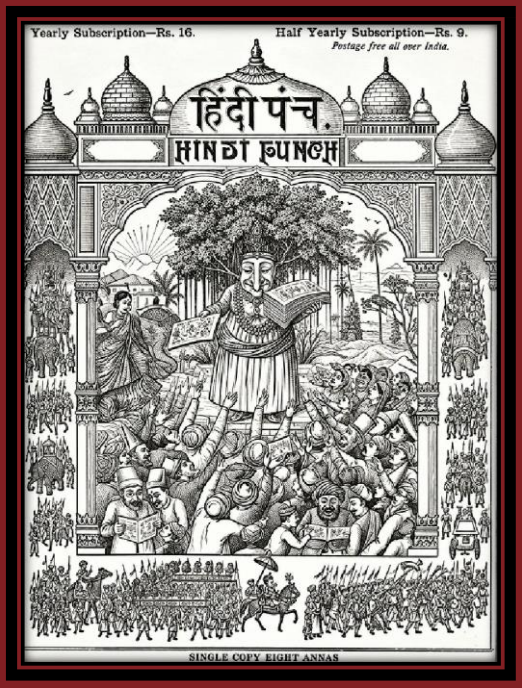
SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Satire, Humor and the Representation of Otherness and Marginality in India



International Conference

Scientific Director: Fabio Mangraviti (Sapienza University of Rome)

Department of Oriental Studies
20 November 2026 (9.30-18.30)

Room T03
'Marco Polo' Bulding – Ground Floor

https://meet.google.com/ste-wrjb-tic

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Satire, Humor and the Representation of Otherness and Marginality in India

Hours 9.30-9.45
Welcome Remarks and Introduction
Fabio Mangraviti (Sapienza University of Rome)

Hours 9.45-10.30
Keynote Speech: Of Crocodiles, Frogs and Cockroaches: Two Hundred Years of Multitude in South Asian Satire
Hans Harder (Ruprecht Karl University of Heidelberg)

Abstract:
Ridiculing the opponent, making fun of humans and even celestials, deriding heretics, attacking the orthodox: these are age-old procedures in South Asian cultures and literatures, and satirical depictions go back a long way in Sanskrit, Persian and other literatures of the subcontinent. But we can say that British colonialism created the conditions for satire to acquire a new virulence. Satire, in so many forms, has come to stay and is an important mode in literature and the media to vent discontent and criticism to this day. In this talk I will sketch the trajectory of satire in colonial and postcolonial times. Throwing spotlights on some instances in Bengali, Hindi and Urdu literatures in the main, we will trace this oblique mode of expression in changing social circumstances through the last two centuries: from crocodiles to cockroaches.

Hours 10.30-13.30.Morning session
Chair: Giorgio Milanetti (Sapienza University of Rome)
Fabio Mangraviti (Sapienza University of Rome)

Hours 10.30-11.00
Behind Kṛṣṇa's Smile: The Lord's Hint of Laughter in the* Bhagavadgītā *and Beyond
Antonio Rigopoulos (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

Abstract:
The focus of my presentation concerns Kṛṣṇa's hint of laughter (*prahasann iva*) in *Bhagavadgītā* 2.10. It is my contention that the god's laughter/smile constitutes the poem's turning point since it signals the outpouring of his grace and teaching to Arjuna: remarkably, it is from this verse that Śaṅkara (c. 700 CE) begins his commentary. I then turn to an examination of the occurrences of prahasann iva within the broader framework of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* epics. A final overview of laughter in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and an appreciation of the deity's laughter/smile in kṛṣṇaite literature and iconography allows the recognition of a unified canon that ties together the literary and esthetic, performative dimensions of Kṛṣṇa's *prahasann iva.*

Hours 11.00-11.30. Coffee Break

Hours 11.30-12.00
***Beyond Mosquito* Kīrtan*: When Śiva Becomes the Dancer. Comic Inversion and Marginal Agency in Rāmeśvara's* Śivasaṅkīrtana**
Michał Panasiuk (INALCO)

Abstract:
This paper examines a comic episode in Rāmeśvara Bhaṭṭāchārya's eighteenth-century Bengali *Śivasaṅkīrtana*, in which Parvati creates and sends flies, horseflies, and mosquitoes to torment Śiva. What follows is an elaborate scene of pursuit and attack in which the insects are given remarkable agency. They act collectively, swarm around Śiva, bite him, keep him from sleeping, and eventually drive him to fight back with increasingly desperate measures. The episode's humor is heightened by the poem's repetition, onomatopoeia, and exaggerated descriptions of the body. At one point, the mosquitoes' attack is presented as a "mosquito *kīrtan*" (*mośār kīrtan*), while Śiva becomes the one who "dances" (*śiber nartan*). The scene also plays with the scale and language of heroic and devotional performance, turning an everyday nuisance into a quasi-epic confrontation. I suggest that this episode offers a particularly revealing example of how Bengali vernacular literature could make the divine comic without simply undermining its sacred status.

Hours 12.00-12.30

Humor and subversion in Vidyāpati's multilingual oeuvre

Thibaut d'Hubert (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich)

Abstract:

Judging from the reconstructed relative chronology of Vidyāpati's literary career, we get the picture of a man of letters who, as he got older, shifted from frivolous creative literature to drier Sanskrit treatises on ritual and law. Even within the creative works of the earlier part of his career, we perceive contrasting voices, but a close reading of his Sanskrit, Avahaṭṭha, and Maithili works also point to the possibility of identifying shared themes, terminology, and stylistic traits. With this paper, I propose to explore the relation between the explicit use of humor (*hāsya*) in plays and didactic texts composed in fourteenth and early-fifteenth century Mithila, with the formation of a vernacular lyric tradition and the opening of literary practices beyond panditic expertise. I will read Vidyāpati's multilingual oeuvre in this larger context and reflect on humor and subversion as features of the style associated with his name.

Hours 12.30-13.00

Reversing and Othering in Rajshekhar Basu's short story 'Upside-down Chronicle' (Ulaṭ Purāṇ, 1927)

Daniela Cappello (University of Naples L'Orientale)

Abstract:

My contribution will focus on the satirical writings of Rajshekhar Basu, the celebrated Bengali humorist, chemist and lexicographer (1880-1960) better known under his nom-de-plume Parashuram. In continuation with early Bengali satire that lampooned the westernized Bengali babu, Basu's satire was prominently addressed to non-marginal figures of the Bengali elite: he targeted medical doctors, fake gurus, gullible devotees, anglophile intellectuals, and corrupt businessmen – modern faces of the anglicized Bengali babu – to unmask the hypocrisy of his own society. I will focus on some passages of his short story *Ulaṭ Purāṇ* (1927) to show that satire here operates through a double process of othering and an inversion of colonial mimicry.

Hours 13.00-13.30

Q/A Session

Hours 13.30-14.30. Lunch

Hours 14:30-18:30

Chair: Mara Matta (Sapienza University of Rome)
Piotr Borek (Jagellonian University)

Hours 14.30-15.00

The Performance of Virtue: Satire, Irony, and Power in Anil Yadav's Gausevak

Alessandra Consolaro (University of Cagliari)

Abstract:

This paper examines the functions of satire and irony in Anil Yadav's *Gausevak,* focusing on how the story exposes the contradictions between public virtue and private corruption. The title itself is deeply ironic: the protagonist Dhama Chero is publicly known as a *gausevak*, a servant or protector of cows, yet the narrative gradually reveals that his cow protection work conceals his involvement in the illegal cattle trade. Through this contradiction, Anil Yadav satirizes the political use of religion and the transformation of sacred symbols into instruments of profit, power, and electoral strategy.The presentation also explores how the story satirizes the wider structures surrounding Dhama: state development, bureaucracy, policing, journalism, caste and communal politics, and the representation of adivasi identity. The unfinished dam becomes a symbol of failed development, producing displacement, corruption, and violence rather than progress. Similarly, the gaushala, the Ram Lila performance, the political speech, and the use of bows and arrows as visual props reveal how culture and religion are converted into political spectacle.Particular attention is given to the role of grotesque humour and dark irony. Scenes involving the tea-addicted buffalo, the police campaign against owls, the staged identity of adivasi protesters, and the old "make-up artist" who alters the appearance of cattle show a world in which absurdity and brutality coexist. Finally, the paper considers the reporter's silence as a critique of journalism: although he witnesses the truth of Dhama's violence and trafficking, he chooses to write only about safer, symbolic subjects.

In *Gausevak,* satire is therefore not merely comic; it is a powerful method of political and ethical exposure.

Hours 15.00-15.30

***Dhvani and the aesthetic production of* hāsya *and* vībhatsa rasa*. Who is the object of laughter in Rājendr Yādav's* Honā/sonā ek khubsūrat duśman ke sāth?**

Piotr Borek (Jagellonian University)

Abstract:

In my presentation I propose to reread Rajendr Yādav's (1929–2013) controversial essay *Honā/sonā ek khubsūrat duśman ke sāth* (1999) through the lens of classical Indian aesthetics. The essay has often been interpreted either as pure misogyny or as a provocative intervention in debates on gender relations. Given Yādav's well-known commitment to amplifying marginalised voices, I argue that one should read the essay as a rhetorical construct which ridicules women and reinforces gender stereotypes only on the level of literal meaning (*abhidhā*). Drawing on the classical Sanskrit literary theories of dhvani and rasa, I propose that the provocative, often vulgar or obscene statements which seemingly satirise women, force the reader to move beyond the surface of the text. Irony functions here as a vehicle of *dhvani*, enabling the emergence of meanings that are not explicitly stated but aesthetically suggested.A closer analysis of the essay reveals a deliberately constructed tension between *hāsya* (laughter) and *vībhatsa* (disgust) *rasa*. The exaggerated and often shocking representations of the other and of gender relations may at times produce laughter or an ironic distance, but this response immediately gives way to discomfort and leads toward disgust (*jugupsā*). Patriarchal anxieties, structures of domination, and forms of objectification remain embedded in the discourse rather than necessarily reflect the author's own views. The ultimate object of satire is not woman herself but the male gaze that constructs her as a beautiful enemy (*khubsūrat duśman*). The author plays with the aesthetic dynamics and thus represents, questions and destabilizes the gendered otherness.

Thus, by attempting to apply the concepts of dhvani and rasa, I propose to categorise this modern Hindi essay as as a social satire.

Hours 15.30-16.00

Uneasy Laughter: Incongruity, Irony and Satire in Contemporary Hindi Dalit Fiction

Veronica Ghirardi (University of Turin)

Abstract:

Dalit literature has largely been read through the paradigms of testimony, protest, and trauma, while the role of humor has received comparatively little critical attention. This paper argues that contemporary Hindi Dalit fiction develops distinctive comic modes through which caste is not merely represented but critically exposed as a contingent and performative social order. Drawing on theories of verbal humor, particularly the concept of incongruity developed by the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), the paper examines how irony and satire articulate different responses to the contradictions of caste in post-Mandal India. Focusing on Ajay Navaria's short story *Yes Sir*, read alongside Roop Narayan Sonkar's *Suardān*, it explores how contemporary Dalit fiction uses humour as a privileged aesthetic mode for interrogating the persistence and transformation of caste ideology under democratic modernity.

Navaria's Yes Sir stages this collision between the ritual hierarchy of caste and the bureaucratic logic of modern institutional authority. The Brahmin peon Tiwari's attachment to notions of purity and hereditary status is gradually destabilized by the official power of his Scheduled Caste superior, culminating in the grotesque reversal of the servant volunteering to unclog his superior's toilet. The comic effect emerges from the gap between Tiwari's declared belief in caste superiority and his pragmatic submission to economic and bureaucratic power. Yet this incongruity does not produce reconciliation or moral transformation. Instead, it generates discomfort by exposing caste privilege as a fragile performance sustained by shifting relations of recognition and authority.

Sonkar's *Suardān* offers a productive counterpoint. While Navaria locates incongruity within the contradictions of caste subjectivity and uses irony as a mode of exposure, Sonkar mobilizes satire and symbolic inversion to imagine an Ambedkarite future grounded in scientific rationality, inter-caste solidarity, and the desacralization of Brahmanical symbols. Here, incongruity becomes not merely a means of revealing social contradictions but a strategy for reordering symbolic hierarchies. Read together, these texts suggest that contemporary Hindi Dalit fiction deploys at least two complementary strategies: irony as the revelation of caste's internal instability and satire as the imaginative reconstruction of alternative social relations. Rather than merely contributing to the representation of marginality, humor emerges as a mode through which Dalit writers expose the epistemological contradictions of caste while simultaneously imagining alternative social and symbolic orders.

Hours 16.00-16.30. Coffe Break

Hours 16.30-17.00

Performing the Period: Play, Activism, and Menstrual Politics at Māsika Mahotsav

Valeria Giampietri (Sapienza University of Rome)

Abstract:

In India, menstruation remains a stigmatized and largely invisible experience, shaping the private, social, and religious lives of menstruators. This presentation examines *Māsika Mahotsav*, a festival dedicated to menstruation, and asks how festival-based activism can unsettle menstrual taboos. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2025 in Kisal, a rural village in Maharashtra, it focuses on the participatory, game-based activities that formed the core of the event.

Building on Victor Turner's notion of liminality and theories of play as a political practice, I argue that play operates as a structured threshold: a temporary space in which dominant norms can be suspended, negotiated, and reconfigured. Within this space, participants engaged collectively with menstrual symbols and representations of blood in ways that would otherwise be socially constrained or prohibited. Through play, activities that might reproduce menstrual stigma were transformed into opportunities for collective experimentation and re-signification.

The presentation therefore explores how playful and performative practices can create temporary spaces for negotiating menstrual norms and making otherwise stigmatized forms of bodily experience publicly discussable. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on the relationship between play, political activism, and the transformative potential of cultural events.

Hours 17.00-17.30

Stand-up Comedy and the Law

Lorenza Acquarone (University of Milan)

Abstract:

India is a young, progressive, and vibrant country: the average age of the population is 29, and half of all Indians are under 35. In recent decades, the number of educated and urbanized people with Internet access has grown significantly, and stand-up comedy has become a voice of India. Employing biting and sarcastic humour, jokes focusing on sensitive topics like gender roles, castes, politics, and religion are defying the establishment, as the Cockroach Janta Party recently showed. Originating as a satirical movement, the Gen Z-led reaction quickly gained massive traction on social media platforms, amassing tens of millions of followers within weeks, and started playing a role in public campaigns for accountability. But to what extent can the law be used to muzzle satire? Stand-up comedians can be hindered in their creative ability by the legal system. Formal complaints have been filed against comedians based on legal provisions relating to contempt of the State, the protection of reputation (defamation), and the freedom of religion.

Hours 17.30-18.00

Q/A Session

Hours 18.00-18.30

Concluding remarks

Fabio Mangraviti (Sapienza University of Rome)