

ART
STARTING YOUNG: As part of their Young Talent Program, Alliance Francaise will be showcasing the works of art student Prasad KV in an art exhibition titled *Meta Alliance Francaise*, Vasanth Nagar, April 22-May 12, all day

MUSIC
BUSK AWAY: Tuesdays are when you get your guitars out and sing away at the acoustics-themed BuskYa Nights at Opus, hosted by Josh and Saahas. **Opus, Chakravathy Layout, Palace Cross Road, April 21, 8.30pm**

FILM
CLASSIC REVISITED: The International Music and Arts Society will be screening Kaadu, the 1973 National Award-winning movie directed by Girish Karnad that is based on a novel of the same name by Srikrishna Alanahalli. **NGMA, Palace Road, April 19, 11am**

PERFORMANCE
KIDS AT PLAY: Bhoomija presents Jackfruit Festival -Strings Attached. Performed only by kids, the program features a Jugalbanti and Taala Vaadya kutcheri. **MLR Convention Centre: JP Nagar, 7th Phase, April 24 and 25, 7.30pm**

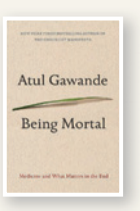
LIT FEST
THINK TANK: It's a fine mix of performances, discussions, and workshops at the 2-day Litmus Festival. Speakers include Anand Patwardhan, Rakesh Omprakash Mehra, Devdutt Pattanaik etc. **Hummingtree, Indiranagar, April 18 and 19, 10am onwards**

SHELF ESTEEM

Patterson is comfort reading

After self-publishing his first book, *The Rozabal Line*, Ashwin Sanghi is the best-selling author of *Chanakya's Chant* and *The Krishna Key*

What are you reading right now?
Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End by **ATUL GAWANDE**



Which book, author or series do you reach out for when you just want a comfort read?
JAMES PATTERSON, particularly his **Alex Cross** series.

Which is the weirdest book you have read, and why was it weird?
Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age by **BOHUMIL HRABAL**. The entire book is one unending sentence!

Who are your favorite contemporary writers, and your favourite writers of all time?

Among thriller writers my favourites are **DAN BROWN**, **JAMES PATTERSON**, **THOMAS HARRIS**, **JEFFREY DEEVER**, **STIEG LARSSON** and **MARTIN CRUZ SMITH**. I love non-fiction and authors that I enjoy reading include **STEPHEN HAWKING**, **BRIAN WEISS** and **GARY ZUKAV**. Among Indian authors, I am a fan of **SALMAN RUSHDIE** but I also enjoy reading works of **DEVDUTT PATTANAIK**, **S HUSSAIN ZAIDI** and **RAMACHANDRA GUHA**. My all-time favourite books are **Autobiography of a Yogi** by **PARAMAHANSA YOGANANDA**, **Midnight's Children** by Salman Rushdie and the **Mahabharata**. Retold by **CA RAJAGOPALACHARI**

Which was the last book that made you laugh?
Yes Prime Minister by **JONATHON LYNN** and **ANTONY JAY**

If you have to get the Indian prime minister to read one book, which one would it be and why?
CHANAKYA'S CHANT to see if he can correlate any of the characters in it to ones from his own life.

Name one book that is a favourite but most people would be surprised to know you'd even read it...
Lolita by **VLADIMIR NABOKOV**

Which book would you ask people not to read, if you believed in doing such things of course?
All books should be read. It is then left to the reader to decide if the covers are too far apart.

Which was the last book you just couldn't finish?
The Satanic Verses

Which book do you remember most vividly from your childhood?
Treasure Island by **Robert Louis Stevenson**

All books should be read. It is then left to the reader to decide if the covers are too far apart.



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Earlier this month, comedians Sanjay Manaktala, Sundeeep Rao, Praveen Kumar, Naveen Richard, Kenny Sebastian and Kanan Gill took to the stage at Chowdaiah Memorial Hall, one of the biggest venues for live entertainment in Bengaluru. More than 800 people turned up to watch the six comics - who, only a few years ago, were drawing 15-20 people at small cafes and bars like Urban Solace and Take Five.

English stand-up comedy is big today, not just in Bengaluru but in most Indian metros, and this is nothing short of an explosion because today's vibrant comedy scene was practically nonexistent even four years ago. While the success of YouTube channels like The Viral Fever and AIB gave comedy a solid push, with Indians discovering the rich vein of comedy in everyday life, the pioneering work done by these comics in creating new material and a new market is commendable. Many of the city's successful comics started their careers in front of small crowds at venues such as Urban Solace, which created regular open mic nights (a format where anyone can perform) and later, regular comedy nights with comics like Sanjay Manaktala and Sundeeep Rao. "Our aim was to support creative self-expression, and comedy was just one of the forms we supported along with music and poetry. Our comedy shows, which started around 2012, are



Thumbs-up: Comedian Sanjay Manaktala performs at Jagriti

How Bengaluru became COMEDY CENTRAL

among the most popular today, though the beginning was rough. I remember times when there were all of two audience members and these guys would still perform," says Perry Menzies, the owner of Urban Solace.

"We were like salesmen. We would go to venues and beg them to give us space to perform," says Manaktala, who worked in the New York comedy scene - the mecca of stand-up in the world - before moving to Bengaluru in 2010. He credits two events for the success of Indian stand-up comedy: the opening of The Comedy Store in Mumbai and the advent of Indian comedy channels on YouTube. "Today, every single bar or pub owner in Bangalore wants a comedy night, and bigger venues have opened up to comedy as well," says Manaktala, who does at least 20 shows a month.

According to rough estimates, there are at least 35-40 comedy shows a month in the city, including more than 20 open mic nights and at least 10-12 ticketed shows - not counting charity events, private shows and corporate events. The other interesting development is that along with pubs and cafes, venues that were previously associated with "serious culture" - theatre, music, art, dance, indie film screenings - have embraced comedy. Chowdaiah is probably the best example, but others around the city like Rangasthala at the Rangoli Metro Arts Centre, Alliance Francaise, MLR Convention Hall and Jagriti Theatre in Whitefield, now regularly host comedy acts.

"Doing comedy in front of a live audience is not easy. Your material has to be top-class, you have to be an excellent actor and be ready to improvise," says Jagdish Raja, founder of Jagriti. "Everyone needs comic relief. Everyone loves to have a laugh. We have big groups coming in in on comedy nights, some straight from the workplace. They want to sit back and relax, and laughing is a great way to do that," says Raja.

For UA Vasanth Rao, Chief PRO of BMRCL who is also a (somewhat unlikely) curator of cultural programming at the Rangoli Metro Arts Centre, says comedy is a performing art like any other. Rangoli hosts a 'Mini



Bengaluru comic Sundeeep Rao is India's only visually impaired stand-up artiste

The number of comedy shows in the city has exploded, with dozens of stand-up acts and open mics every month

Laughter Carnival' on the first Sunday of every month at its 130-seater Rangasthala auditorium with two or three shows a day - and most of them are sold out. Comics Praveen Kumar, Sathish Perumal, Raja Sekhar, Avinash Agarwal and Umesh Somani from the group Punch Tantra usually perform at this stand-up show, and bring in their own fans.

"When they first approached me, I was a little wary because ours is a family audience. I watched one or two of their shows to make sure the humour did not cross a line. I'm not being moralistic, but it should not be crass. Humour can be used to convey social messages. I don't approve of things like that AIB Roast," says Rao, suppressing a shudder. Of course, it is very difficult to say where the "line" is. By its very nature, comic satire is bound to offend someone - politicians, the government, gov-

ernment officials, feminists, sexists, misogynists, students, men, women. Just about everyone. Yet, people like Raja believe you can be funny without being crass or "using cuss-words every two minutes." "You have to work very hard on your material, and it comes with years of experience. And in India, you don't have to reach out for sexist jokes or make fun of community stereotypes - there is so much matter just in our newspapers. Life itself is so absurd here that you have a rich source of material right there!" he says.

But it's worth remembering that Indian comedy is very, very young - and most comics are just honing their craft and finding original voices. In a sense, the sudden propulsion of comedy into the big league of entertainment could do a disservice to the craft itself, as comics reach for lower and lower hanging fruit in order to please the crowd, or for lack of time to perfect their material.

Indian-American comic Rajiv Satyal, who performed in Bangalore recently, says the scene is still young. "The upside of a developed scene like America's is that I made my mistakes on small stages. In a developing scene like India, when you're offered enormous opportunities too early, you can make enormous mistakes on enormous stages. I'm not saying the AIB Roast was a mistake but clearly something was lost in translation," says Satyal.

Manaktala agrees. "You have to learn how to ride a bike before you can do stunts. Some comics think they can pull off stuff on sensitive topics like race and gender because American comics [like Chris Rock or Aziz Ansari] do that. They don't realize that these guys have been doing this stuff for 30 years. In a way they have earned the right to be offensive, and there is a lot of thought behind their jokes. If you haven't put that kind of work into your jokes and just want to raise a few laughs by being offensive, the audience knows and is going to boo you out," he says.

"Perhaps the biggest difference between American and Indian humor is that the former is self-deprecating," says Satyal, who believes Indians are sensitive to other Indians seeming to criticise them. "I played the viola in an orchestra for seven years; there's a principle in music that the closer you are to a note without hitting it, the worse it sounds."

Kannada stand-up draws big laughs

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Kannada stand-up comedy has always been a popular genre of entertainment. And over the past few years, the number of shows and artists has gone through the roof. Stand-up comedy shows, which are known as 'Nage Habba' in Kannada, are attracting people of all ages and are popular in rural and urban areas. They draw crowds across genders, caste, class and status - so much so that comedians have become celebrities in the league of politicians, sportspersons or film stars.

B Praneesh, who is well-known by his stage name 'Junior Beechi' and has been in the field since the 1990s, says what started out as a hobby has given him enormous popularity and has enabled him to visit 20 countries as a performer. "Though I am from Ganga-vathi, a taluk headquarter in Koppal district, I have enthralled citizens of Bengaluru and many cities of the world. For people to enjoy my shows, the only criteria is they should know the language of humour and a little bit of Kannada."

Sudha Bargur, who gave up a secure job as a college lecturer to take up comedy as a full-time profession, says people are taking to comedy to relieve stress. Stand-up comedian Basavaraj Mahamani of Yagdir says the crowd that comes for his shows is often urbane and sophisticated.

F'M channels have given a huge boost to Kannada comedy, says Bargur. "I present hu-

morous incidents from everyday life and moral messages through the show *Andu-Indu*, a daily three-hour show on Radio city," she says.

There are around 50 comedians of varying popularity, reach and stature performing Kannada comedy today. "Let humor spread everywhere. But low quality of humor is not acceptable. When we were established in this sector, several comedians followed suit. But many of them could not sustain their careers because they peppered their acts with obscenity," says B Praneesh.

Bargur says one of the problems faced by established comedians is few people write their own original material, and there are always copy-cats who think nothing of re-using material written by successful artists.

Praneesh, Mahamani and Bargur say they perform between four and six shows every week across Karnataka.

When it comes to content, most of the established comedians incorporate morality and ethics into their acts, and they usually perform observational and social comedy with some amount of political satire. However, they have to vary the act according to the kind of audience. "If the crowd consists of college students, we cannot start away with moral lessons. We have to weave it in subtly with big doses of laughter," says Bargur. Praneesh affirms that family-focused acts are the most popular.

"I talk about relationships such as parent-child and husband-wife. I try to use the platform to strengthen these human relations," he explains. Many of the comedians now have their own shows on TV channels, and demand for their dates is increasing considerably. Praneesh confesses that at times, he performs two or three shows on the same day, while Bargur says that the remuneration she gets from a single show is at times at par with her entire monthly salary as a college lecturer.

Praneesh, who has performed at Bengaluru-based software companies like Infosys and Wipro, which have a cosmopolitan crowd, enjoy his brand of comedy. "There have been a few cases when we have been able to change someone's mind about committing suicide. Yes, humor has that power," he says.

Comic culture

Comedy had been part of drama and literary programmes for centuries, and there is a rich tradition of comedy in Kannada culture. Veteran Kannada writers like TP Kailasam, Rashi, Beechi, and AR Mitra promoted comedy through their writing and lectures. Veteran theatre personality Master Hirannaiah gave dignity to comedy through his dramatic writing. There are dedicated little magazines for comedy in Kannada. However, the trend of stand-up comedy is relatively young, having started life about 15-18 years ago. I found encouragement from the non-literary crowd, which was cut off from literary events and theater.

- B Praneesh

Guru-Shishya Parampara in comedy

The Guru-Shishya tradition, a common practice in field like music and classical dance, exists in the field of stand-up comedy too. Beechi, a well-known humorist who died in 1980, had named his house 'Timma', which was a common character in his jokes. Beechi's disciple Praneesh named his house 'Beechi Nilaya' to honor his guru. Mahamani, who has been inspired by Praneesh and has emerged as a successful comedian in his own right, has named his house 'Beechi Praneesh Nilaya.'

Robots, Outer Space, and Kannada Literature

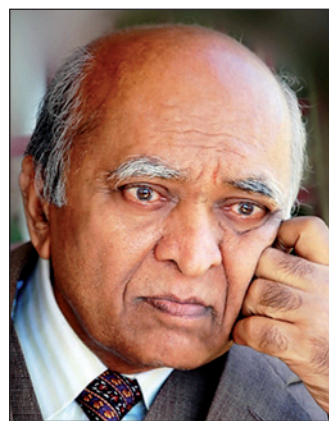
Kannada's reputation as a 'literary' language means not many know of its forays into genre writing - including science fiction

Thejaswi Udupa

If the Jnanpith Awards are used to measure the literary worth of a language, Kannada with eight winners is second only to Hindi. Bengali and Malayalam, the other languages that share the reputation of being 'literary,' are reasonably behind with five apiece.

A fallout of this reputation is that one does not get to hear much about genre writing in Kannada. It is not like Tamil, where authors like Rajesh Kumar and Sujata are widely known and even have an aura of cool thanks to publishing houses like Blaft. But it would be a mistake to assume that Kannada does not have a tradition of pulp just because you don't see such books widely available in bus stands and railway stations.

A large portion of Kannada genre fiction gets consumed in magazines. *Sudha*, *Taranga*, *Mayura*, and *Tushara* have for many years now been most Kannada households' chief source of information and literature, both high-brow and low. These magazines have carried everything from serializations of novels like SL Bhyrappa's *Parva*, a historical retelling of the Mahabharata stripped of all its fantastical elements, to stories and novels featuring black magic, sex, murders, violence and more black magic. However, social dramas that occupy the valley between literary fiction and genre fiction/pulp dominate - possibly because the most voracious readers of these magazines are women. The most popular examples of genre writing in Kannada are essentially socio-dramas crossing over into either crime or fantasy (which usually means black magic). Science fiction is a rarity. Pretty much the only person writing science fiction in Kannada magazines was **Rajashankar Bhoosnurmath** (in pic), who also



wrote under the pen name Rabho. He passed away earlier this week in unfortunate obscurity. The only Kannada science fiction that predates Bhoosnurmath's stories in magazines is probably Gopalakrishna Adiga's translations of Jules Verne. Bhoosnurmath's stories became so popular that magazines soon started releasing special issues centered on his fiction. A few other authors did try - Sanjay Havanur for example, but

the Bhoosnurmath remained the only one producing anything of significance, both in terms of quality and quantity. Soon enough, his science fiction was pretty much the only one available in book-stores too, with novels like *Manvantara*, *Operation UFO* becoming minor hits.

Bhoosnurmath was strictly in the Fred Hoyle and Jayant Narlikar school of science fiction. That is, they were essentially men of science - maybe preachers of science is a better phrase - who wrote science fiction stories and novels because it helped them get people thinking about science. Even when he wrote for magazines, around half of Bhoosnurmath's output was actually short articles about concepts in science (and sometimes, unfortunately, pseudo-science too.) A lot of what Bhoosnurmath did outside of his sci-fi output all fit in with his image as one of the state's foremost evangelists of science - be it his tenure as the principal of Karnataka Science College in Dharwad, or his long-standing association with the

Karnataka Rajya Vijnana Parishat.

He may even have influenced people like SL Bhyrappa, whose latest effort *Yaana* had a strong whiff of Bhoosnurmath to it. Bhoosnurmath did his work in an era when great works of science fiction were not easily accessible. Over the past few years, that has changed dramatically in India. The best and greatest of science fiction is all easily available at the click of a mouse. Science fiction is now slowly creeping into mainstream Kannada pop culture too. The story of Upendra's movie *Super* owes a great deal to ideas that Bhoosnurmath first put forth. If a book like Ian McDonald's *River of Gods* (a cyberpunk novel set in India of the 2040s) shows up in Kannada soon, and there is no reason why it should not, it would owe as much credit to the pioneering efforts of Bhoosnurmath as it would to other factors like accessibility and affordability of world-class science fiction. The writer is an independent journalist. Reach him on Twitter @udupendra

