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Licence to laugh

By: [Namita Gupta](#) Date: 2009-09-09 Place: Bangalore

Stand-up comedian rajiv satyal in conversation with Namita Gupta on what makes him tick

One look at Rajiv Satyal and he might seem completely unassuming at first. But watch him do what he does best and you will fall in love with his one-liners. This US-born Indian stand-up comedian is better known as The Funny Indian back in the US. But as I move close quarters with him, I wonder why. Born in Cincinnati of Indian parents, he is not conversant with any Indian language and at the age of 33, this is only his third visit to India.

Nevertheless, his quick wit in an American accent will win you over. "Every Indian parent tells his children about how they came to the US with all of 7\$ in their pocket and made it big. It's always seven, not six not five," he quips with a sly smile and adds, "Whenever we have conversation about buying something for a 1000\$, our desi guys would reply with a - you got ripped man, I got the same for 300\$."



Thumbs up: Rajiv Satyal is all set for his first stand-up comedy in Bangalore, says his favourite one-liner is about the Indian time zones. "Everyone is late in India, but at the same time."

Journey so far

Satyal moved base from Ohio to LA, when he saw that the entertainment industry didn't exist in Ohio. The LA based comedian, who is also a Marketing Executive with Procter & Gamble, has opened over 20 shows for Russell Peters, and says, "I had to pursue my dreams and the comedy clubs in Los Angeles were the right place."

How and when did it all begin? "At the age of seven it had started tickling my funny bone. I decided to take up comedy seriously in June 2005, when I won The Funniest Person in Cincinnati contest in the semipro/professional division, after my brother told me to participate from a contest promo he had seen in a newspaper."

Rajiv soon became a regular at major LA clubs like the Laugh Factory and the Improv and performed in the presence of Bob Saget. His take on learning to laugh at himself, President Barack Obama, Bush are something to vouch for. He also does a wisecrack on racist jokes and says, "People relate to it. Also, being ethnic gives me a different perspective to take on racist jokes in the US. You need to have a creative licence to crack such jokes. Creative licence is not a piece of paper. It is permission from the audience to make fun of and speak or empathise with the cause. You first make the audience comfortable and know that you know the depth of the subject and only then can you do it."

Free flowing spirits add to the mood

I have always wondered how funny the stand-up comedians are in real life and if it is really stressful to do comedy? "You don't have to be funny to be one. I think I'm funny in real life on stage. Well, yes my friends do expect me to be funny all the time, but it's not all that easy. Most of the comedians to my knowledge are very serious in life. Comics are born out of great pain and some of the great artists are depressed in life. Steve Martin was like that. Only 20% of the people are fun loving, like me and 80% of the stand-up comedians are serious in life. Touring different cities for a stand-up comedy adds to the stress. But if you're performing at the right kind of place, with the audience in good spirits and booze flowing around, it makes a lot of difference."

It comes to me in the shower

Talking of his inspirations in life he says, "I have opened for Dave Chappelle, Kevin James, and Maz Jobrani and Russell Peters and Dave Chappelle and Russell Peters will always remain my inspiration. Russell lives a mile away from me. Though he's not a material influence, he has helped me a lot in picking up crowd interaction, which is very important for a stand-up comedian. He told that since I was so fast with audience interaction in real life, I should try it on stage and it really works."

His forte lies in conversational lines, dialogues and more of personal take on himself, than about pulling on other people. About when does that funny bone tickle him, he avers, "It comes to me at various times in the shower, with friends, while driving or when I am relaxing. The key here is to write it down. If you don't pen it immediately you will tend to forget it and it will lose its essence. I normally write it down immediately on my Blackberry and send an email to myself. Sometimes, my funniest material comes from stuff I think of on stage. I improvise, go off the cuff a lot and some of it sticks. I started to make Indian jokes because (and I know this is name-dropping) Pete Sampras once told me that the first thing people notice is that I'm

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Indian, and I have to address it."

And I begin to wonder, could there be any Punjabi influences? "Yes, why not. We are known to be funny. It's ingrained in our culture and we are more expressive than others." "I don't get all the jokes that the Laughter Challenge guys do. They are definitely high energy with a lot of politics and mimicry of politicians and Bollywood stars thrown in, but it is very different from American comedy, which is more autobiographical," says Rajiv on his take on Indian stand-up comedians.

Why now?

I begin to wonder, being an Indian, what took him so long to perform here? Rajiv clarifies, "I always wanted to come to India and do a stand-up. My good friend Russell Peters has done it and said that Indians in India get it more than NRIs, the way of speaking, the way people talk, the inflexions, the jokes. The comedy scene is still picking up here. Even in the US it is only about 50 years old. Only in 1960's did the comedy clubs begin." Does comedy take care of his bread and butter? Rajiv says, "If you can make everyone laugh, yes." Rajiv is single and as the movie Top Gun used the phrase, he would consider India to be a target-rich environment. As they say that you don't come to Rajiv's shows to escape, you come to experience.

Where: The Collection, UB City on September 9 and at Opus, Palace Road on September 11.

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