

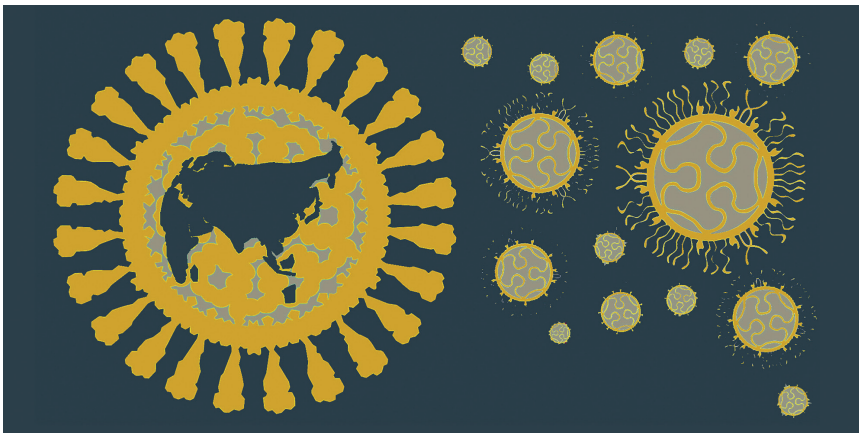
# The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa

Societal Implications, Narratives  
on Media, Political Issues

edited by

Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

VOLUME I – CULTURE, ART, MEDIA





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## 2. *Haṃso haṃsāo, Coronavirus ko dūr bhagāo*: Hindi Satire and Humour as Psychological and Ideological Resources during the COVID-19 Crisis

*Fabio Mangraviti*

### **Abstract**

This article presents the forms and functions pursued over the past years by satire and humour in the Hindi public sphere (Orsini 2002). The paper mainly focuses on the narratives concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and/or the policies implemented by the Indian government to manage the health crisis in India. Crucially, it is based on the results of an interdisciplinary investigation. Indeed, just like in other global contexts, humour and satire in the Hindi public sphere appeared through a multiplicity of channels. In March 2020, as the first lockdown was announced in India, there was an outburst of memes, videos, and vignettes on the COVID-19 pandemic in Hindi and other languages, many of which were uploaded and shared through social media platforms. Moreover, since the onset of the first lockdown, many well-acknowledged performing satirists (*vyāṅgyakār*) and humourists (*hāsyakār*) were forced to resort to new, digital ways to narrate the pandemic. Along with the digital forms of satire and humour, traditional media and literature also paved the way for the narrativisation of the health crisis. This study combines a qualitative content analysis of the elements drawn from the World Wide Web along with a more descriptive analysis. The last section of the article will also address the satirical responses to the pandemic by Hindi literary satirists. It explores two intertwined thematic issues: the first deals with the adaptive coping functions embodied by Hindi satire and humour during the pandemic; while the second copes with the ideological value of the narratives, especially with regard to the response offered by the authors to the

policies implemented by the Indian government to deal with the crisis in different phases of the pandemic.

**Key Words:** COVID-19; Hindi public sphere; Satire and humour; Indian new media; Hindi literature.

## 2.1. Theoretical Dimension of Humour and Satire during the Pandemic

Over the past three years, along with the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic, new studies have been carried out on satire and humour, hitherto deemed as two communicative means (Weisgerber 1973), discursive practices (Simpson 2003, p. 69), and/or modes of expression (Harder 2012, p. 165) with an indisputably central role in shaping the contemporary public spheres. It must be clarified at the start of the article that, by simultaneously investigating these two “amorphous” (Davies, Illott 2018) and “formless” (Connery, Combe 1995, p. 5) modes or genres<sup>1</sup>, the study draws on previous contributions which tend to link satire and humour to the common terrain of the comic<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, it is necessary to outline that the article does not address these fields simply as mutually exclusive and directly opposed domains; rather, it starts from the assumption that humour often “overlaps” with satire (Phiddian 2019, p. 16), which generally

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of ongoing studies tend to consider humour and satire not as proper genres, but rather as “modes” which, especially in the case of satire, establish a “mimetic” relationship with the literary and extra-literary fields they are associated with (Guilhamet 1987, pp. 1-20; Harder 2012, pp. 165-166). However, it must be considered that, recently, there have been some attempts at re-assessing these fields as genres (Declercq 2018).

<sup>2</sup> This tendency, for instance, can be seen in McGowan’s book *Only a Joke Can Save Us: A Theory of Comedy* (2017), where both humour and satire tend to be incorporated within the category of comedy. Similarly, Declercq, in *Satire, Comedy and Mental Health* (2021), by considering comedy as a field which is mostly related to the scope of creating “amusement”, connects both satire and humour to this category. Indeed, in his conception, one of the main scopes of satire, alongside the production of criticism towards a certain sociocultural aspect, is that of entertaining the audience. Recently, the tendency to simultaneously explore the uses of satire and humour in the contemporary scenario has been followed by Zekavat, who authored the monographs *Satire, Humor and the Construction of Identities* (2017) and *Satire, Humor and Environmental Cases* (2023).

implies a “deliberate use of the comic for purposes of attack” (Berger 1997, p. 167)<sup>3</sup>.

Recent studies have focused on the use of these means in different geographical contexts, while others have attempted to address the broader socio-cultural, psychological, and political forms embodied in the contemporary post-COVID-19 global scenario (Zekavat 2021; 2022). A relatively common theoretical perspective is to consider both satire and humour as instruments employed by authors to adopt coping strategies during the pandemic. This view is based on the relief theory. It has a long history, dating back to Freud’s assumptions about the cathartic value of humour and implying an “economy in the expenditure of affect” (Freud 1974 [1905], p. 293). Such an approach has been broadly contested at the cognitive level. Nonetheless, in recent times, new theories based on less mechanical explanations have reassessed the coping function of satire and humour, especially at times characterised by the appearance of distressful events. A recent contribution to this theoretical approach was offered by Declercq, who investigated contemporary humour and satire by considering them as consciously, individually, and collectively pursued strategies aimed at deeply understanding “the limits of reason” in the present global society.

[...] good satire helps us cope with the limits of critique by avoiding the Scylla of political apathy and the Charybdis of mental health problems. Therefore, satire is a resource to negotiate the existential conflict between care for others and care of self. [...] First, satire does not really cure a morally sick world, but helps to cope with it. This does not mean that satire cannot contribute to political change, but it only has a modest impact in the service of motivating more direct political action. Second, satire helps us deal with the limits of critique through the solace of pleasurable autotelic engrossment in entertainment, which reconnects

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<sup>3</sup> The quite controversial relationship between satire and humour has been widely debated. Zekavat notes that, although it is not easy to find a watershed between satire and humour, it is even more difficult to establish their relationship. He also outlines that, in many ways, humour must be regarded as an integral and constitutive part of satire (Zekavat 2017, p. 27). A somewhat similar perspective has been recently expressed also by Phiddian, according to whom: “Even the darkest satire turns into wit (and very often humour) as well as mobilisation of harsh emotions. Without the wit, it becomes mere abuse or complaint” (Phiddian 2019, p. 59). Conversely, as outlined by Twark, certain ambits, such as black humour, that are usually associated with humour, do not necessarily produce laughter. From this Twark derives that “humour itself is not always humorous or funny.” (Twark 2007, p. 13)

us to an otherwise depressing absurd world, without ignoring the fact that we should alleviate suffering. Third, satire develops comic and ironic coping strategies that we can fruitfully adopt and adapt in the stories we tell about ourselves in a world that is sick beyond full recovery. (Declercq 2021, pp. 2–3)

Declercq's approach differs from previous claims built on the relief theory. The author does not consider satire and humour as two merely psychological valves; he rather deems both of them as means to develop – by triggering entertainment strategies – a better and more consolidated way to interpret a world which, in the author's words, appears "sick beyond full recovery". Such theory stands on the assumption that these are useful mechanisms to cope with mental health distress caused by the unstable socio-cultural, political, and health background. It also investigates the connection between the psychological value of the instruments which, in Foucauldian terms, can be deemed as "care of self" triggers (White 2014, p.489), and the following ideological and political outcomes produced by the adoption of these resources. Declercq remains quite sceptical about the 'revolutionary' power of comedy to mobilize political action. This does not mean that satire and humour – especially in times defined by deep socio-cultural instability – cannot play a political role in more subtle ways. Indeed, they are useful to reduce the otherwise unbridgeable distance between the "care of self" and the "care for others". By doing so, both satire and humour have also become part of the dynamics of creating old and new identities (Zekavat 2017). However, we could criticise this approach on the grounds that neither satire nor humour are the only communicative resources needed to adapt to changing historical circumstances. In his contribution to the present volume, Milanetti claims that the act of narrating/narrativising has always been considered an invaluable task for processing traumatic events and historical, political, and socio-cultural transitions in different geographical contexts and across language and literary boundaries<sup>4</sup>. It is important to note that many classic literary authors adopted satire to specifically address the sufferings and contradictions caused by the spread of pandemics within the communities they were part of. For instance, Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, apart from being a *locus classicus* of the literature produced

<sup>4</sup> See supra: *Tell a Story to End the Pandemic. COVID-19 and the Remedy of Narration: Instances from India and Italy*, by G. Milanetti.

during pandemics, also tangibly showcases the inextricable connection between satire, humour, and the task of narrativising pandemics during the early modern period (Metzger 2020). Another example is Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

These are just cursory examples, and they are not enough to historically explain the connection between the outburst of pandemics and the spread of satirical and humourist narratives in Europe. Nevertheless, they are both useful examples as they point to the fact that humourist and satirical narratives have often been adopted in different language and literary contexts to relocate the stressfulness produced by the outbursts of pandemics. It is also interesting to see that, in the contemporary, post-pandemic world, the role played by satirical literature, probably even more than mere humourist literature, in the narrativisation of COVID-19 has been quite peripheral. Why has satirical literature played such a marginal role? There is no simplistic answer to this question. One reason could plausibly be that, to this day and with few remarkable exceptions, the pandemic has not yet become part of the topics deemed worthy of being addressed in literature through satirical narratives. Another rationale is that contemporary literature could not contextualise the effects of the pandemic, especially at the outset of the first wave, within the given socio-cultural framework. Whatever the answer may be, we cannot dismiss the fact that, in the present context, most of the studies addressing the strategies of narrativisation of the pandemic do not consider satire and humour as merely literary fields. Moreover, nowadays satire is not investigated only through the lens of a literary critical approach, as was the case until the 1970s. Studies which deem satire only as a literary moral genre have been replaced by perspectives which emphasise the multidisciplinary character of this mode. The reasons behind this shift are well explained by Simpson, who reassesses the value of satire as a culturally situated discursive act and points to the mistakes made by literary critics in locating it only within the context of literary production (Simpson 2003, pp. 57-63). Similar observations have been made by Phiddian (2013, pp. 53-55), who presents the limits of formalist approaches to satire. He also tries to connect literary approaches to perspectives emphasising its rhetorical nature. Although rooted in different areas, both theoretical observations place the study of satire and humour within an interdisciplinary dimension, including the interconnection between the press, traditional, and new media. These

reflections are not just casually introduced in the discourse. Indeed, it is remarkable that, in spite of the paucity of literary satirical responses to the pandemic, a huge number of narratives on the COVID-19 health crisis were expressed on new media such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Philip 2021; Yang 2022). During the pandemic, many people uploaded their contents to these platforms, which became their way of sharing their most immediate responses to COVID-19. With their comments, they contributed to extending the rhetorical possibilities of these narratives. In addition to the contributions made by ordinary people on social media platforms, many satirist and humourist writers and vignettists enriched the repertoire of symbols and values linked to the pandemic by uploading their own ideas, videos, and performances on new media platforms. Eventually, more or less consciously, these were also readopted by authors narrating the pandemic in the press and in literature.

So far, we have highlighted the coping function of humour and satire, as well as the common scepticism about their potential to enact political mass mobilisation programmes. Nonetheless, it is imperative to note that, since 2020, these fields have covered a number of applications; although they have not directly triggered political action, on many occasions they contributed to orienting people towards developing their own political opinion. Moreover, they were adopted differently in many geographical contexts to help people cope with the restrictions imposed upon them during the pandemic, to maintain a social etiquette and, more generally, to overcome the sense of isolation forced upon the more marginalised groups of the population during the first phase of the pandemic (Zekavat 2022, pp. 523–524). As outlined by Zekavat when referring to the responses provided by ordinary people, during the first wave of the pandemic, “the politicization and unpreparedness of public officials caused unprecedented uncertainties among citizens. Humour served as a medium to express these concerns in a safe manner and discuss topics that were otherwise too embarrassing or incomprehensible for public debate” (Ibid., p. 524). However, with regard to the ideological dimension of these fields, it is interesting to outline that traditional and new media also showcased a rather direct political participation in the debates on the pandemic. For instance, in 2020, in the USA, some satirical shows played a major role in disseminating information on the measures to be adopted to prevent the spread of the virus. *The*

*Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, a renowned show hosted by Stephen Colbert, was highly appreciated for embodying a positive and politically-oriented kind of satirical activism (Caron 2016, pp. 160–167; Paroske 2016, p. 208). During the pandemic, Colbert’s show became even more visible and influential in public debates in the USA. In January and February 2020, Donald Trump’s administration was accused of sharing fake news about the pandemic and, more generally, of underestimating its negative effects. During that phase of political, social, and health uncertainty, “in the absence of strong leadership, many took upon themselves to ‘be their own President’ and take action to mitigate the raging crises, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (TLS), for one, attempted to reprimand the government’s response and at the same time appeal to its audiences to behave responsibly at the time of crisis” (Zekavat 2021, p. 284). This, however, was not an isolated case. Satire and humour were adopted in many other global contexts, even by well-acknowledged personalities, to provide information about the measures to be undertaken to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Moreover, similar narratives were not only developed to fulfil an informative task but also to criticise governments for showing a “lack of responsibility” in a moment which called for practical and immediate responses to stop the spread of the virus. The political orientation of satire and humour has varied considerably during the last three years, also with regard to the timeline in which such narratives have been developed. From this point of view, we must outline that, at times, satirists and humourists realised opposite objectives to those pursued by Colbert’s show. As seen in Colbert’s example, in most cases and in many different realities, the first wave of the pandemic was characterised by the development of satires addressing the need to exercise strong political leadership. However, during the three years of COVID-19, and along with the rise of Colbert-like narratives, a conspicuous number of objections were also raised at administrations which were blamed of enacting authoritarian measures. A fresh example comes from the protests that spread across many cities in China against the reinforcement of the “Zero Covid Policy” in November 2022. On that occasion, many protesters started showing discontent about the way the health crisis was being managed, and subtly developed a satirical narrative against the limits to free speech in China by raising blank sheets of paper (Adlakha 2022). As reasonably expected, the adoption of

satire and humour in the Chinese context was quite limited. Given the strong restrictions on local press and media, citizens aiming to develop satirical and humourist views could only move, often in oblique ways, behind the narrow spaces of free virtual speech. It is interesting to note that, even before the flare-up of the protests in China in 2022, some political and ideological views were expressed by Chinese netizens to blame “their multi-layered grievances against misogyny, state censorship, and censorship” (Yang 2022, p. 99). Outside China, satire and humour were adopted in countries where the government was being accused of mitigating the threatening effects of the pandemic by embracing exceptional measures which limited civil liberties. It would, however, be perilous to observe a Manichean division between countries which showcased a somewhat ‘anti-authoritarian’ use of comedy and others which used it to invoke stronger leadership. Both narratives coexisted in the USA, in many European countries (Cancelas Ouviaña 2020; Vicari-Murru 2020), and in India, often during the same wave of the pandemic.

Moreover, it is important to reflect on the heterogeneous and polysemic nature of the narratives produced by the authors of satirical and humourist contents. Such contents raised concerns related to the pandemic as well as several intertwined socio-cultural issues. In India, for example, some Adivasi and Dalit activists used satire and humour as an instrument for raising counter-narratives against mainstream culture. Since 2020, these marginalised authors have been availing the opportunities granted by new media to make their claims more visible. Finally, we cannot dismiss the fact that xenophobic, sexist, and racial narratives were adopted ubiquitously in many global contexts, regardless of the political and ideological orientation of the aforementioned geographical areas. Given the complex nature of the satirical and humorous responses to the COVID-19 crisis, the present article suggests applying perspectives that build on the adaptive nature of satire, in combination with those stressing its ideological value, to study the Hindi public sphere.

## 2.2. Methodology

The present study seeks to research different satirical and humourist elements, collected from a broad range of sources. It aims to analyse them in-depth in three different sections. The first section consists of



a historical introduction to the dynamics characterising the use of satire and humour in the Hindi public sphere over the last years. Much attention will be paid to the juridical and political limitations faced by comedy in India; there will be much stress also on the new activist strategies pursued by Indian authors in order to mobilize their public about their claims. The second section, which engages with satirical and humoristic narratives in new media, adopts a conventional qualitative content analysis based on the Hsieh and Shannon (2005) model to carry out a survey of 131 items. The majority of the items investigated reveals a distinct overlapping of humourist and satirical narratives. Moreover, starting from previous assumption that humour and satire are equally part of the category of the ‘comic’, it was decided to also consider some humourist elements devoid of any satirical intent. It was established to manually identify, wherever necessary, more than one main topic in the investigated elements. The survey of vignettes and memes entailed the identification of one up to three main topics. Otherwise, given the length and complexity of the videos and cartoon videos, it was necessary to identify one up to four topics in order to assess them. Moreover, the survey analysed the materials by also identifying the number of items adopted to pursue specific psychological, political, and/or informative functions. Unlike other recent studies on the use of comedy in media during the pandemic, by focusing on these aspects the contribution provides some general reflections on the diachronic development of the comic narratives in the period between March 2020 and March 2022. Most of the memes have been selected from depositories of satirical and humourist items created by Indian users, such as *AhSeeit* and *Smileworld*. In addition, a huge number of vignettes and memes have been extracted from the online page of the Hindi journal “Dainik bhāskar” (“Dainik Bhaskar”) and from “Navbhārat tāims” (“Navbharat Times”). As for analysing the contents on YouTube, the study has primarily investigated items which included words such as *vyaṅgya* (satire) and/or *hāsyā* (humour), alongside other words such as Coronavirus, Corona, and/or COVID-19, either in the title or in the videos description. The third part of the article shifts from analysing new media to investigating the narrativisation strategies of the pandemic as part of Hindi literature. Here, the research focuses on the strategies pursued by authors to enact adaptive coping strategies to analyse the pandemic. The study will attempt to establish some aesthetic ties between literary and extra-literary responses to the

health crisis. Furthermore, the political and ideological orientation of these strategies will be explored, especially with regard to the position taken by Hindi authors to the policies enacted by Indian government.

### 2.3. Coping Function, Digitalisation and Limitations on Satire and Humour in the Indian Context

India, 24 March 2020. This day will always be remembered as the day when the first nationwide lockdown was announced. This lockdown not only affected the way services and businesses worked across the country but, most importantly, impacted the life of every single citizen in India. It was certainly a crucial historical moment, which deeply shook the foundations of India's socio-cultural environment. However, as seen in some Hindi literary narration on the COVID-19 crisis, it seems that only after the start of the first lockdown was the pandemic perceived and narrated as an issue of national concern<sup>5</sup>. The many socio-cultural and political issues which arose in India due to the pandemic will not be presented here. Suffice it to say, the escalation of the pandemic and the following limitations imposed to prevent it from spreading, paradoxically, also provided fertile ground for artists, writers, and intellectuals to come up with innovative ways to respond to the crisis. With regard to responses to the pandemic in the Hindi public sphere, it is interesting to note that, even before the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Indian writers, literary critics, and performers deemed satire and humour as two powerful instruments to cope with stressful historic situations.

In the 1960s, in the literary essay titled *Nayī kahānī kī bhūmikā* (Introduction to the New Short Story, 1966), Kamleshvar Prasad Saksena – one of the torchbearers of the *Nayī kahānī* avant-garde literary movement – established the relevance of satire as an important way to detect all the socio-cultural and political contradictions (*visangati*) which had plagued the Indian society at the outset of the partition of India in 1947

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<sup>5</sup> In many satirical writings, Hindi literary satirist Alok Saksena outlined that, just a few days before lockdown was announced, many people in India had celebrated Holi, one of the most relevant Hindu festivals (Saksena 2020, pp. 29-34). This festival, in Saksena's depiction, left society in a state of euphoria coupled with anxiety about the spread of the virus in India. Significantly, during that period, even outstanding Hindi journals, such as "Hindustān", started debating in a vigorous way about the pandemic just around the middle of March.

(Kamleshvar 1966, p. 16)<sup>6</sup>. According to Kamleshvar, the large-scale loss of lives and unprecedented migration between India and Pakistan opened the doors to a historical phase of ideological instability and feeling of disillusionment (*moh bhāṅg*) towards Indian institutions (Ibid.). Therefore, since the 1950s and 1960s, Hindi literature and, in particular, Hindi satirists narrativised, and at the same time psychologically faced this feeling, by developing narratives to cope with the uncertainties following India's independence. Remarkably, in spite of the attention attributed to other topics, only on a few occasions have satirists and humourists debated socio-cultural and political matters linked to the flare-up of pandemics in the Indian context. However, it is relevant to outline that, on many circumstances, medicine and doctors have been the subject of Hindi satirical writings. Quite often, satirists have made fun of the inconsistencies in Indian healthcare institutions<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, especially since the 1950s, apart from literature, some extra-literary fields have also contributed to developing satirical and humourist strategies to cope with the feeling of disillusionment presented by Kamleshvar in his essay. For instance, since the 1950s and even in the present time, *Musāyṛās* (gatherings of Urdu poets) and *Kavi sammelans* (gatherings of Hindi poets) have undoubtedly played a major role in developing such narratives<sup>8</sup>. In spite of the many criticisms levelled at these events by the Hindi intelligentsia for their alleged trivialisation of poetry, the *Hāsya kavi sammelans* (gatherings of humourist poets) played a major role in debating matters which were

<sup>6</sup> The most relevant feature of *Nayī kahānī*, a Hindi literary movement which developed across the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, was the adoption of the short story (*kahānī*) as a preferred narrative mode to analyse the socio-cultural issues characterising post-colonial Indian society. Different from the earlier Hindi literary movements which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, the writers associated with the *Nayī kahānī* movement attempted to portray a more realistic, and sometimes disenchanting, picture of Indian society, by focusing on the metropolitan or urban landscapes.

<sup>7</sup> A grotesque and satirical picture of Indian doctors was, for instance, crafted by Berhab Banarsi, who authored the short story *Cikitsā ka cakkar* (The Whirl of Medical Treatments). See Banarsi (1997, pp. 49-59).

<sup>8</sup> The socio-cultural relevance of these performative events has been recently unfolded by Mahmudabad (2020), who has, however, neglected the relevance of the satirical and humourist nature of many of the poems which have been historically recited during these events. Remarkably, Mahmudabad's analysis, which traces a diachronic investigation of *Musāyṛās* from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, emphasises the role of these events in the development of counter-narratives concerning the concept of country (*vatan*), community (*qaum*), and Muslim global community (*millat*) in the contemporary Indian context.

perceived as problematic or controversial from a socio-cultural and political point of view<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, humour and satire played a central role in the narrativisation of tragic and shocking events in India. It is imperative, now, to introduce two crucial issues relating to the use of comedy in the contemporary Hindi public sphere. The first has to do with the dynamics of progressive digitalisation to which many traditional forms have been recently subjected. These dynamics have revealed themselves in different ways.

Primarily, it must be outlined that, even in the period which preceded the pandemic, although *Musāyārās* and *Kāvī sammelans* were generally staged behind an audience in a physical public space<sup>10</sup>, a large number of these events began to be uploaded on YouTube and other media. Alongside performers who usually joined *Musāyārās* and *Kāvī sammelans*, also several Hindi stand-up comedians began uploading their private shows on new media to cope with and narrativise the pandemic. The role played by these videos during the 2020 lockdown will be further analysed in the following section. For now, suffice it to say that, given the absence of a physical audience, the relationship with a virtual, public audience deeply affected the uptake of satirical narratives. Moreover, it had a great impact on the nature of the responses provided by the public to the narratives exposed by satirists and humourists. Comments on YouTube and other platforms did, indeed, have the potential of expanding the narratives provided by these performers. Still, there were other digital forms through which narratives

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<sup>9</sup> At present, only a limited number of studies in the Hindi language have investigated the existence of these events. In the 1950s and 1960s, the performed lyrics were mostly inspired by heroic (*vīr*) feelings, while humour (*hāsya*) would have been more peripheral. On the contrary, according to the majority of the studies on this subject matter, in the 1970s and 1980s, during a period of “decadence” (*girāvāṭ*) of the *Kāvī sammelans*, lyrics inspired by humourist and satirical feelings prevailed (Visheshlakshmi 1985, pp. 319–330).

<sup>10</sup> In the period preceding and following Indian independence, the majority of the gatherings were patronised by the Indian National Congress (INC) and/or by cultural associations such as the All-Indian Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA), which supported these events with the goal of voicing distinct ideological, political, and socio-cultural slogans and campaigns. In the contemporary context, similar events are organised especially for commemorating political anniversaries and celebrations as well as religious festivals. Many gatherings of poets are organised, for instance, during Holi, a festival which is deeply connected to the realm of joke and humour. Finally, it is interesting to note the diasporic nature of these events, which, over the last few years, have been often organised in many Asian countries, in Europe, and in the USA.

in Hindi and Hinglish manifested themselves. For instance, a multitude of memes or vignettes have been produced by ‘ordinary’ people and by recognised artists during the last years. An interesting and innovative element is the use of these narratives from a subaltern and marginal perspective. This is the case with numerous Instagram pages; at times, by adopting a caustic style, they have been, and still are, engaged in articulating the socio-cultural and political claims by Indian Dalit and – to a lesser degree – the Adivasi communities<sup>11</sup>. These digital narratives and their incidence in Indian “subaltern counter-public” (Fraser 1990, p. 70) should not be underestimated. They are part of a political programme, consciously developed by these communities<sup>12</sup>. It is also important to outline that, over the last few years, stand-up comedy has become crucially important in India particularly for the articulation of claims by women artists, which “could be contradictory to each other, but emerging from the standpoint of someone surviving within the Indian cultural contexts” (Shivaprasad 2023, p. 169). Apart from the multi-fold dynamics linked to the digitalisation of satire and humour in the Hindi sphere, the subaltern perspective is another important factor not to be seen as incidental when addressing contemporary narratives on COVID-19. Satire, deemed in Phiddian’s term as a rhetorical art (Phiddian 2013, p. 55), has often been addressed in history as a “Pharresian instrument” for witnessing the misconducts pursued by governments (Caron 2016, p. 157). In recent times, such an assessment has turned out to be quite partial since, in many historical circumstances, satire has been a male and elitist practice (Knight 2004, p. 6). In any case, however, it must be outlined that the directions and orientations of satire are not fixed, and the relationship between this field, the institutions and the subaltern public is subjected to ideological variations – not less than the position held by scholars who investigate this domain.

<sup>11</sup> Instagram is, arguably, the main platform for the development of satirical narratives by activists who claim their ideological closeness to Adivasi and Dalit communities. Some Instagram groups, such as *dalitmemers3.0*, *bahujan\_memes* and so on, have a clear-cut satirical attitude. However, it must be outlined that, so far, they have quite a limited audience. Other groups, with a less caustic satirical vein, adopt satire and humour only incidentally and with the specific scope of voicing specific sociocultural and political campaigns of the Adivasi, Dalit and LGBTQIA+ people and communities.

<sup>12</sup> This is well reflected in the words of Chandra Bhan Prasad, activist, writer, and journalist, associated with the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce, who has recently stated that: “For upper-caste people, Twitter is just another invention. For Dalits, it has the potential for a revolution... There is no barrier for Dalits.” (Quot in Browarczyk 2021, p. 5).

Furthermore, while exploring the use of comedy in the Indian context during the pandemic, it is still important to also consider its controversial relationship with political power and censorship. It is commonly claimed that cultural productions in Indian *bhāshās* (local Indian languages) were generally not subjected to censorship (Chandran 2017, pp. 89-117). Indeed, compared to writers and performers who resort to using English as their linguistic means, authors using Indian languages appear to be more “conservative” in their approach to morality and religion (Ibid., p.89). The aim of the present study is not to question such an opinion by presenting a diachronic analysis of the many situations when authors using Indian languages developed strategies to circumvent censorship. Rather, what is remarkable here is that, especially in the last few years, satirical and humourist productions in Hindi and in other Indian languages have been harshly impacted by legal and extra-legal repercussions. For instance, Sanjay Rajoura, a member of the satirical theatre group (*Aisī taisī demokresi*, “Democracy, Go to Hell”) has been recently subjected to police enquiry for having raised some humourist comments on the Hindu God Ganesha (Sood 2020). A similar incident took place in 2021, when Kunal Kamra, another member of this group, responded to the Supreme Court with several tweets and expressed ideas which offended the apex Court (Ibid.). Even Vir Das, an Indian comedian, actor, musician, and author of the dark comedy series *Hasmukh*, was taken to court with the allegation of having raised defamatory comments on Indian lawyers. The tendency to bring satirists and humourists under the legal scanner has increased over the last few years and, notably, during the COVID-19 period. This not only affected Hindi or Hinglish authors, but all the artists associated with comedy. In 2021, Nalin Yadav, comedian, Munavar Faruqui, stand-up comedian, and Nilesh Sharma, journalist, were accused of producing offensive and blasphemous narratives about Hindu deities and/or about Indian institutions and political figures. In May 2020, an article titled *No Country for Political Satire: How Much Can Indian Comedy Really Push the Boundaries*, published on “Dead Ant”, an Indian activist website committed to disseminating information about the socio-cultural and political campaigns promoted by satirists, stated that:

Satire, in a perfect world, points a fun-house mirror at society. It says the things – in an exaggerated, sardonic way – that were too afraid to think. Behind the disarming jokes lies the ugly truth. But today, comedians,

who play the role of the truth-telling court jesters of society, are faced with the constant, terrifying prospect of both legal and ‘extra-legal’ repercussions for their words. The impulse, naturally, is to self-censor. To limit all provocations. [...] the legal framework of the freedom of speech and expression, as defined in Article 19 (1) (a) in our Constitution, is one thing. But what we have trouble reconciling with is the philosophical concept of free speech, of tolerating conflicting, uncomfortable ideas. Kneejerk outrage is evergreen, leading to increasingly bizarre outcomes. (Akhil Sood, 2020)

“Dead Ant”, especially in the last few years, has been playing a crucial role in advocating for the rights of free speech in India. This is not the only strategy used by satirists for claiming their rights of free expression. In February 2020, for instance, just a month before the lockdown, many artists joined the *Stand Up for India* event, a fundraiser to ensure that Indian citizens could use Internet in accordance with the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution (Rawal 2020). In light of the above, it is important to frame Hindi satirical and humourist narratives about COVID-19 – which will be addressed in the following sections – within the context of both the dynamics of digitalisation and partial or complete censorship/self-censorship to which, during the last three years, comedy in Hindi and in other languages have been subjected. Clearly, the aforementioned observations are neither exhaustive nor all-encompassing, but they do provide a context for understanding the multidisciplinary dimension of contemporary Hindi satire and humour.

#### **2.4. Glimpses from the Web: From Adaptive Coping Strategies to Dark Narratives**

While discussing the functions carried out by humour and satire, the previous sections also outlined the coping power of these instruments. These means provided us with a mechanism to adapt to the health, socio-cultural, and political dynamics triggered by the outbreak of the health crisis. If we look at the nature of the satirical and humorous responses during the COVID-19 period, especially during the first wave, it becomes clear that, occasionally, multimedia contents were directed towards facilitating psychological strategies to contain the negative effects of the health emergency. This tendency is well highlighted in Table 1: 18 of the investigated items revealed the presence

of words and concepts explicitly referring to the emotional sphere. The data becomes even more significant when we consider only the videos, since 14 out of the 22 items recall the sphere of the emotions. Moreover, most of the selected items were overtly characterised by a metanarrative reflection on the relevance of satire and humour as valves for facing the negative emotions resulting from the pandemic and, especially, the lockdown. The videos uploaded on YouTube from 25 March to 31 May 2020 played a major role in developing these strategies. It is remarkable that a large number of the videos uploaded during the lockdown portrayed the shows of the *Hāsya kavi sammelans* organised in 2017 and 2018, way before the start of the pandemic. Nevertheless, in the performances uploaded on YouTube in March 2020, right before the lockdown, and in 2021, authors made different references to the pandemic. A remarkable feature of the videos consists of elements found in the titles and in the comments suggesting they were intentionally uploaded – during the lockdown – with the specific aim of coping with the psychological distress caused by the latter. Many videos were labelled with the following sentence in the title: “*Ham-so haṁsāo, Coronavirus ko dūr bhagāo*” (Laugh, make others laugh, and destroy the Coronavirus)<sup>13</sup>. Other similar sentences were: “*Hamsne se hāregā Corona*” (Corona will be erased by laughing!)<sup>14</sup> or even more well-articulated slogans, such as: “*Coronavirus kī khabreṁ sunkar pareśān ho cuke haiṁ to yah kavi sammelan suniye loṭpoṭ ho jāemge*” (If, by listening to the news on Coronavirus you have become extremely worried, then listen to the discussions of this gathering of poets and you will be delighted)<sup>15</sup>. Interestingly, during the lockdown and the period which followed, some Indian artists resorting to Hindi or Hinglish performed private shows which were promptly uploaded on YouTube and other media. Among them, an important example is that of Sunil Jogi, Indian author and humourist<sup>16</sup>. During a private show authored by the

<sup>13</sup> See, among others, the video portraying a spectacle by the humourist Babulal Dingiya, uploaded on YouTube on 23 March 2020, available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFKtiSXK9G8>>.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, the private show by Sunil Jogi, uploaded on YouTube on 26 April 2020, available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P236o1ikg9c&t=665s>>.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, the video of a humourist poets’ meeting, uploaded on YouTube on 19 March 2020, available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kI2l-PAbRA&t=568s>>.

<sup>16</sup> Until recently, he was the President of the Hindustani Academy (Hindustāni Ekeḍemī), a cultural organisation based in Prayagraj, which is responsible for the dissemination – through various cultural organisations – of cultural production in Hindi, Urdu, and



latter, broadcast on the television channel *News24* and then uploaded by the channel on YouTube on 26 April 2020,<sup>17</sup> the performer vividly expressed his commitment to ‘cure the mental distress of the Indian audience through the therapeutic use of laughter:

*Maiṁ hūṁ dakṭar Sunīl Jogī haṁsāne ke lie muskarāne ke lie āj hazīr hūṁ. Is Lockḍaun ke samay meṁ apne ghar se Lockḍaun kā pūrā pālan karte hue maiṁ āpke bic hūṁ. Hāsya ek vardān hai jo īśvar ne sirf insān ko diyā hai, samsār kā ek h prāṇī ro saktā hai [...] lekin sirf insān hai jo haṁs saktā hai, muskarā saktā hai. To yah bahut zarūrī hai.*

I am Dr. Sunil Jogi and I am here to make you laugh and smile today. I am in your midst, in these times of lockdown and supporting it in the most complete way by staying at home. Humour is a gift that God gave just to the human being; every sentient being is able to cry [...] however, just the human being can laugh and smile. Therefore, this is certainly necessary. (Jogi, 2020a)

Sunil Jogi’s words are significant for two reasons. First, they clearly reflect political and ideological acceptance of governmental policies on containing the pandemic during the first wave<sup>18</sup>. Compared to other global contexts where, since the earliest stages of the pandemic, comedy was also used for questioning lockdown-like measures, in the Hindi public sphere it seems like there was a consistent acceptance of this measure. Undoubtedly, certain humourist expressions, like the aforementioned slogan referring to the stress caused by the negative news broadcast by mainstream media, points to a ‘hidden’ feeling of discomfort towards Indian institutions. However, we should not underestimate that, during the entire lockdown period and especially in March and April 2020, many traditional and new media directly contributed to spreading tips and information for coping with the psychological tension (*tanāv*) and pressure (*dabāv*) caused by the pandemic<sup>19</sup>. Another remarkable feature of the

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other Indian languages. Sunil Jogi is also, significantly, an author with a long history of performance within the ranks of the *Hāsya kavīs* (humourist poets).

<sup>17</sup> See note 14.

<sup>18</sup> The endorsement provided by the humourist is suggested by the adoption of the Hindi verb *pālan karnā*, which can be variously translated as “to perform” or “to obey”, linked to the word *pūrā*, whose meaning is “wholly”.

<sup>19</sup> On 22 March 2020, “Hindustān fursat”, a supplement of the Hindi newspaper “Hindustān”, published an article named *Ḍar Karo-na*, whose title was a pun translatable as “Don’t be Afraid” but also meaning “Corona Fear.” Later, on 23

aforementioned video is the author's tendency to recast the therapeutic psychological functions embodied by humour and satire in a spiritually-oriented dimension. Against this backdrop, it is clear that Jogi's words were devoid of any marked religious connotation. Elsewhere, however, Jogi narrativised the pandemic also by adopting Hindu-oriented values and symbols. An example can be seen in the show uploaded on YouTube on 30 March 2020, wherein Jogi – taking a motif which was adopted, with different shapes, in many global public spheres, and reassessing it within the Indian context – drew an analogy between the war (*yuddh*) fought by people who persisted in accepting all restrictions and the one depicted in the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>20</sup> The tendency to re-adapt narratives drawn from India's past religious background and mythology was a common practice among humourist performers and, remarkably, it also impacted Hindi literary satirists during the pandemic. Interestingly, most of the performers who adopted these elements were authors usually joining the *sammelans*. Stand-up comedians were, to a larger extent, quite sceptical in using these elements. As shown in Table 1, memes and videos uploaded on YouTube during the pandemic also served a preventive informative function. Even in this case, a quite conspicuous number of the videos and cartoon videos – 7 out of 24 – show this dimension; conversely, this function appears to be less visible in the memes, where 9 out of the 107 elements have an informative value. Information on actions and social measures to be adopted to prevent the spread of the virus were, in some cases, directly provided by the performers; in other cases, they were added in the video description.

Before further and diachronically exploring how the ideological and political responses to the pandemic changed over time, it is worth investigating the most common topics presented during the pandemic. First of all, it is remarkable that most memes and vignettes produced during the first lockdown addressed the concepts of family and/or situations implying the relationship between two partners during the pandemic. As shown by Table 2, 20 of the investigated elements represented these topics. As for vignettes and memes, a large number of the representations were labelled as *Desi-memes* and focused mainly

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March, "Hindustān" published a new article, named *Tanāv se kaise jīt pāem* (How Could we Win against Stress), which enhanced newspaper's strategy of providing information to psychologically cope with the stress caused by the forthcoming lockdown.

<sup>20</sup> Video available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBBnMUcBFTw&t=32s>>.

on issues concerning the socio-cultural status of Indian women during the pandemic. The forms through which *Desi-memes* were represented varied considerably. In most instances, especially in the case of male authors, the main focus was to represent women as authoritarian and despotic housekeepers. These caricatures were not overtly characterised by sexist or deeply aggressive tones; nonetheless, they subtly represented masculine and patriarchal views concerning the status of Indian women. In a few cases, *Desi-memes* in Hindi and Hinglish were also adopted for popularising narratives about women's empowerment, particularly with regard to their right to self-determination and gender equality. Occasionally, however, clear-cut sexist representations of Indian women were also detected. Since the first wave of the pandemic, most of the elements with an informative function were characterised by references to masks and medicines; later, since 2021, reference was often made to the vaccine, generally with sceptical tones. Overall, as shown by Table 2, 16 of the elements investigated showcased the presence of references to masks, vaccines and medicines. The first wave of the pandemic was also characterised by the adoption of xenophobic, satirical narratives; these narratives, which were detected in 10 of the memes investigated, present in Table 2, concerned China and, to a lesser degree, Italy. Given this socio-cultural background, it is relevant to note that only on a few occasions was the administration of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Bhārtīy Janatā Partī, BJP) subjected to overt Hindi satirical criticisms about the way the Indian management dealt with the health crisis. Moreover, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, it seems that the Hindi public sphere was characterised by a 'normative' consistency with regard to the topics narrativised through the adoption of satire and humour. Most political criticisms were levelled by Indian stand-up comedians. This, for instance, was the case of the group of comedians Aisi taisi democracy, whose members, on the occasion of the celebration of workers' struggles on 1 May 2020, performed and uploaded an open satirical debate/performance called *Corona Virus Set for May Day* on YouTube<sup>21</sup>. This video, which mainly dealt with the COVID-19 crisis, also raised a number of local and international issues. The main objection raised by performers against the BJP, at the domestic level, and against Donald Trump, at the global level, was that these governments

<sup>21</sup> Video available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI95g1ta2O4&t=1219s>>.

had underestimated the virus. Moreover, governments were accused of negligence in trying to mitigate the crisis, especially in the period before the Indian lockdown. Another contentious issue was the role of the Indian administration in spreading fake news about the remedies that could help avoid contracting the virus. Within this larger ideological debate, there was also deep criticism against the reduced possibilities of free speech in India.

After the end of the lockdown, the Indian administration was heavily criticised for the way it managed the pandemic, and for the different responses provided by the government to face the health crisis. One major issue was the shortage of health and safety precautions and assistance to prevent the spread of the virus and to cure ill people. Moreover, a very common criticism against the BJP was that it allowed religious rallies and festivals, such as the 2021 Kumbh Mela, which facilitated the spread of the virus throughout the country (Venkataramanakrishnan 2021). During the second wave of the pandemic, the number of cases peaked by late April, when India reported 400,000 new cases and over 3,000 deaths in one day. At the time, the healthcare system was under a lot of pressure due to the lack of liquid medical oxygen and cryogenic tankers. It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate the reasons for the rapid spread of COVID-19 in India in 2021. It is, however, convenient to draw a diachronic intellectual trajectory of comedy in the period spanning between 2020 and 2021. The kind of informative and psychologically-oriented comedy that characterised the first wave in 2021 progressively disappeared in favour of a new approach that largely reflected dark narratives. After the pandemic reached its climax, in 2021, an illustrative satirical narrative of political dissent was unfolded by Aisi taisi Democracy, which published a cartoon video called *Super Spreader Anthem || Aisi Taisi Democracy || Rahul Ram + Varun Grover + Sanjay Rajoura #Covid19* on YouTube on 15 June 2021<sup>22</sup>. The protagonist and hero of this cartoon video, inspired by the game *Super Mario Bros*, is Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, depicted as an epigone of *Mario*. The anthem playing in the background of the video was performed by Rahul Ram, guitarist and singer of Aisi Taisi Democracy.

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<sup>22</sup> Video available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaqaNsizl0w>>.

*Modī jī, Modī jī*  
*khīmco deś kī bodhi jī*  
*bhare śamsān dekhke*  
*Bhārat mām bhī jī*  
*Modī jī, Modī jī*  
*Modī jī, Modī jī*  
*āpne bolā COVID gone*  
*mask bhī rakhā nahīm on*  
*Kumbh Melā rally sab allow kar diyā [...]*

Modi ji, Modi ji  
 You drag the corpse of the nation,  
 Looking at crowded crematoriums  
 Even Mother India cried  
 Modi ji, Modi ji  
 Modi ji, Modi ji  
 You had promised that COVID would have gone  
 You never even wore a mask  
 But you allowed Kumbh Mela and rallies [...]

(Aisi Taisi Democracy, 2021)

As showcased by the presence of four indicators – lost lives, money, oxygen, and time – the aim of the hero and protagonist of the cartoon is to spread the virus in India in the quickest and most expensive way possible, by adopting a number of measures such as refusing support from other countries and allowing religious rallies and festivals which facilitate the spread of the virus. Interestingly, in spite of the ludic and captivating framework of the satire, the content of the video is deeply morbid. The passages referring to the burning funeral pyres of COVID-19 victims are particularly macabre. Indeed, especially in New Delhi, many people take the funeral pyres as a symbol of the government’s inability to manage the situation. The cartoon video was also a way to express some general ideas about the Indian political and cultural mainstream and, in particular, the repression of the voices of political dissent and comments on Twitter and other sites<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, there was strong criticism towards

<sup>23</sup> On some occasions over the last three years the Indian government was accused of restricting the power of tech companies in India and of policing “what is said online” (Singh, Conger 2022) on social networks and, especially, on Twitter. This tendency, according to the critics, started in 2020, in parallel with the rise of the Indian farmers’ protest, and increased over the last two years. Recently, the former Twitter CEO

the tendency, even during the pandemic, of ‘saffronising’ the Indian political setting by promoting the therapeutic advantages of Hindu symbols and values. Based on the data collected, it is hard to gauge the online viewers’ response to the satirical narratives developed during the pandemic. Nevertheless, some of the comments posted by users are useful to investigate the extent to which the uptake of the humourist and satirical contents actually worked. In the comments posted by users on the *Super Spreader Anthem* video, the will to extend the narrative of Aisi Taisi Democracy is evident, adding new elements to the political satire. For instance, one comment on *Mann ki baat* (Inner Thoughts), an Indian radio programme hosted by the Indian Prime Minister and aimed at addressing Indian citizens, states that: “This is mann ki baat of every citizen in this country”. In another satirical appeal, equally mocking the statements made by the Indian Prime Minister, we read: “This song has the real things which nations want to say... Thank you so much”.

As this satire shows, after the ‘construction’ of the Indian national symbols addressing the first wave of the crisis, a quite innovative phase, characterised by the partial deconstruction of these symbols, seemed to take hold in 2021 and 2022. This ‘deconstructive’ trajectory was pursued by authors, often engaged in new media, who spoke on behalf of the more marginalised individuals and communities of Indian society. Furthermore, even famous stand-up comedians, such as Ankita Shrivastav<sup>24</sup> and Rehman Khan,<sup>25</sup> by reflecting on biases and clichés which had emerged during the first wave of the pandemic, contributed problematising many issues, ranging from the role of religion and ‘tradition’ in a post-pandemic world to analysing the changes occurring in Indian contemporary families.

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Jack Dorsey has alleged that the Indian government requested the removal of tweets and accounts linked to this protest; furthermore, Twitter, according to Dorsey, was also asked to censor journalists critical of the government (Mateen 2023). On its part, the Indian Government recently denied these allegations and, conversely, in 2020 accused the Twitter CEO of not respecting local norms and rules regulating the publication of contents on social networks.

<sup>24</sup> See the video *Main, Meri Family & Lockdown | Standup Comedy | Ankita Shrivastav*, published on YouTube on 1 February 2021 and available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUZell4AoVw>>.

<sup>25</sup> See the videos *Indian People and Corona Virus | Stand up Comedy by Rehman Khan*, published on YouTube on 20 March 2020, available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCdIelHD7w0&t=91s>>; *You Tube, Vaccine & Muslims | Stand up Comedy | Rehman Khan*, available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWEzIo59rXw>>.

## 2.5. From New Media to Literary Satire

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, literary narratives imbued with satirical and humourist tendencies generally displayed a certain reticence in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, Hindi literary production has offered some interesting examples of satirical narrativisation of the pandemic. It is important to note that most literary humourist and satirical writings on the pandemic were first published on the print and online editions of popular Hindi journals and magazines such as “Jansattā”, “Purvācal Prahārī”, “Saritā”, and others. After the end of the lockdown, many of the previously published satirical sketches were collected and included as part of literary anthologies published around the end of 2020 and 2021. It is also worth mentioning that many outstanding contemporary Hindi writers have not, to this day, displayed any specific commitment to the narrativisation of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the contrary, satirical writers such as Ajay Shukla, author of the column *Sattū jī ke fek nyūz* (Sattu jī’s Fake News), published in the journal “Jansattā”, and Alok Saxena, author of several sketches published in “Saritā” and “Purvācal Prahārī”, have prominently contributed to the process of satirical narrativisation of the pandemic. From a general analysis of these literary narratives, it can be ascertained that, on the one hand, a specific feature of the literary satirical narratives on the pandemic was that they displayed a continuity with literary tropes drawn from Hindi literature of the 1950s and 1960s, especially from the works of Harishankar Parsai<sup>26</sup>; on the other hand, they showed a deep thematic connection to some ideas and values produced, during the lockdown, on traditional and new media. With reference to the ‘traditional’ character of satires on COVID-19, on many occasions both the aforementioned literary satirists aimed to project contemporary symbolisms drawn from Indian history, mythology, and religion. Saxena’s reassessment of the figure of Yamaraja, the Hindu God of Death, is particularly interesting. In the 1950s, Yamaraja had already been one of the main characters of Parsai’s short story *Bholārām kā jīv* (Bholaram’s Soul, 1954), and is now portrayed in the short story *Seniṭāijaryukt bārīs kā intazār* (Waiting for a Rain Filled with Sanitiser). In the latter,

<sup>26</sup> Parsai is usually deemed as the most outstanding literary satirist who authored many literary columns, novels, and short stories during the 1950s and 1960s. For a study see Mangraviti (2022).

Yamaraj is represented as a benevolent God who suffers for the dead people brought to the underworld:

*Abhī maim Nidrādevī ke āgoś meṃ āyā hī thā ki sapne meṃ mujhe Citragupta dikhāi die. Cehare par cintā kā bhāv thā. Citragupta ko cintit hotā huā dekh kar Yamrāja prakaṣ hue aur bole: ‘Kyā bāt hai Citragupta? Pṛthvīlok kī koī samasyā hai kyā?’; ‘Jī, cintā kī bāt yah hai ki abhī tak to maim apne yahām āne vālī ātmāom kā lekhājokhā āsānī se purā kar liyā kartā thā. Ab dhartī par Koronā nām kā jānlevā vāyras cārom taraf tejī se phail rahā hai, jo hamāre yahām āne vālī ātmāom kī saṅkhyāom ko kāi gunā barhā saktā hai. Mujhe cintā is bāt kī hai kī apne pās bahutāy meṃ ātmāom ko rakhne ke lie itnā parisar kahām hai?’ [...] Citragupta bole: ‘Jī, maimne patā karvā liyā hai ki vahām āisoleśan vārḍ banākar Koronā samkramit rogīyom ko alag rakh kar ilāj karvāyā jā rahā hai. Māsk aur seniṭāijar phrī meṃ bāntē jā rahe haiṃ. Tamām jagahom ko seniṭāijar se dhoyā jā rahā hai. [...] Turant hī Yamrāja jī bole: ‘Viśeṣ prabandhā karvākar dhartī par jaldī se jaldī seniṭāijar kī jhamājham bāris karvā do.*

As soon as I was embraced by Nitradevi, Chitragupta appeared to me in a dream. There was a hint of concern on his face. Recognising that Chitragupta was in deep concern, Yamaraja revealed itself and said: ‘Is everything ok, Chitragupta? Is there any problem on the Earth?’ ‘Yes, the reason for my concern is that, so far, accounting for the number of souls who came here was not a big task. Nowadays, the deadly Coronavirus is spreading so rapidly, all over the Earth, that the number of the departed people has dramatically increased. I wonder if there are enough buildings to welcome souls in our area.’ [...] Chitragupta stated: ‘Yes, I found out that an isolation ward is being made there and all the Corona-infected patients are being treated separately. All the places are being washed with sanitiser. [...] Immediately Yamaraja said: ‘By making special arrangements, get the sanitiser rained on the Earth as soon as possible.’ (Saksena 2020, p. 41)

In this and in many other writings by Saksena, unlike the previous uses of comedy on new media during the first wave, the homeostatic and psychological function is much more marked than mere satirical criticism. It is clear that by trying to cope with the fear and distress caused by the pandemic, the author has humanised Yamaraja. This rather unconventional representation of Yamaraja, significantly, was not only crafted by literary authors; the tales concerning Yamaraja during COVID-19 times found a place also in the *The Kapil Sharma*



*Show*, a Hindi-language stand-up comedy and talk show broadcast by Sony Entertainment Television and hosted by Kapil Sharma, one of the torchbearers of stand-up in India<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, Yamaraja was not the only figure marked by spiritual significance whose representation was functional to the construction of psychological coping strategies. Quite common was the reference in Saksena's writings to the Coronasur (Corona-demon), a demon epitomizing the features of the Coronavirus whose iconography was progressively moulded by Indian performers and artists engaged in different fields<sup>28</sup>. Informative messages – still veined by satirical and humourist overtones about the pandemic – can be found in articles and satirical sketches such as *Lākdāun hai to kyā kareṃ tāki āpkā jīvan sārthak ho jae* (Lockdown: What you Should Do in Order to Make Your Life Fruitful) and *Korona kāl meṃ yog aur khunpān se manovṛtti badlie* (Change your Mental Disposition during Coronavirus' Times with Yoga, Food, and Drink). In India and around the globe, sceptical narratives have been the object of many memes; Saksena's adherence to such narratives can be identified by analysing works such as *Rūpyā banā imyuniṭī kī pahcān* (Money Became the Identification Card of Immunity) and *Koronā vāirolajī andhviśvās ke cakkar meṃ* (In the Superstition's Grip of Corona Virologists). Both the sketches portrayed the malpractices in the Indian national health system as well as the "superstitious beliefs" (*andhviśvās*) of Indian virologists and doctors. Another thematic feature which connects the narratives found in new media with those present in some literary satires consists of remarks on marital life. For many reasons, the aesthetic and ideological orientation of Saksena's satirical narratives on the pandemic seem to follow the same trajectory of narrativising the pandemic as previously detected in Sunil Jogi's performances. It showcases the same tendency to completely and indisputably accept

<sup>27</sup> Such representation of Yamarāja is present in many shows by Kapil Sharma and particularly in the episode *In Yamarāja ko lagtā hai Corona Virus se bahut zyādā dar | The Kapil Sharma Show | Kapil Ke Avatar*, published on YouTube on 9 June 2022. In this episode Yamaraja is represented as a character who is frightened of the spread of the Coronavirus. Interestingly, characters who are usually associated with Yamaraja, such as Chitragupta, the Hindu deity who serves as a registrar of the dead, are also represented as 'villains', engaged in realising grotesque and clumsy evil deeds such as robbing dead people of their possessions. The video is available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reTxjxs32Xo>>.

<sup>28</sup> For a study concerning the religious values attributed to Coronasur in India and in other Asian countries see Hertzman et al. (2023).

the measures taken by the ruling administration on how to manage the pandemic. Furthermore, a *fil rouge* connects the satirical narratives of both authors: it consists of the tendency to reassess values and symbols extracted from India's past and, particularly, from Hindu heritage, with the intention of turning them into useful ways to trigger psychological coping strategies. From this perspective, addressing recent reflections by Zekavat on the connection between satire and the construction of identities (2017)<sup>29</sup>, it could be stated that the kind of comedy pursued by the above-mentioned authors was mostly aimed at establishing values and symbols circumventing a quite homogeneous and Hindu-oriented notion of the Indian national community. In this regard, we should mention that both authors have distanced themselves from a more radical and critical approach adopted by Ajay Shukla, as clearly seen in his articles published in the print and online editions of "Jansattā" during the lockdown in 2020. Like Saksena, even Shukla seems to reassess historical values and symbols by adopting satire and humour. Nevertheless, at first sight Shukla's approach to the narrativisation of the pandemic seems to be less spiritually and religiously oriented. It is, rather, much more rooted in the 'tradition' of Hindi leftist satire, which dates back to 1950s literary production and, generally – but not exclusively – intermingles historical and mythical themes with a reflection on specific sociocultural claims and demands. From this perspective, an original feature in Shukla's works is his reflection on ecological matters – an issue which connects his literary production to the eco-literary experiments of Hindi contemporary literature (Consolaro 2016, pp. 107-121)<sup>30</sup>. Finally, it is important to analyse the deep thematic continuity between the political, ecological, and economic criticisms levelled by this literary satirist and those previously detected in the performances of Aisi taisi democracy. By sati-

<sup>29</sup> In Zekavat's words, satire "has been used both to resist and subvert, and to reinforce the structures of power and social systems. In both ways, however, satire is a determinant of identity formation by distinguishing certain groups from others." (Zekavat 2017, p. 5).

<sup>30</sup> With reference to the incorporation of ecologist issues in Ajay Shukla's satirical columns, we could mention, for instance, the satire *Koronā ko bhagvān kī cīṭī, parhkar hīl gāim sabkī cūlem* (By Reading God's Letter to Corona the Joints of All Will Be Shaken), published in the journal "Jansattā" on June 1 2020. The satire focuses on God's bitter reflection on the damage to nature generated by the existence of human beings. In this satire, differently from other productions composed by the same author, it is easier to find ties to spiritual symbols and themes.

rically analysing the COVID-19 crisis, Shukla, like other performative satirical authors, is interested in witnessing the political processes of homogenisation and removal of the marginal voices of political and socio-cultural dissent within Indian society. This criticism is quite evident, for instance, in the satire *Koronā par kaibineṭ kī baṛī baiṭhak, JS ke sujhāo par baṛke PS* (Big Cabinet Meeting on Corona Issue: Senior Minister Flares up for Joint Minister's Suggestion), published on 29 May 2020, in which Shukla – portraying an imaginary Minister's cabinet meeting – hints that by closing universities the Indian government is actually trying to erase all forms of dissent produced by the most radical and revolutionary streams of Indian youth.

*Viśvavidyālaya vihīntā kā aslī fāyḍā to maim ab batāne jā rahā huṃ. Soco, kitnā mazā āegā, jab na Jeenyū hogā va Jādaopur. Aligarh kī kirakirī nikal jaegī... samjhe āp log? Yūnīvarsitī khatm hone par arban naksal bhī khatm ho jāemge. Ye sab saraṇḍā ke jaṅgal meṃ apne celom ke sāth Lāl kitab kā punarpāṭh aur apne cain kī banśī bajāemge. Viśvavidyālaya khatm hone par kā cauthā fāyḍā yah hogā ki paṛhe likhe berozgār khatm ho jāemge. Na na na. Berozgār to rahemge par unkī aukāt nyūnatam mazdūri ki ho jaegī.*

I am now going to tell you the real benefit coming from the absence from university. Think how much fun it will be, when there are neither JNU nor Jadavpur. The grit of Aligarh<sup>31</sup> will be removed.... did you understand guys? Urban Naxals<sup>32</sup> will also be eradicated when the university ends. All of them will endlessly recite the *Lāl kitab*<sup>33</sup> with their disciples in the forest of Saranda playing the flute of their inner peace. The fourth advantage of the abolition of the university is that there will be no educated unemployed people. No, no, no. They will not be unemployed but they will have the status of a worker with minimum wage. (Shukla 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Here, reference is made to three Indian universities that have been, especially over the last ten years, particularly critical towards BJP's administration.

<sup>32</sup> The Naxals are Communist guerrilla groups, ideologically inspired by Maoist ideology. On many occasions, universities have been blamed for providing ideological support to these groups.

<sup>33</sup> We decided to maintain the original words *Lāl kitab* since, in this satirical context, this definition could refer not only to Mao's *The Little Red Book* but also, subtly, a set of books on Vedic palmistry and astrology which were authored during the 1930s in Hindi and Urdu.

## 2.6. Conclusion

Over the past years, humour and satire have turned out to be important tools to psychologically manage the pandemic in the Hindi public sphere. Digitalising these approaches and adopting them to develop different narrativisation strategies on COVID-19 has also paved the way for the development of some counter-narratives by ‘radical’ authors belonging to marginal realities within the Hindi public sphere. At the same time, especially the authors associated with *Hāsya kavi sammelans*, have welcomed satire and humour as important tools to legitimise the policies enacted throughout the years by the BJP government. Through a multidisciplinary approach, the present work has traced two very distinct trajectories pursued by satire and humour in the Hindi language. On the one hand, these elements were used during the pandemic, especially during the first lockdown, to strengthen the symbolisms and values characterising the Indian community, often represented as a monolithic and homogeneous national identity; on the other, especially since the second wave of the pandemic, satire and humour were adopted to deconstruct symbols and values concerning this identity. In both cases, it is interesting to note that the pandemic, although being the main focus of the narratives, was also a ‘pretext’ for developing broader reflections on Indian democracy and on the relationship between ‘mainstream culture’ and marginalised groups and communities. The narratives produced by traditional and new media cannot be underestimated as they have deeply remoulded the imaginaries, symbols, and values delimiting the boundaries of Indian identity. Presumably, in the next few years, comedy will become an important political mobilisation instrument in the Indian context, resulting in satire and humour often being subjected to legal and extra-legal repercussions within the Hindi public sphere and, more generally, in the contemporary Indian political framework, as can clearly be seen in the controversies surrounding the *Stand Up for India* contest held in 2020.

**Table 1**

Sr. No.	Medium	Psychological Function	Informative Function	Politics/ Ideology	Investigated Items
	Videos	15	8	4	22
	Cartoon Videos	0	2	2	2
	Memes/ Vignettes	4	9	9	107

Table 2

Sr. No.	Topic	Medium		
		Videos	Cartoon Videos	Memes
	Family/Relationship/Love	5	0	15
	Vaccine/Mask/Medicines	3	2	11
	Xenophobic/Antixenophobic	0	0	13
	Faith/Religion/History	7	1	2
	Sport and Game	0	0	8
	News and Misinformation	3	1	4
	War and Violence	3	0	3
	Technology	2	0	4
	Misogyny/Sexism	0	0	5
	Need to relax	0	0	5
	Study	0	0	5
	Music and Movies	2	0	3
	Alcohol and Tobacco	0	0	4
	Businesses	0	0	4
	Job	1	0	4
	Housework	0	0	3
	Food	0	0	3
	Socialisation	0	0	2
	Social Inequality	1	0	2
	Activity and Inactivity	1	0	1

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