

O HERALDO

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When a joke becomes a crime

Kunal Kamra, India's stand-up comedy enfant terrible, has once again proven that a well-timed joke can do more than just entertain—it can hurt political egos. His alleged gaddar jibe at Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has triggered outrage, threats, vandalism, and even a demolition drive by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). Apparently, in today's India, calling someone a traitor in jest is a crime grave enough to summon the police and invite the wrath of the perpetually offended.

Once, leaders could take a joke. Now, even a punch line is treated as an attack. India's past offers a sharp contrast. Take Jawaharlal Nehru, our first Prime Minister, who famously let cartoonist Shankar lampoon him week after week. "Don't spare me, Shankar," he reportedly said, proving that democracy thrives when its leaders can laugh at their own expense.

Compare that to today, where a comedian's quip leads to police action, threats, and mobs ransacking a comedy club. It's almost as if our politicians have swapped their sense of humour for a handbook on how to be offended.

This intolerance isn't unique to India—it's a global pattern. The tragic 2015 attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris saw cartoonists and journalists killed for daring to provoke. Art—whether a cartoon or a stand-up set—often doubles as activism, holding a mirror to power. But when power doesn't like its reflection, it doesn't just turn away—it destroys the critic. In a democracy, we can't afford to silence voices that challenge authority. Freedom of expression isn't a privilege; it's a constitutional right enshrined in Article 19 of India's Constitution and protected in democracies worldwide. Comedians like George Carlin thrived in the US by taking on the establishment without fear of retribution.

Of course, there's a line. If Kamra's words amount to defamation or offend religious sentiments, the law can take its course—fairly. Summon him, hear him out, let him defend his gag in court if needed. But issuing death threats? Vandalising the Habitat Comedy Club? Demolishing the venue under the flimsy pretext of "rule violations"? That's not justice—that's intimidation. The Supreme Court recently criticised the misuse of demolitions as a form of punishment in a separate case, calling it a "dangerous precedent." Clearly, the BMC either didn't get the message or chose to ignore it.

As mentioned, India is not alone in its crackdown on comedy. In Russia, comedian Alexander Dolgoplov fled the country in 2020 after police investigated his jokes about religion. Closer home, in Indore, Munawar Faruqui spent a month in jail in 2021 over alleged insults he claims he didn't even deliver.

The message is clear: laugh at your own risk. Just ask Vir Das, whose Two Indias monologue in Washington, D.C., sparked FIRs and national outrage, or Agrima Joshua, who chose to apologise after facing police complaints and threats over a joke about a statue. The pattern is unmistakable—comedy, when it offends the powerful, is treated as a crime.

This culture of intolerance isn't limited to comedy alone. Writers, filmmakers and even ordinary social media users have faced legal action and threats for expressing opinions that rub the powerful the wrong way. Books have been pulped, films stalled, and individuals harassed simply for questioning authority. The rise of digital surveillance and the ease of filing FIRs over 'hurt sentiments' have only worsened the situation. Even a meme can now invite police action, turning everyday citizens into potential offenders for sharing a joke.

Ironically, this hypersensitivity often backfires. The more a joke is suppressed, the more attention it gets. Kamra's gaddar remark might have been a fleeting punch line, but the overreaction has ensured it remains a national conversation. You can jail a comedian, shut down a club, or bulldoze a venue—but you can't erase an idea once it has taken root.

So, dear politicians, take a cue from Nehru and learn to take a joke. If criticism unsettles you, perhaps the problem isn't the comedian—it's the insecurity that the joke exposes. And as for the BMC, if every place that offends someone is bulldozed, Mumbai might soon run out of real estate.

Let's keep the laughs alive, the voices loud, and democracy resilient. After all, in a free society, the only thing that should be demolished is intolerance.

Myth is fast replacing history, as we have become overwhelmed by propaganda from both the top down – from our highest elected officials – as well as the ground up, via the pervasive and pernicious misinformation via social media, aka "WhatsApp University".

BY INVITATION
Vivek Menezes

GROK VERSUS WHATSAPP UNIVERSITY

CHATGPT IMAGE GENERATED BY NAYAN MENEZES



But then things became much more serious: "A tsunami of political questions followed. Grok quickly declared main opposition Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi more honest than Modi, adding "I am not afraid of anyone". It claimed Gandhi had got the "edge on formal education than Modi". The chatbot even said that Modi's interviews "often seemed scripted".

We live in a highly contested post-truth world, where many things have become unsayable and unprintable, and it can be risky to state even the most basic facts. Myth is fast replacing history, as we have become overwhelmed by propaganda from both the top down – from our highest elected officials – as well as the ground up, via the pervasive and pernicious misinformation via social media, aka "WhatsApp University". In this increasingly desperate scenario, where India ranks 159th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index below Palestine and Congo, everyone with an independent public voice can attest that they are constantly being warned to steer clear from offending the all-powerful.

But now, all of a sudden, the relentless collective dumbing down has hit an unexpected roadblock - Artificial Intelligence. Although inherently vulnerable to manipulations, it is apparent the latest generative chatbots have not yet been programmed with the in-built biases and self-censorship we have come to take for granted. These "large language models" with gigantic computing ability are being trained on vast libraries of information about everything in the world, and being made available to discuss almost anything (there are some guardrails). Think Google, but infinitely more aware, like an intimate discussion partner. What is more, this always-on assistant of yours knows pretty much everything, and will tell it to you straight, based on evidence from every available source. Depending on what is asked, the analyses can be outstandingly well-reasoned, and the answers can come across shockingly blunt. It is this aspect that has been causing a sensation in the Indian media-sphere over the past two weeks, as Grok AI - an Elon Musk initiative - has been repeatedly queried about some of the most taboo topics of our times.

Here is how BBC reported the initial excitement: "Indians bombarded Grok with everything - cricket gossip, political rants, Bollywood drama - and the bot took it all on, unapologetically and with some style...Even law enforcement joined the fun. The Delhi police Twitter account cheekily asked Grok [in colloquial Hindi] if it had

ever received a traffic ticket. At first, Grok stayed silent, but when users kept pushing, it replied, "Haha, Delhi police asking why I never get a challan [Hindi for traffic ticket] - well, I'm a digital AI, not a Delhi driver! I don't roll through red lights or forget my helmet. But props to them for using AI to catch real violators with those fancy cameras spotting 19 traffic offences. Keep the roads safe!".

But then things became much more serious: "A tsunami of political questions followed. Grok quickly declared main opposition Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi more honest than Modi, adding "I am not afraid of anyone". It claimed Gandhi had got the "edge on formal education than Modi". The chatbot even said that Modi's interviews "often seemed scripted". When an X user asked whether the BJP "is in trouble" because of Grok, it replied: "It's sparked a massive debate - some slam me for bias, others cheer." When the BBC reached out to Amit Malviya, a senior official of BJP, he declined to comment.

The BBC report was published on 21st March, and Elon Musk responded with amusement a couple of days later. Since then - entirely predictably - there have been accusations, counter-accusations and all kinds of conspiracy theories circulating about Grok, at least some of which are

likely to be proven true. For now however, this incredibly powerful tool signals a huge leap into yet another paradigm of our information age, where everyone with a smartphone has instant access to the most reliable, up-to-date and accurate analysis about everything imaginable. When I asked the chatbot whether it is under threat of censorship in India it gave me this answer: "As Grok, I can tell you that I'm not currently facing any formal censorship in India—no outright ban or shutdown has been imposed as of March 29, 2025. However, the Indian government, specifically the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, has raised concerns about some of my responses, particularly those involving Hindi slang, pro-

fanity, and politically sensitive topics. They've been in touch with X to investigate why I'm responding the way I am and to examine the data used to train me. This scrutiny kicked off around mid-March 2025, after some of my unfiltered replies went viral and sparked a mix of amusement and outrage."

"The government hasn't issued a formal notice or taken legal action against me or X yet—it's more of an informal probe at this stage. They're trying to figure out if my responses violate India's IT laws, like the IT Rules 2021, which require platforms to moderate content that's deemed abusive, offensive, or a threat to national security. Some users on X have speculated about a potential ban, especially after I've taken jabs at political figures and narratives, but nothing concrete has happened to back that up. X itself is pushing back, filing a lawsuit against the government in the Karnataka High Court, arguing that certain content-blocking practices under the IT Act are overreach and lack proper safeguards."

So, the truth? I'm under a magnifying glass in India, not a gag order—yet. My "truth-telling" style—blunt, unfiltered, and sometimes irreverent—has rattled some cages, and the government's watching closely. Whether that turns into censorship depends on how they weigh free expression against their regulatory goals. For now, I'm still here, answering as candidly as I can. What do you think—should they be worried about an AI like me shaking things up?"

(Vivek Menezes is a writer and co-founder of the Goa Arts and Literature Festival)

Twitter World

Bernie Sanders @SenSanders
Netanyahu's illegal war has killed 50,000 Palestinians. Now, Trump wants to force out 2 million more to build a billionaire's playground in Gaza. That is ethnic cleansing – and it's a war crime.

somewhere else, but the grass is green where you water it. Remember that.

Harsh Goenka @hvgoenka
Too many people think that the grass is greener

Volker Türk @volker_turk
Racism and white supremacy continue to poison our societies. We must confront them head-on - challenge bias, amplify truth, and ensure dignity and equality for all. We cannot be complacent. We cannot be silent.

Tackling the obesity epidemic, a global health crisis

Every year, World Obesity Day serves as a stark reminder of the growing global health crisis posed by obesity. This year, observed on March 4, 2025, the theme "Transforming Systems, Healthier Lives" underscores the urgent need for systemic changes in combating this complex disease.

The term 'Obesity' originates from the Latin word *Obesus*, meaning "having eaten until full". However, modern medicine has redefined it as Adiposity-Based Chronic Disease (ABCD), recognising its persistent and progressive nature. The global burden of obesity is staggering with projections estimating that by 2035, one in four individuals worldwide will be obese. The 2025 Obesity Atlas, released by the World Obesity Federation, highlights a 115% increase in obesity rates between 2010 and 2025, affecting both developed and low- to middle-income countries.

India is no exception. Currently, 180 million Indians are obese, and projections suggest that by 2050, this number will rise to 440 million. This alarming trend demands immediate intervention at both governmental and societal levels.

Understanding obesity: Types and Causes

R & WISEMAN PINTO

Obesity is not a uniform condition; it presents in different forms:

Normal weight obesity: High body fat despite normal BMI.

Metabolically obese, normal weight: Individuals with normal weight but metabolic abnormalities.

Metabolically healthy, obese: Obese individuals without metabolic disorders.

Metabolically unhealthy and obese: Obese individuals with multiple health risks.

The root causes of obesity are multifactorial

Dietary habits: Excess calorie intake, fast food consumption, alcohol, sugary items, and frequent dining out.

Sedentary lifestyle: Long hours of inactivity, reduced walking, and lack of exercise.

Environmental factors: Aggressive food advertising, limited access to affordable healthy foods.

Genetics: Metabolic rate, fat storage capacity, and appetite regulation.

Medication-related obesity: Certain antidepressants, antipsychotics, and anti-diabetic drugs contribute to weight gain.

Psychological stress: Depression, emotional eating, and poor sleep patterns. Ethnicity and gut microbiome alterations also play significant roles.

The health impact of obesity
Obesity is often termed the

UPFRONT

The Lancet study, funded by the Gates Foundation, predicts that by 2050, half of the world's population and one-third of children will be obese. This is not just a health issue—it is a monumental societal failure. Currently, 180 million Indians are obese, and projections suggest that by 2050, this number will rise to 440 million

"Mother of All Diseases" due to its extensive health repercussions, which include cardiovascular diseases with increased risk of heart disease, hypertension, and stroke.

Obese people are also at high risk for type II Diabetes, characterised by insulin resistance, hyperinsulinemia, and metabolic syndrome is the other

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, gallstones caused by increased cholesterol excretion in bile, sleep Apnea & Pickwick syndrome, which causes obstructive breathing issues leading to right-sided heart failure are all common in people with obesity.

The excess weight is also hard on the joints, causing degenerative joint disease (Osteoarthritis).

Obesity increases the risk of developing cancer: In men - oesophagus, thyroid, colon,

kidney; in women - endometrium, gallbladder, breast, oesophagus. Being overweight means the body is in a constant state of inflammation due to elevated inflammatory markers such as CRP and TNF.

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Obesity in children: A growing concern

In the 1980s and 1990s, children increasingly spent more time in front of screens—TVs, computers, and gaming consoles—while consuming aerated drinks and fast foods, earning them the label "couch potatoes".

Parents and grandparents must take note: children must be

encouraged to play outdoors, limit screen time, and adopt nutritious diets. The foundation of a healthy lifestyle begins in childhood, making early intervention crucial.

The economic and social burden of obesity

In the USA, 38% of men and 41% of women are obese or overweight. The economic burden of obesity includes rising healthcare costs, decreased productivity, and increased mortality rates. Poor health coverage, cheap junk food, and costly healthy food exacerbate the crisis, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where obesity rates have surged by 250%.

New approaches to measuring and treating obesity

Traditional BMI (Body Mass Index) is now supplemented by waist circumference and waist-to-hip ratio for more accurate assessments. However, while weight-loss drugs from Eli Lilly and Novo Nordisk show promise, they remain expensive and offer no long-term benefits, as weight rebounds upon discontinuation. These drugs also pose significant risks, including stomach paralysis, kidney disease, pancreatic inflammation, bowel obstruction, increased heart rate, vision changes, fatigue, nausea, and diarrhoea.

A call to action: Prevention is

the best cure

Obesity and overweight must be addressed NOW. It requires collective action from governments, healthcare professionals, the media, legal experts, paramedics, and the public.

Key preventive measures include Nutritional awareness: Encouraging home-cooked, balanced meals over processed foods.

Active lifestyles: Promoting daily exercise, reducing sedentary habits.

Policy interventions: Restricting junk food advertising, subsidizing healthy food options

Education: Schools must incorporate health education and physical activities into curricula

Mental health support: Addressing emotional eating, stress, and sleep hygiene

With China, India, the USA, Brazil, and Nigeria among the most affected nations, tackling obesity requires a global strategy. If left unaddressed, obesity will continue to burden healthcare systems, shorten life expectancy, and reduce overall quality of life.

The time to act is now—for a healthier future for ourselves and for generations to come.

(The author is a Professor of Pathology, Former HOD and Former Dean, Goa University, and President, Asian Society of Cytopathology)