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Comedy Cubs

15 Oct, 2006 | 0229 hrs IST | Chidanand Rajghatta

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A friend heading to India asked if there were any comedy clubs or stand-up acts he could ease into on a free evening. Not to my knowledge, I regretted; he could try therapeutic guffaws in the morning at a 'laughing club,' but when it came to late night chuckles, the scene in the ground zero of globalisation was grim. We have writers in India who tickle the humerus, but none who can stand up and deliver.

No such problems in the west, where *desi* comics, mostly second generation ABCD types, are letting it rip. There're enough new acts here for the *desi* gang to slap together a "Gurus of Comedy" national tour last couple of seasons, an event that looks set to have us grinning year to year. At a recent gig, Rajiv Satyal, a Cincinnati-based stand-up, kidded, "Some of you white folks in the audience must be wondering, are we outsourcing comedy to India now?"

Stand-up is a high-wire act. It is a comedic art form where the performer is at the mercy of a live audience. He has to elicit non-stop laughter from an expectant crowd with a stream of jokes and one-liners across uncertain boundaries. Actor Will Ferrell calls stand-up comedy a hard and lonely profession. The best attain iconic status – Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Jay Leno among them. It's not something an ethnic group known for its brains – and not so much for wit – is expected to master.

But they are giving it a shot. Most *desi* comics choose the safe haven of self-deprecating humour for material, avoiding politics and sex. Their minority background and immigrant foibles offer a rich lode of gags on dysfunctional families, strange accents, racial discrimination, arranged marriages, cross-cultural mishaps and lately, outsourcing. They even make fun of their own success. "My boss asked me why we win so many spelling bee contests," comic Paul Singh jokes. "I told him you would win too if you had names like Subramanian Venkateswaran Chandrasekhar."

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