

# Complementary Failures: Tracing Johnny Lever in Post-Liberalisation Hindi Cinema

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## Introduction

Comedians occupy a paradoxical space in Indian cinema; they are almost always household names, yet their textual presence appears in scholarship as an afterthought.<sup>[1]</sup> In popular discourse, comedy is often relegated to the function of comic relief and comic performance remains an expendable form of creative labour. Comedy remains a staple for Bombay cinema since the beginning of sound, with comedians like Noor Mohammed Charlie, Ghori and Dixit and others providing the foundational caricatures for Bombay cinema's humorous beginnings. The genre's popularity surged in the 1960s, leading to the establishment of an award for the best performance in a comic role by the popular magazine *Filmfare* in 1967<sup>[2]</sup> and continued well into the 1990s as numerous comedians competed for a display of the finest buffoonery on screen. The heterogeneity of genre elements in the 'masala' film<sup>[3]</sup> makes comedians indispensable to the industry, yet they are far more disposable and replaceable than the major stars. Situating comedians within a framework of masala films and their genre heterogeneity not only elides the singularity of comedians, but also the cultural meaning of their ludic actions. Indeed, beyond the functionalist understanding of comedy as an affective diversion from melodramatic excess, precious little has been addressed regarding genealogies of comic performance or the underlying significance of their apparent lunacies.

Johnny Lever's fate is no different. Born as John Prakash Rao Janumala in a Telugu Christian family, Lever got his famous sobriquet while working at an event of a notable Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) enterprise—Hindustan Unilever. Initiating his career in variety shows, comedy troupes and stand-up comedy during the early 1980s, Lever finally got his break in late 1980s as he slowly became a regular feature in Hindi films. Lever's career exploded into life in the 1990s, coinciding with India's liberalisation, as he would feature in almost all the memorable comic roles during this period irrespective of the ethnic, cultural, or social identity of the character involved. Despite being one of the most popular comedians in post-liberalisation Hindi cinema, his location in popular discourse hardly changed even at the height of his commercial success. In an interview, Lever accepted his role as 'the sidekick of the hero' because 'somebody has to get the punch.'<sup>[4]</sup> Since the Indian audience is yet to accept buffoonery from the hero, he conceded that the comedian must step in to be the 'clown of the filmy circus.' Lever was referring to a longstanding tradition in Indian cinema whose origins can be traced back even to *Natyashastra*.<sup>[5]</sup> Even during the 1950s and 1960s, comedians like Johnny Walker and Mehmood, despite enjoying supreme popularity, would play sidekicks. If there is no difference between Johnny Walker and Johnny Lever, it can only mean that comic form in Indian cinema is homogeneous and continuous, as if comedy is without and outside history.

The task to situate a comedian historically is to be mindful of the intersection of the industrial, social and cultural histories, and the how the comic repertoire comes to inhabit such intersection. Without discounting the occasional role of the sidekick that the comedian is forced to perform as per industrial norms, my paper attempts a close examination of Lever's repertoire beyond the 'sidekick' myth. I argue that Lever's comic persona often functions not as a 'sidekick' who takes the 'punch,' but as a complementary presence to the

male hero. His figuration is defined by the (comical) failures that allow the male stars to comprehensively demonstrate their masculinity. The slapstick humour of his incompetent masculinity on screen has an obvious comedic necessity, but the incompetence often complements the masculinity of the male hero. I look at three films, *Baazigar* (The gambler, 1993, Abbas-Mustan),<sup>[6]</sup> *Deewana Mastana* (Crazy lovers, 1998, David Dhawan),<sup>[7]</sup> and *Love ke Liye Kuch Bhi Karega* (Will do anything for love, 2001, Eeshwar Nivas)<sup>[8]</sup> where Lever's repertoire is used in three distinct genres—thriller, comedy, and caper drama respectively—to different effects. Lever won his first Filmfare nomination for the best performance in a comic role with *Baazigar* and his role in *Deewana Mastana* helped him secure his first Filmfare award for the best performance in a comic role. Recognition aside, my choice is also dictated by how these films showcase Lever's ability to adapt to a range of comic characters and how the trope of failure recurs in his figuration against the dominant codes of masculinity emergent in the post-liberalisation Hindi cinema. I argue that the trope of failure is important to understanding Lever's industrial viability as a comedian in the post-liberalisation moment. Lever's modulation of his comic idiosyncrasies according to the generic demand not only allows an expansive investigation of his figuration but also paves the way to trace a hitherto missing genealogy of comedic masculinity in Hindi popular.

### A man without memories

The comic repertoire of Johnny Lever includes a wide spectrum of roles—bumbling servant, inept policeman, clueless gangster, or wandering urchin. In most of these roles, Lever's persona lacks suavity, often employs *tapori* language to underscore an intimacy with the vernaculars of the street, and almost always belongs to working-class lineage, exhibiting an uncanny parallel with his biography. Lever's Telugu Christian identity, his working-class migrant labourer parents, and his childhood in Dharavi often tend to become raw materials for his comic acts.<sup>[9]</sup> For an industry where comedians are often instructed to improvise their acts, Lever's humour uses wordplay, double entendre, vocalisation and exaggerated gestures through physiognomic distortion, most notably his eyes, often drawing on his experience as a stand-up comedian.<sup>[10]</sup> His gimmicks are further amplified by his locutionary style, marked by a torrent of utterances which allow very little response time for the confounded listener. A demonstrative example, where the various registers of his humour converge, would be his appearance as a comic relief in the superhit action thriller, *Soldier* (1998, Abbas-Mustan).<sup>[11]</sup> The protagonist, Vicky (Bobby Deol), meets tram conductor Mohan (Johnny Lever) while riding a tram in Australia. Mohan, realising Vicky is also Indian, starts telling his sob story about how he lost his twin brother, Sohan. The sob story soon reveals itself to be a gimmick as Mohan confuses Vicky with his rapid narration and misleading sentences. Vicky, increasingly befuddled about the turn of events, eventually gives up. The encounter between Mohan and Vicky is a recurring gag in the film as Mohan keeps switching jobs and appears in different garbs throughout the film, which makes Vicky think he is the lost twin, Sohan. Lever's zany iterations of disorientation and errant behaviour is in obvious contrast to Vicky's assertive, cosmopolitan masculinity and purposive mobility. The structure of such otherwise inconsequential gags, when inspected carefully, reveals a metaphor of the itinerant migrant labourer who cannot make sense of his own dislocation.

While Lever does not function as a sidekick in this context, his gag is nonetheless a typical example of how the comedic ingredient functions in a 'masala' film, dictated by a 'heterogeneous mode of production.'<sup>[12]</sup> The independence of the gag from plot progression is a common occurrence in Hindi cinema. I am more interested in situations where the gag, initially disconnected from the narrative, suddenly acquires central significance in the eventual resolution. Such is the case with *Baazigar*, a superhit thriller that launched Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol as an iconic Bollywood pair. The film is also remembered fondly among Bollywood aficionados for the character of Babulal, the breakthrough role of Johnny Lever's career. *Baazigar* narrates the revenge of Ajay Sharma (Shah Rukh Khan) over his father's nefarious partner, industrialist Madan Chopra (Dalip Tahil), by initiating romantic liaisons with Chopra's two daughters, Seema (Shilpa Shetty) and Priya (Kajol). The film perpetually attached the trope of obsessive persuasion to Shah Rukh's figuration as it

would become a key theme of some of his most successful romantic dramas such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995, Aditya Chopra),<sup>[13]</sup> *Mohabbatein* (Love stories, 2000, Yash Chopra),<sup>[14]</sup> and *Om Shanti Om* (2007, Farah Khan).<sup>[15]</sup> In *Baazigar*, the element of persuasion, with an added edge of vengeance, provides a distinct inflection to Shah Rukh's masculinity. But the consummation of such masculinity, as I shall argue, requires a comical failure.

Johnny Lever is introduced in *Baazigar* as Babulal, the ham-fisted servant of the Chopra family. The film, in the first few minutes, establishes the core constituent of the gag—Babulal's unreliable memory. Babulal forgets to send the car to airport for Priya's arrival, serves tea without tea leaves, and keeps misidentifying spices. The seemingly innocuous element becomes the lynchpin of the plot during the engagement ceremony of Priya and Ajay, who has assumed the identity of Vicky Malhotra to infiltrate the Chopra family. Ajay, the soon-to-be-groom of Priya, having already eliminated Seema by faking her suicide, has the ulterior motive of usurping the business empire of Chopra family by coaxing the power of attorney out of Madan Chopra. During the engagement ceremony, one of Seema's friends, Anjali, calls on the Chopra residence to inform them of an uncanny resemblance between Seema's boyfriend Ajay and Priya's fiancée, Vicky. Unfortunately for Anjali, Babulal receives the call and vows to convey the information to Priya. In a desperate attempt to remember the details, Babulal keeps repeating Anjali's information loudly as he blunders through the crowd. Ajay chances upon Babulal, senses the imminent danger, and intercepts him. He instructs Babulal to get him an ice cream, which messes up Babulal's memorisation process and eventually, when Babulal reaches Priya, he can only convey gibberish. Ajay meanwhile talks to Anjali over phone, pretending to be Priya's father, and extracts her location. He kills her off and disposes of her body. After the engagement, Mr. Chopra hands over the power of attorney to Ajay as he embarks on a business trip, which allows Ajay to strip Mr. Chopra of all his power, just like Chopra did with Ajay's father. The culmination of the revenge therefore rests squarely on the phone call sequence and Babulal's failure to remember.

The complementary nature of such failure comes into sharper relief with the significance of memory to the narrative. Typical of the generic tendency of a thriller, the concealed information that motivates the film's plot progression is memory—the memory of Chopra's betrayal of Ajay's father, Viswanath (Anant Mahadevan). Chopra had performed a power-grab of Viswanath's wealth when Viswanath gave him the power of attorney while away on a business trip, initiating the tale of revenge as Ajay and his parents were pauperised overnight. At the heart of *Baazigar* is the shape-shifting protagonist who moves between identities—the flamboyant Vicky and the soft-spoken Ajay. Vicky is a car racing enthusiast who claims to have an affluent lineage, whereas the film begins with images of extreme poverty that surrounded Ajay's childhood and him being a taciturn youth. The diametric identities, the 'cool dude' Vicky and the wallflower-like Ajay, may appear as two distinct kinds of masculinities. But they appear indistinguishable in their unnerving calmness, typical of the male-oriented revenge thriller, especially in eliminating the potential obstacles towards the ultimate revenge. The calmness is a by-product of mnemonic force that drives the revenge, as evinced by Ajay's calculated decision to abandon the romantic pursuit of Priya in favour of revenge. Curiously enough, Ajay's course of action comes under serious threat from two fortuitous interventions by Babulal, a man who seems to exist without memory, as he cannot even memorise habitual tasks, let alone what is registered in consciousness. After Anjali's body is discovered, Priya's friend, police inspector Karan Saxena comes to meet Priya with Babulal lurking around. Babulal, upon hearing Anjali's name, suddenly remembers about the phone conversation with Anjali, only to be thwarted again by Ajay as he arrives just in time to distract Babulal.

In Hindi popular cinema, the hero can often conjure a 'weak messianic power' that transcends realist premise and underlines a mythic quality to the hero's destiny in the narrative.<sup>[16]</sup> Shah Rukh is no exception in this regard in *Baazigar*, where his revenge increasingly gains a sense of inevitability. *Baazigar* largely follows what Ravi Vasudevan calls a 'vertical' melodramatic articulation, where the space of the family is reconstituted by a direct confrontation with emergent forces in the public space.<sup>[17]</sup> In *Baazigar*, the confrontation is with globalisation and an ascendant significance of the capitalist ethos which upends the

traditional values of faith-based exchange systems, as illustrated by Mr. Chopra's initial betrayal of Ajay's father's trust to usurp his money. The film's gesture to the contemporaneous moment is nowhere clearer than in the difference between two defining moments, separated by roughly two decades, that mark the revenge arc. When Ajay's father hands over the power of attorney, he only goes to Assam (a state in Eastern India) for a business trip, whereas Mr. Chopra hands over the same power to Ajay on account of multiple international business trips involving multinational projects. The connective thread of such socioeconomic transitions is, of course, the figure of Shah Rukh Khan. As numerous scholars have noted, Shah Rukh would emerge as the emblematic star of post-liberalisation Hindi cinema in his ability to seamlessly move between two registers of masculinity—that of globalised modernity and traditional patriarchy.[18] Ajay, in the garb of Vicky, projects a cosmopolitan masculinity whose competence in sports cars and discotheques carries an aspirational quotient for a media public entering the neoliberal global economy. His obsessive persuasion of revenge nonetheless maintains his umbilical connection to the familial cause.

For Lever, this was hardly his first foray into comical incompetence. In an earlier film, *Khiladi* (The player, 1992),[19] also directed by Abbas-Mustan, he plays the role of an innkeeper, Anna Pillai, who is hard of hearing and fails to recognise the suspects despite them being right in front of him. But in *Baazigar*, the integration of the gag to the plot progression allowed Lever to enjoy recognisable narrative agency. For the 'weak messianic power' of the male hero to operate without obstacles in the narrative, the narrative makes space for complementary failures, embodied by the incompetency of the comic figure, whose absurdity equally cannot be accounted for within a realist framework. The comedian's masculinity is therefore marked with an excessive and complementary absence in relation to the male hero. But it would be myopic to infer, from a single example, the codes of comedic masculinity for post-liberalisation Hindi cinema's most iconic comedian. As I shall show, it is contingent upon both Lever's stardom and the genre within which Lever operates.

### Competition and its predicaments

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Lever was at the peak of his stardom. His ability to improvise his gags meant that his demand as a comic relief was exceedingly high, exemplified by his twenty-films-a-year output during this period. Lever once confessed that depending on the comic stereotype assigned to him, he would combine mimicry, dialect humour and vocal modulation to eke out a character. His two consecutive Filmfare awards, for *Deewana Mastana* and *Dulhe Raja* (1998, Harmesh Malhotra),[20] however, came not for his stock character iterations, but as major characters in two comedies. In both films, the characters played by Johnny Lever seem to compete with the characters portrayed by Govinda. Govinda, whose initial successful foray was in action cinema, emerged as a comic hero in the 1990s. His decade-long collaboration with David Dhawan produced a string of superhit comedies. In Dhawan-Govinda collaborations, Govinda's comedic figurations would often be a working-class persona with an irreverent attitude towards social distinction (e.g., *Coolie No. 1* (1995),[21] *Banarasi Babu* (1997)[22] or an exceedingly innocent individual whose innocence is a mask for his comic mischiefs (e.g., *Hero No. 1* (1997),[23] *Deewana Mastana* (1997)). Despite Dhawan's consistent engagement with comedy since the early 1990s, *Deewana Mastana* was the first film where Dhawan and Lever collaborated. In the film, Lever plays the classic sidekick to Anil Kapoor. The film centres on two romantic contenders, Raja (Anil Kapoor) and Bunu (Govinda), both of whom try to woo Neha (Juhi Chawla), a practicing psychiatrist. As the romantic competition amps up, it is Lever's character, Gafoor, who designs elaborate plans to remove Bunu from Raja's way. Most of the narrative, in fact, is a bricolage of gags where Gafoor comically fails to eliminate Bunu to ensure Raja's romantic success and with each failure, Bunu and Neha's intimacy continues to grow.

The synopsis may give the impression that Gafoor is merely an accomplice in the tussle between Raja and Bunu, but the narrative shows otherwise. Bunu offers little challenge to Raja initially since Bunu suffers

from multiple phobias while Raja is introduced as a swashbuckling figure to whom Neha has taken an immediate liking. Bunu's only avenue to access Neha is to be her patient, but his phobias impede his chances of being identified as her locus of desire. As Raja busies himself in maintaining intense proximity to Neha, it is Gafoor and Bunu who lock horns in a succession of gags. The film continues to augment both the scale of the gags and the extent of Bunu's escape since Gafoor wants to exploit Bunu's phobias to execute his plans. Gafoor tries to lure Bunu into a site of explosion because of his pyrophobia, pushes a hydrophobic Bunu into a pool, and rolls a boulder down his path because Bunu is afraid to run. The spectacular failures of Gafoor in these gags are complemented well by Bunu's near miraculous ability to survive them. In fact, Bunu's fear of running seems to disappear after being chased by the boulder. It is the unintended effect of Gafoor's failures that aid Bunu to gradually emerge out of a cluster of phobias and assume a form of sovereign masculinity typical of the male hero in Hindi cinema, setting the stage for a climax between Raja and Bunu. But the film's climax is also the film's final gag where the two suitors are reduced to the butt(s) of the joke. Neha informs both that she has finally decided to marry and invites them to civil court, where, upon arriving, both realise that they have been invited as witnesses with Neha's fiancée, Prem (Salman Khan) already there as the chosen groom.

Govinda's progress from an infantile male severely afflicted with phobias to a sovereign masculine self with a conscious ludic tendency has a restorative arc that recurs in films like *Aankhen* and *Banarasi Babu*. In both films, Govinda's characters shed their initial infantility to assume a masculine sense of control over diegetic proceedings while maintaining a ludic attitude befitting his comic figuration. Such movement from an 'expressive anarchy towards an expressive coherence,' so that the comic narrative doesn't amount to an assemblage of gags, is typical of any comedian comedy.<sup>[24]</sup> It is the introduction of Johnny Lever in *Deewana Mastana*, however, that dislodges Govinda's singular comic presence. Unlike *Dulhe Raja*, where Lever effectively functions as Govinda's secret aide despite apparent rivalry, *Deewana Mastana* pits the two as competing comic figures with a curious inversion. Lever, Bollywood's most recognisable stock comedian of the 1990s, was accustomed to performing clownery as comic relief. In such sequences, the male hero would serve as the straight man for Lever's buffoonery,<sup>[25]</sup> of which the already discussed instance of *Soldier* is just one example. In *Deewana Mastana*, it is Johnny Lever who resembles the straight man as Govinda is assigned the bulk of clownery. Unlike the typical straight man, however, Lever does not feed Govinda punchlines by refraining from comic gestures. Rather, it is through the slapstick of extravagant failures that Lever allows Govinda to execute the gags successfully.

A good example of such failure is the gag around hydrophobia where Bunu is pushed into the pool by Gafoor. Bunu's cries of help are immediately heard by Neha and other women in the pool. As Bunu floats towards the poolside with their help, he remarks that he thoroughly enjoyed the swimming lesson. Lever's function, thus equivalent of a comic foil or straight man in the film, is thoroughly antithetical to his figuration. For someone who is frequently thrown in humorous predicaments for comic relief, Lever here becomes an orchestrator of failed predicaments for Govinda to display his full range of comic virtuosity. The text thus maintains a differential in comic performance between Govinda and Lever and is organised around Govinda's slapstick antics instead of Lever's comic actions. Such differential not only consolidates the separation of the star and the comedian even in the genre of comedy, but also indexes Lever's ability to morph his comic figuration as per industrial necessity.<sup>[26]</sup> The industrial distinction between the star and the comedian becomes evident in Govinda's nomination for best actor in Filmfare awards for *Deewana Mastana* instead of the best performance in a comic role category, which was won by Lever for the same film. It was only when Govinda's halcyon days in Hindi cinema was over during the 2000s that he started getting consistently nominated in the best performance in a comic role category.<sup>[27]</sup> The upsurge in body culture, the emergence of the chiselled body as the masculine ideal with new stars like Hrithik Roshan and John Abraham, and the circulation of such bodies in print cultures meant that Govinda's ageing, borderline obese body was a body out of joint. It is through the comic employment of his less-than-ideal physicality that Govinda was able to reinvent himself as a comedian during the late 2000s in films like *Bhagam Bhag* (Running around, 2006, Priyadarshan)<sup>[28]</sup> and *Partner* (2007, David Dhawan).<sup>[29]</sup>

The two competing comedians would reprise their roles in the 1998 film *Dulhe Raja* in a more obvious format, where Govinda is the owner of a small eatery within a luxury hotel managed by Lever. He appears to be Govinda's bitter rival given Govinda's conflict with the hotel owner, played by Kader Khan, but the film soon establishes Lever's actual allegiance to Govinda. Assisted by Lever, Govinda's actions have an overtly heroic tone in *Dulhe Raja*. *Deewana Mastana*, on the other hand, denies Govinda almost any heroic agency in the narrative whatsoever, turning him into the butt of the final gag. It shows the monolithic nature of the 'sidekick' myth invariably affixed to any comedian's biography in Hindi popular cinema. Lever's sardonic statement, 'comedians play the clown of this filmy circus,' would fall flat here because the film offers very little opportunity of clownery to Hindi cinema's most visible clown.<sup>[30]</sup> Instead, it prioritises the comic hero by preparing the ground for his performance at the expense of the comedian. The performance differential that separates the comic hero and the comedian is a product of the star power differential. As I have shown with *Baazigar* and *Deewana Mastana*, such star power differential works for genres in distinct ways that cannot be reduced to the 'sidekick' myth. In *Love Ke Liye Kuch Bhi Karega*, a caper comedy about a kidnapping gone awry, the very idea of the 'sidekick' disappears altogether. What persists in Lever's figuration is the trope of failure, now moulded into a reflexive commentary about the film industry that runs parallel to the botched kidnapping and its consequences. It is to this final iteration of failure I turn to now.

### Of failed aspirations

Across the years, Lever's repertoire has accumulated a wide range of stereotypes, including ethnic ones, but a significant portion of them are working-class identities. The class position, instead of offering any sustainable form of conflict, often becomes a pretext to foreground Lever's dexterity in conveying gestures, dialects and speech cultures that index such identity. Even during his earliest appearances in films like *Tezaab* (Acid, 1988, N. Chandra),<sup>[31]</sup> Lever sported a working-class slacker, a social type commonly known as *tapori*. The figure of *tapori* would later reach its pinnacle of popularity with *Rangeela* (Colourful, 1995, Ram Gopal Verma)<sup>[32]</sup> in Aamir Khan's portrayal of Munna.<sup>[33]</sup> As Ranjani Majumdar has noted, the *tapori* 'is marked as an ordinary man of Bombay whose language emerges out of a polyglot city-street culture that is entirely urban.'<sup>[34]</sup> Although primarily associated with language, the onscreen iterations of *tapori* have transformed the figure of *tapori* into a social gestalt which combines various vernaculars of the street beyond the mere linguistic. The *tapori's* masculinity is 'a combination of innocence and machismo, vulnerability and street-smartness,' an oscillation sustained by dramatic manoeuvres as well as codes of performance.<sup>[35]</sup> The *tapori* is a vehicle of humour since he constantly lampoons civility, decorum and power. When refracted through the male hero, as exemplified in *Rangeela* and *Ghulam* (1998, Vikram Bhatt),<sup>[36]</sup> the instability of the masculine self of the *tapori* produces a romantic ideal where vulnerability becomes an object of desire. For the comedian, the same vulnerability becomes a source of comical deficiency, a sign of inevitable failure.

Such is the case with the character of Aslam Bhai (Johnny Lever) in the film *Love Ke Liye Kuch Bhi Karega* (henceforth abbreviated as *LKLKBK*). A loose remake of the Coen Brothers classic *Fargo* (1996),<sup>[37]</sup> *LKLKBK* allocates Aslam Bhai a subplot that is entirely absent from the original film. The character, frequently cited as one of Lever's most iconic performances,<sup>[38]</sup> is an elaborate parody of perhaps the most famous onscreen *tapori* Munna, played by Aamir Khan in *Rangeela*. The film, a simplified iteration of *Fargo* sans violence, narrates the spiralling misfortune of Prakash (Saif Ali Khan) who hires two slackers, Rahul (Fardeen Khan) and Harry (Aftab Shivdasani), to fake the kidnapping of his wife, Sapna (Sonali Bendre). The target is Prakash's sworn enemy, Sapna's father Rajiv Chopra (Dalip Tahil), from whom Prakash plans to extort a healthy ransom. Things go south when Sapna becomes the target of an actual gang of kidnapers, but eventually they are caught, and Rajiv Chopra embraces Prakash with all acrimony forgotten. The film essentially eliminates the entire plotline of police chief Marge (Frances McDormand), one of the central characters in *Fargo*, and replaces it with Aslam Bhai, who appears in the narrative as Harry's acquaintance. A small-time gangster who extorts money from small local businesses, Aslam Bhai also

harbours a not-so-secret ambition of becoming a screen icon someday. Nudged by Harry to pursue his ambitions, Aslam Bhai eventually falls prey to an elaborate fraud and by happenstance, lands in front of the police as the actual kidnappers are being rounded up. Neither a comic relief nor among the central characters yet having a parallel subplot dedicated to him, Aslam Bhai's presence may not have diegetic consequences, but instead have critical cultural significance.

The film is essentially a story of two aspirations—that of the slacker duo Rahul and Harry, and of Aslam Bhai. The slacker duo is educated yet unemployed youth who lament how the city is an unequal space, where capital seems to accumulate where it already exists with no opportunity for upward mobility. Aslam Bhai, while not being penniless, lives a socially marginalised existence and aspires to achieve prestige through cinema. The slacker duo turns to petty crime as they clumsily try to rob Prakash in a parking lot but are bailed out of their incompetence when Prakash says he has a better idea of making them rich. After Prakash plans the staged kidnapping with the duo and promises them a share of Rs. 2.5 million, the duo, returning home, daydreams about their aspirations finally nearing realisation. Aslam Bhai, despite his rowdy and ruthless exterior, can be prey to flattery, especially if it's about his actorly aspirations. Harry tries to exploit Bhai's vulnerability to buy time for his borrowed money, but during one such attempt, a fraud who introduces himself as Aaj Kapoor (Snehal Dabi) decides to tap into Aslam Bhai's vulnerability. Claiming to be Bollywood's most in-demand casting director, he promises to fulfil Aslam Bhai's every dream and eventually runs away with the money. Through Aslam Bhai, cinema is projected as an elusive object that fully permeates the city as a culture yet remains exclusive as an industry—a trope that recurs in Hindi cinema and is made immensely popular by *Rangeela*. But whereas such aspiration has a redemptive end in *Rangeela* through romantic love, in *LKLKBK* it becomes an object of parody with added reflexivity because of Lever's presence.

The parodic intentions are perhaps most prominent in the sequence where Aaj Kapoor appears for the first time. Swayed by Harry's flattery, Aslam Bhai agrees to display the full range of his virtuoso performance by enacting different melodramatic situations. Aslam Bhai's unwatchable performance is greeted with enthusiastic encouragement from a stranger who introduces himself as Aaj Kapoor. A pun on Raj Kapoor, perhaps the greatest icon of yesteryear's Hindi cinema, Aaj Kapoor says he is the updated version of Raj Kapoor, as he has discovered some of the biggest stars in contemporary Hindi cinema. A tune from Raj Kapoor's *Mera Nam Joker* (1970)<sup>[39]</sup> wafts into the soundtrack as Aaj Kapoor convinces Aslam Bhai of his talent, tells him to meet at Mehboob studios the next day, and disappears. Dressed in a transparent vest and unbuttoned shirt, with accoutrements around his neck, Aslam Bhai, in this sequence, appears as a parodic interpretation of the tapori Munna in *Rangeela*. What elevates the sequence from being just another gag among many is Aslam Bhai's sudden burst of enactment. What could be otherwise deemed as merely mimetic gestures of romance, action and tragedy, when mediated by the body of Johnny Lever, becomes a reflexive figural invocation of the comedian's biography. During his early years, Lever had gained popularity as a mimicry artist and would continue to mime popular stars on screen and stage even at the height of his commercial success.<sup>[40]</sup> The genre missing from Lever's repertoire of bad enactment is, of course, comedy. By turning the melodramatic tenor of screen performance into comic material, Lever lampoons both the codes of performance of the male hero as well as Hindi cinema's monolithic understanding of the mimetic possibilities of comedy. If in *Rangeela*, cinema's romanticism is eventually championed since the star intervenes to make Munna's romance with now-famous Mili (Urmila Matondkar) a success, in Aslam Bhai's inevitable failure, the humour takes aim at the romanticism itself. In the film's penultimate sequence, where Aaj Kapoor escapes with Aslam Bhai's money from the backdoor while he waits in front of Aishwarya Rai's residence, a popular romantic song from the Aishwarya Rai-starrer *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (I have given my heart away, Darling, 1999, Sanjay Leela Bhansali)<sup>[41]</sup> appears on the soundtrack as an aural gag. Lever's expectant gestures, intercut with the song, become comic fodder and reflexively fuse into a meta-figuration.

While Aslam Bhai lands up in the hands of the police, the slacker duo of Rahul and Harry finally have

everything their way as they eventually land lucrative jobs in Rajiv Chopra's company as a reward for rescuing Sapna, as well as the share of ransom. The slacker duo's aspirations are thus marked differently than Aslam Bhai's—one is sanctioned for success while the other is always-already a failure. The working-class masculinity in Lever's figuration does not translate into romantic resistance typical of Hindi cinema, but of a seemingly irresolvable social immobility. Yet, the failure of Aslam Bhai to become a romantic hero, when parsed through the figure of the comedian, can be understood as a successful gimmick. It is the relentless iterations of failure, and not merely being the hero's 'sidekick,' that allows Lever to become a success, an industrially viable entity in post-liberalisation Hindi cinema. That Lever would reprise a similar but more conventional role of the bumbling gangster in *Awara Paagal Deewana* (Wayward, crazy, insane, 2002, Vikram Bhatt)[42] shows how various dimensions of onscreen failure can concoct successful comic formulas. In *LKLKBK*, beyond the formulaic, Aslam Bhai's fate is a symptom of failed promises that would come to mark India's economic liberalisation. As Aslam Bhai is being taken away by the police, he desperately blabbers that he has already paid for shooting a sequence with Aishwarya Rai in Dubai, as promised by Aaj Kapoor. The absurdity of Aaj Kapoor's promise is perhaps no more absurd than the promise of globalised modernity's democratic distribution of wealth.

## Towards a theory of funny men

For comedy, masculinity has almost universally been an object of humour, with the male comedian being the embodied object through failure, inadequacy and instability, perhaps nowhere more than in screwball comedies.[43] With Johnny Lever, it is not merely the failure but the machinations of complementarity of such failures, as I have delineated across genres, that vitalise his figuration in Hindi cinema. Comedy's near absence from historiography doesn't allow me to launch any comparative analysis of comedian figurations within the limits of this article, but male comedians in Hindi cinema are often defined through distinct gestures, social stereotypes and vocality for easy recognition within any narrative. Any analysis of their figuration(s) would not only emphasise their singularity rather than clubbing them under rubrics of 'comic relief' and 'sidekick,' but also help locate comedians like Lever within a comedic milieu. The constellation of masculinities that defines such milieu would narrate a cultural history of Hindi cinema where the star is decentred from the locus of cultural meanings. The distinct relations such masculinities would have with the dominant codes of masculinity could provide a diagrammatic understanding of masculinity. Complementarity, in that case, would be one mode of relation among many.

Comedy thrives on the vulnerable, unstable selves and their unfortunate entanglements. It is how vulnerability and instability are mobilised towards comic ends that often varies across cultures. To historicise and contextualise comedy, Rob King has argued in favour of identifying 'humorlects' within a culture complex at different points in history.[44] 'Humorlects,' King proposes, provide an explanation to the universal question—what is so funny and when is it funny? In Hindi cinema, if comedy needs to be historicised for an industry historically dominated by male comedians and heavily reliant on performance, identifying the 'humorlects' will involve masculinity as a key analytic. For any historiography of Hindi comedy, it is the inextricability of comedy and masculinity that will shape the enquiries to come.

## Notes

[1] Suvadip Sinha provides a glimpse into this critical blind spot through his analysis of Tun Tun. Tun Tun (b. Uma Devi Khatri) was a comedienne who was a household name yet remains almost entirely absent from the archive, fleetingly appearing in the film for brief moments before disappearing into oblivion. See Suvadip Sinha, 'Fat Woman in a Car: The Curious Case of Tun Tun,' *Feminist Media Histories* 3(2) (2017): 78–97, doi: [10.1525/fmh.2017.3.2.78](https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2017.3.2.78).

[2] Filmfare awards are widely recognised as the equivalent of Academy awards for Indian cinema which determines the artistic benchmark for popular cinema. The best performance in a comic role category was introduced in 1967 and was continuously awarded barring three years in late 1980s till 2007. Lever has the second highest number of nominations in this category, tied with



Deven Verma at 13 nominations.

[3] Priya Jaikumar defines 'masala' film as 'a consequence of producers and directors trying to ensure that every film had a fighting chance to reap good profits-in the absence of a studio infrastructure-by incorporating something in the film for everyone.' See Priya Jaikumar, 'Bollywood Spectaculars,' *World Literature Today* 77(3-4) (2003): 24-29, specifically p. 26, doi: [10.2307/40158170](https://doi.org/10.2307/40158170).

[4] 'God's Gift,' *Times of India*, 18 November 1999, p. 9.

[5] The idea of the comedian as a hero's sidekick is there in the idea of *Vidushaka* (jester) who is supposed to be the royal companion in their quest for romantic love. Although there are many variants of *Vidushaka*, *Vidushaka* provides laughter which allows an element of distraction for romantic drama and allows dramatic transitions.

[6] *Baazigar*. 175 mins, 1993, directed by Abbas-Mustan, produced by Venus Movies, *YouTube*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

[7] *Deewana Mastana*. 140 mins, 1997, directed by David Dhawan, produced by Ketan Desai, *YouTube*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

[8] *Love ke Liye Kuch Bhi Karega*. 131 mins, 2001, directed by Eeshwar Nivas, produced by Dream Merchants Enterprise, *YouTube*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

[9] Lever has spoken time and again about how his expressivity is often gleaned from working-class lives. In many interviews, he has spoken about his early years in Hyderabad and how the humour of the streets has influenced his style. See, for example, [Srivathsan Nadadhar](#), 'Johnny Lever's Method Behind the Quirks,' *The Hindu*, 8 Oct. 2015, accessed 1 Mar. 2023.

[10] Lever rose to prominence as a stand-up comedian during the early 1980s, touring with notable personnels from Hindi cinema like Amitabh Bachchan, before entering the industry.

[11] *Soldier*. 155 mins, 1998, directed by Abbas-Mustan, produced by Tips Industries, *YouTube*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

[12] M. Madhava Prasad has argued that the 'masala' format of the popular Hindi film text comes out of such a mode where there is no assembly-line continuity between various levels of production unlike the classical Hollywood studio. Rather, the various segments of the text are produced with different aesthetic intentions and then combined at the level of post-production. See M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of Hindi Film*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 32.

[13] *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. 181 mins, 1995, directed by Aditya Chopra, produced by Yash Raj Films, *Amazon Prime Video*, accessed 4 October 2023.

[14] *Mohabbatein*. 216 mins, 2000, directed by Aditya Chopra, produced by Yash Raj Films, *Amazon Prime Video*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

[15] *Om Shanti Om*. 162 mins, 2007, directed by Farah Khan, produced by Red Chillies Entertainment, *NETFLIX*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

[16] Anustup Basu argues that the heroic figure in Indian cinema can seemingly perform superhuman actions beyond the realms of secular humanism precisely because of 'weak messianic power.' While the hero operates in the force-field of history, he tends to transcend it eventually by means of such power. See Anustup Basu, 'Afterword,' in *Figurations in Indian Film*, ed. Meheli Sen and Anustup Basu, 268-78, Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.

[17] Ravi Vasudevan argues that since Indian cinema does not strictly adhere to melodramatic conventions due to the heterogeneous mix of genres, it is important to understand the popular narratives based on horizontal and vertical articulations, which pertain to the different ways the social forces interact with kinship structures, primarily the family. See Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 46-56, doi: [10.1057/9781137349781\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137349781_14).

[18] Sumita S. Chakravarty terms Shah Rukh Khan's body as a 'networked body' which can seemingly move between socio-technological regimes. It is the malleability of the body to occupy diametrically opposite spaces, she argues, that allows him to become the poster boy of post-liberalisation Indian cinema. See Sumita S. Chakravarty, 'Con-Figurations: The Body as World in Bollywood Stardom,' in *Figurations in Indian Film*, ed. Meheli Sen and Anustup Basu, 179-201, Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, doi: [10.1057/9781137349781\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137349781_10).

[19] *Khiladi*. 157 mins, 1992, directed by Abbas-Mustan, produced by Venus Movies, *YouTube*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

- [02] [Dulhe Raja](#). 143 mins, 1998, directed by Harmesh Malhotra, produced by Eastern Films, *YouTube*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.
- [21] [Coolie No. 1](#). 143 mins, 1995, directed by David Dhawan, produced by Puja Films, *Amazon Prime Video*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.
- [22] [Banarasi Babu](#). 126 mins, 1997, directed by David Dhawan, produced by Sapna Arts, *YouTube*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.
- [23] [Hero No. 1](#). 134 mins, 1997, directed by David Dhawan, produced by Puja Entertainment, *Amazon Prime Video*, accessed 4 Oct. 2023.
- [24] See Henry Jenkins and Kristine Brunovska Karnick, 'Introduction: Acting Funny,' in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, 149–67, New York, NY: Routledge, 1995. The article makes a distinction between two kinds of expressivity and suggests that the comedian comedy, unlike the clown, is a restoration of one kind of expressivity over another during the narrative.
- [25] The straight man is a stock figure of vaudeville who supplies the comedian the funny lines while maintaining a straight face. The female counterpart of the straight man was known as a comic foil. Over the years, the figure has evolved significantly with gendered distinctions of the foil/straight-man slowly eroding. But the purpose remains the same—maintaining a restraint on performance so that the comedian can display their virtuosity.
- [26] Danae Clark, in her book *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors' Labor*, argues that in an industrial setup like the studio system, it is the power differentials between various entities that determine the structure and hierarchy of the industry. Such power differentials eventually translate on screen as other forms of differentials in terms of screen time, performance etc. Maintaining the power differential is an essential aspect of the industry to maintain the hierarchy, especially that of the producers. See Danae Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors' Labor*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 1–36.
- [27] The shift is quite telling, as between 2000 and 2003, Govinda was nominated five times, without any previous history of nomination before the 2000s.
- [28] [Bhagam Bhag](#). 157 mins, 2006, directed by Priyadarshan, produced by Shri Ashtavinayak Cine Vision and Popcorn Pictures, *YouTube*, accessed 18 Oct. 2023.
- [29] [Partner](#). 155 mins, 2007, directed by David Dhawan, produced by Eros Worldwide, *Amazon Prime*, accessed 18 Oct. 2023.
- [30] 'God's Gift,' p. 9.
- [31] [Tezaab](#). 173 mins, 1988, directed by N. Chandra, produced by N. Chandra Productions, *YouTube*, accessed 18 Oct. 2023.
- [32] [Rangeela](#). 142 mins, 1995, directed by Ram Gopal Varma, produced by Jhamu Sughand, *Amazon Prime*, accessed 18 Oct. 2023.
- [33] Ranjani Majumdar has offered an extensive analysis of the *tapori* figure on Hindi screen through Aamir Khan's multiple performances and how it indexes everyday life in the city in myriad ways. See Ranjani Majumdar, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. 41–78.
- [34] Majumdar, *Bombay Cinema*, p. 45.
- [35] Majumdar, *Bombay Cinema*, p. 64.
- [36] [Ghulam](#). 162 mins, 1998, directed by Vikram Bhatt, produced by NH Studioz, *YouTube*, accessed 18 October 2023.
- [37]  [Fargo](#). 98 mins, 1996, directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, produced by PolyGram Film Entertainment and Working Title Films, *HBO Max*, accessed 18 Oct. 2023.
- [38] Lever won a Zee Cine Award for the best actor in a comic role for his performance as Aslam Bhai. It is also frequently cited, along with his role as Babulal in *Baazigar*, among his most memorable comic performances. See for example, '[Happy Birthday Johnny Lever](#): some of the most hilarious roles played by the comedian over the years,' *Mumbai Mirror*, 14 Aug. 2020, accessed 2 Mar. 2023.
- [39] [Mera Naam Joker](#). 255 mins, 1970, directed by Raj Kapoor, produced by R.K. Films, *YouTube*, accessed 18 Oct. 2023.

[40] Lever, even before he became famous, would entertain in his office functions as a mimicry artist and would continue to perform mimicry in his live shows. In fact, in many of his comic roles, Lever would mimic a star's voice or signature antics, often as a metatextual gesture. For example, in *Roop ki Rani Choron Ka Raja* (Queen of beauty and king of thieves) 1993, Satish Kaushik, he plays inspector Rang Birangi and mimics Utpal Dutt's performance as an inspector in *Rang Birangi* (Chameleon), 1983, Hrishikesh Mukherjee. See [Roop ki Rani, Choron ka Raja](#), 190 mins, 1993, directed by Satish Kaushik, produced by Narsimha Enterprises and Anil Kapoor Productions, *YouTube*, accessed 18 Oct. 2023; [Rang Birangi](#), 180 mins, 1983, directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, produced by Rajvi Pictures, *YouTube*, accessed 18 Oct. 2023.

[41] [Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam](#), 188 mins, 1999, directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, produced by Bhansali Films, *Amazon Prime*, accessed 18 October 2023.

[42] [Awara Paagal Deewana](#), 158 mins, 2002, directed by Vikram Bhatt, produced by Base Industries Group, *YouTube*, accessed 18 Oct. 2023.

[43] Screwball comedies are often regarded as the genre that allow male comic actors to display the full range of their expressivity. Beginning as a sovereign male displaying a commanding masculinity, the course of screwball comedy often reduces such men into unstable, unsure and indecisive figures whose self is been shaken by the zany turn of events. It is widely regarded as the blueprint for romantic comedies in cinema. See Henry Jenkins, "'The Laughingstock of the City": Performance Anxiety, Male Dread and *Unfaithfully Yours*,' in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, 238–61, New York, NY: Routledge, 1995, for a comprehensive discussion of male psychopathology in screwball comedy.

[44] Rob King, 'Historiography and Humorlects,' *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58(3) (2019): 143–48, doi: [10.1353/cj.2019.0028](https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2019.0028).

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