

LETTER FROM AMERICA

A Sampling of American Sense of Humour

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

A recent poll of teenage American girls revealed that the guy they would most like to marry is the one who could make them laugh all day. Last month, an American couple celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary. Asked to list the factors responsible for their marital longevity, they had just one advice: "laugh as often and as hard as you can."

"I have good and bad news," says a man. "My mother-in-law drove over a cliff today. In my brand new car!" Mother-in-law jokes are a major staple of western male humour, something Bangladeshis - who are taught to respect the mother-in-law - cannot relate to. Western mother-in-law jokes actually are a not-so-subtle male attempt to make fun of his wife's family.

Unlike British humour, which can be quite laboriously crafted, American humour is direct. British audiences allow their comedians, such as Morecambe and Wise or the Two Ronnies, to build up a joke before delivering the punch line. Americans have no such patience. They want humour in every line. That is why American television comedies are full of one liners.

For some reason, the Vice Presidents are favourite targets of a comedian's wrath. Comedian Jay Leno had this to say about Vice President Dan Quayle in 1990: "I will tell you how serious President Bush is about sending a man to Mars. He put Dan Quayle in charge of the project, that's how serious!" During the presidential campaign of 1992, Dan Quayle did not help himself by misspelling "potato" in front of school students. Candidate Bill Clinton dismissed Quayle's criticism that he (Clinton) was a liberal by suggesting, "He (Quayle) probably does not know how to spell the word!"

Vice President Al Gore entered a charisma contest with a statue," so goes another joke. "The statue won!" Fortunately, the targets of the comedians are never malicious. The targets are usually game and never hesitate to get back at the comedian. On a recent visit to the David Letterman show, Vice President Al Gore recounted all the jokes the late night television comedian had cracked about the Vice President including the one about "bringing the Vice President back to life" through the services of the "Jurassic Park" dinosaur-resurrecting scientists.

A unique part of American politics is that the politicians all visit the talk shows. The 1996 Republican Presidential candidate Senator Bob Dole announced his candidacy on the David Letterman show declaring, "I believe every nation ought to have a President!" When Bob Dole volunteered to loan former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich 300,000 dollars fine the House assessed

him for ethics violations. President Clinton quipped to reporters: "You know, Chelsea is going to College (Stanford). I have to talk to Senator Dole about her tuition!" During the 1992 Presidential campaign, Bill Clinton appeared on MTV and to win over young voters, and to endear himself to the African-Americans, played the saxophone on the Arsenio Hall show, prompting President George Bush to comment sarcastically: "When he (Clinton) blows into his saxophone, Americans will be singing the blues!"

After haranguing her for weeks for not appearing on his show, David Letterman did manage to get Clinton. Lady Hillary Clinton on his show last month. Asked how she was responding to motorists passing by her new New York home and honking, the senatorial candidate exclaimed: "was that you!"

No recent President has been as good with one liners as former actor turned politician turned President, Ronald Reagan. As he lay in his hospital bed recovering from John Hinckley Jr.'s gun shots in March 1981, Reagan noticed that Vice President George Bush and Secretary of State Al Haig on down everyone was in his room. "Who is minding the house?" he quipped half-seriously, melting away the gravity of the moment. On another occasion responding to reporter's question whether his maverick Environment Secretary James Watt was in trouble, like a father about to discipline a child Reagan asked:

"What did he do?" Sometimes Reagan went too far. At the height of the cold war, as he finished recording his Saturday morning radio speech to the nation in 1984, Reagan joked (without realizing that the microphone had not been turned off): "Ladies and gentlemen, we begin bombing Russia in five minutes!" Presidents who did not have a sense of humour, such as Richard Nixon, are the ones who got themselves and the nation into all sorts of trouble.

Among sportsmen, former American baseball player Yogi Berra made a name for himself by simply stating the obvious: "It ain't over till it's over," "you can observe a lot by watching," or the outlandish, "if there is a fork in the road, take it!" Muhammad Ali, the boxing legend, was no less a comedian. "If anybody dreams of beating me, he should wake up and apologise!" he would say. It is impossible to watch

American sitcoms with children without being embarrassed. In a recent sitcom a youngster asks a breast-feeding woman: "If I blow into one, will the other inflate?" Not to be outdone, in one episode of "Seinfeld" Elaine asks Jerry, George and Kramer: "How do you guys walk around with those things?" Americans are not hesitant to discuss very private matters very publicly. Asked whether it was embarrassing when a secret service agent accidentally burst into the presidential bedroom at the White House one night, President Clinton offered, "Hillary and I had not started yet!"

Americans like to laugh hard. It makes them forget worldly worries and gives their lungs a good workout. They want to go to bed happy; that is why there are so many late night comedy shows. NBC's "Tonight Show," has been entertaining Americans since the 1950s. "Tonight Show's" host for thirty years (1962-92), comic genius Johnny Carson used to call his show "America's foreplay." Currently CBS's "David Letterman Show" runs against "The Tonight Show" (11:35 PM to 12:35 AM), hosted these days by another hilarious comedian, Jay Leno. For the night owls, Harvard graduate Conan O'Brien follows Leno for another hour. O'Brien's show debuted the same day in September 1993, that Yasser Arafat and the late Yitzhak Rabin shook hands at the lawn of the White House. And he was ready for the occasion: "My friends told me that the day I have my own TV show, the Arabs and the Jews will make peace!"

Such self-deprecating humour is common among Americans. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield's act is built around getting no respect. "I tell you, I get no respect. After watching me going at it with my wife in my bedroom for a while, the peeping tom kids started booing me!" Nothing is taboo when it comes to comedy, not even death. An agent is overheard commenting on a pop star's untimely death: "That was a good career move!"

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America has a comedy factory named "Saturday Night Live," on NBC. Since its inception in 1975, the popular television show has produced an incredible number of comedy actors. The first batch offered such refreshingly new comedians as the late John Belushi, Bill Murray, Chevy Chase, Steve Martin and Dan Aykroyd, all of whom are established film actors. The second batch was equally impressive: Eddie Murphy and Billy Crystal, the current host of the Oscars. The more recent alumni include Dana Carvey, Mike Myers, the late David Hartman, the late Chris Farley, David Spade and Adam Sandler, all of whom have made successful movies. "Seinfeld's" Elaine (Julia Dreyfus) was also a "Saturday Night Live" regular. In 1993, as former President George Bush hosted one episode of "Saturday Night Live," Dana Carvey rendered a perfect impersonation of the former President.

Jokes are a way of laughing at the absurdities of life, making fun of ourselves and releasing tension. It should not be confused with wit, which is weighed down by an intellectual dimension. Jokes are by definition silly. Not to worry; the most intimate things even the most intelligent men and women do are embarrassingly silly. Yet, they find maximum pleasure in it!

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Guardians of the Pure Pour Oil on Troubled Water

Film-maker Deepa Mehta was furious when Hindu extremists attacked and set light to the set of her current production, and the local political chief ordered a halt to filming. But the attack is no isolated incident. Gemini News Service examines a wave of cultural intolerance in India.



Actress Shabana Azmi: Work on her latest film, "Water", was halted by Hindu extremists

A mob attack on a film set in the holy city of Varanasi is the latest manifestation of a wave of intolerance sweeping across India as self-appointed guardians of culture act as unofficial censors to suppress freedom of artistic expression.

Filming was halted by the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state, Ram Prakash Gupta, who said he was acting in the wake of a request by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a militant Hindu outfit founded in 1925 with the explicit objective of organising India's majority Hindus to counter the perceived threat from Muslims.

The charge: by portraying the condition of Hindu widows in the 1930s, Deepa Mehta's film "Water" was trying to denigrate Hindu womanhood and present a distorted picture of Hinduism.

Last year, veteran film actor Dilip Kumar was labelled a "traitor" for accepting a Pakistani honour, Nishan-e-Imtiaz. It was conveniently forgotten that, before accepting the award, he had sought permission from Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. When the row showed no sign of abating, the actor met Vajpayee, who refused to take a stand against the veteran thespian's detractors.

In 1996, cinemas in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and Delhi exhibited another Deepa Mehta film, "Fire", were attacked by mobs. The movie was taken off the screen. The reason for the attack: "Fire" dared to hint at the possibility of a lesbian relationship between two women who, neglected by their husbands, found solace in each other's company.

In 1996, an exhibition of paintings by one of India's best-known artists, Maqbool Fida Husain, was attacked and vandalised. The charge: Husain, a Muslim, had the temerity to depict the Hindu goddess, Saraswati, naked.

In all these incidents, the attackers belong to either the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or its ideological siblings, which are members of the so-called RSS clan.

Most top BJP leaders are members of the RSS, which keeps an iron grip over what are essentially its front organisations. The crowd that demolished the Babri Mosque in the town of Ayodhya in 1992 consisted of RSS supporters in-

spired by its ideology.

The RSS remains the lounthead of the ideology of an aggressive Hinduism that considers only Hindus as the true inheritors of Indian nationalism; Muslims and Christians are treated as aliens who have had the cheek to maintain their separate cultural identities. An unabashed champion of the most orthodox form of Hinduism, it pays lip-service to gender equality while promoting a malechauvinistic attitude toward women.

When the RSS holds public functions, BJP stalwarts Prime Minister Vajpayee, Home Affairs Minister Lal Krishna Advani, Gujarat chief minister Keshubhai Patel and Uttar Pradesh chief minister Ram Prakash Gupta sit in the audience as ordinary RSS volunteers while RSS functionaries address them from the raised dais, leaving no room for any doubt as to who leads whom.

The RSS and BJP call their ideology "cultural nationalism". Critics, such as Hindi poet and journalist Manglesh Dabral, call it "cultural fascism".

The fascination of RSS leaders with German fascist leader

Kuldeep Kumar writes from New Delhi

basis of a powerful leader nominated by his predecessor. In its 75 years' existence, it has had only four chiefs, including the current incumbent, Rajendra Singh. The first two died in harness and the third abdicated because of poor health.

The second supreme, MS Golwalkar, laid down the RSS ideological credo in a 1938 booklet "We, or Our Nationhood Defined": "German race pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races - the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested

here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan (the land of Hindus) to learn and profit by."

That followers of such an organisation are trying to impose their will on creative artists by intimidating them through acts of vandalism should come as no surprise. They are trying to create paranoia among Hindus that their religion, culture and social values are in danger.

Romila Thapar, history professor at Jawaharlal Nehru

West Bengal BJP Hardens Stand against Water

Krittivas Mukherjee writes from Calcutta

Water was an insult to the widows of Varanasi. "As 90 per cent of the widows of Varanasi are Bengalis, the state should feel insulted and should have led in the condemnation of the film."

THE West Bengal unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has threatened to take to the streets if Indo-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta's controversial movie "Water" is shot in the eastern Indian state.

The film's shooting in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, was halted by protesters from some hardline Hindu groups and Mehta is hunting for an alternative locale, preferably along the river Ganges.

"We will protest any attempt by the government to allow Mehta to shoot her film here," BJP state secretary Rahul Sinha said. Sinha said his party would also lend moral support to any organisation which might physically try to halt the shooting of the film.

The Marxist-led government of West Bengal and the opposition Congress party as well as the Trinamool Congress, an ally of the BJP, have invited Mehta to shoot her film in the

state which, like Varanasi, is also home to the Ganges river. Leading intellectuals in the state have also welcomed Mehta to West Bengal and launched a signature campaign in her favour.

When it was brought to his attention that information and Broadcasting Minister Arun Jaitley, who belongs to the BJP, had voiced his support for Mehta, Sinha said: "What a minister is thinking is not important. What is important is how the Hindu society is reacting to the film."

The shooting of "Water" in Varanasi had to be discontinued after right-wing Hindu parties launched violent protests against the film, which depicts the life of Hindu widows in the holy city, and vandalised the shooting site. The Uttar Pradesh government also refused to cooperate with Mehta.

BJP's Sinha said it was ironic that the Communist govern-

ment, which had not allowed the shooting of "La Nuit Bengali" and objected to the shooting of "The City of Joy," was inviting Mehta to shoot "Water" in the state. "By what right is the CPI-M (Communist Party of India-Marxist) allowing Mehta to shoot after the party itself objected to shooting of films earlier in the state?" he asked.

Sinha said "Water" was an insult to the widows of Varanasi. "As 90 per cent of the widows of Varanasi are Bengalis, the state should feel insulted and should have led in the condemnation of the film," he said.

The state's ruling Dal has also said the banks of the Ganges in West Bengal will turn into another Varanasi if Mehta tried to shoot the film in the state. Meanwhile, the Congress has dared the BJP to prevent Mehta from shooting in the state.

Party state president Priya Ranjan Dasgupta said, "We will check out how strong the

BJP and Shiv Sena are in the state."

Controversial Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen, who is in the city now, raised the hackles of the BJP by announcing her support for the beleaguered director. The West Bengal unit of the BJP has demanded Nasreen's arrest for allegedly making derogatory and insulting remarks against Indians in an article written in a Bengali daily recently. BJP's state secretary Sinha alleged that she had called India an uncivilised country.

The state BJP leader's said a citizen of some other country had no right to criticise Indians while sitting in India and demanded that Nasreen withdraw her remarks. Sinha said the writer had the freedom of expression, but had no right to hurt the sentiments of Indians with her "vulgar and unsavoury comments."

- India Abroad News Service

Garfield

