

Laughter Has a Target

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Laughter is a blessing. When people laugh, they look very charming. It is really heartening to learn that man is the only animal capable of laughing, though our schoolmasters have taught us that the hyaenas laugh, wherein the word 'laugh' denotes only the cry made by the animal. However, it cannot be denied that the man who laughs is a living being and he who cannot, can best be nicknamed 'Zombie'.

A man steps on a banana peel, slips and falls down howling. This scene provokes laughter. The laughter becomes irrepressible when a man in an attempt to kick and drive away a stray dog gets in turn driven away by the dog.

A short statured and very fat-looking woman walking on the road may provoke laughter, but the laughter is more when she is found walking with a man who is as fat as she, and they look like twin drums on the move. The laughter becomes uncontrollable when the fat woman is found walking with a lean and haggard-looking man, for they remind the viewers of a drum and a drumstick. And when we imagine what a funny scene it would make when the drum and the drumstick fight, it provokes a rib-tickling laughter.

The laugh is on others. To laugh we need a target. We are tickled to laugh at others' expense.

Mullah Nasruddin once entered a fish market to buy fish for dinner. The market was crowded. He elbowed his way to a fat fishwife. His eyes rested awhile on the wide

variety of fish displayed for sale. He picked out one big fish and holding it close to his big nose smelt it.

The fishwife threw a look of contempt at the Mullah. Snatching the fish out of his hand, she yelled: 'What the hell were you doing with your funny nose so close to my fish?'

The Mullah replied: 'Well! To tell you the truth I was only talking to the fish.'

Amazed, the fishwife enquired, 'What did you tell?'

The Mullah answered with all seriousness, 'I asked him if there was any news from the sea. That's all.'

The fishwife roared with laughter: 'And what did the fish say?'

'Not quite encouraging,' said the Mullah and continued: 'The fish told me that he had left the sea long ago.'

The fishwife's face turned pale. Now it was the Mullah's turn to roar with laughter.

In this story, it was the fishwife who first let out a real belly-laugh when she heard that the fish could be talked to. The Mullah became the target of laughing for her. She took him for a clown. But when the Mullah proved that he was no clown but a real wit, she realized that she was being laughed at for selling putrefying fish.

Man is an animal that laughs. He is also an animal that is laughed at. Eminent scholars like Henri Bergson in his highly informative book titled *Laughter* and Strickland Gillilan in his very entertaining book titled *A Sample Case of Humour* have tried to define laughter in their own way,

and have classified laughter under several headings. But I think that all these several headings can be reduced to just two: 1. The laugh is on you, and 2. The laugh is on me. All that we have to do is to step aside, and look upon life as a disinterested spectator. Many a drama will turn into a comedy.

Once two men were crossing a large field. When they reached the middle of the field, a big bull came charging towards them, perhaps to show them the nearest way to the fence. One of the men found a tree and he climbed it as rapidly as possible. The other man couldn't get to the tree in time, but seeing a large sociable looking hole in the ground, he jumped into the hole. The bull made a lunge for him and just missed him as he went down, and jumped over the hole. The man came up again; the bull turned, saw him, snorted and came back at him. Down went the man, over went the bull, up came the man, back came the bull, till the man up in the tree got excited, and howled down:

'You big fool you, why don't you stay down in that hole? You will get that bull so mad he'll keep us here all summer!'

The man in the hole yelled back: 'Big fool yourself! There's a bear in this hole!'

This story is illustrative of the laugh being on you and on me for both men were caught in a real predicament. When will the bull go away? And when will the man up in the tree come down?

The laugh is on me when I say: 'Hell with that fever. I ran down terribly. I got so ill that I couldn't eat anything solid except rice, meat, vegetables and fruit and I couldn't drink anything except liquids. I went day after day without a wink of sleep. If it hadn't been for the ten hours of sleep I got every night, I guess I'd have died.'

The laugh is on you when I tell you, 'You know some people never sweep under

the beds at all—well, you swept everything under the beds.' Just imagine your plight, when your kid bounces in from school one day and asks you, 'Mum! What is sex?' you launch into a rather stammering rather clinical dissertation on the facts of life. You look more and more puzzled as you go on. But when your kid pulls out the identity card from the schoolbag and says: 'Well, mum! I'll never get all that stuff in this little space under SEX', then the laugh is on you.

To laugh at others or to laugh at oneself, one needs a sense of humour. A sense of humour is an expression of one's ability to think. In order for something to strike one as funny, it must be intellectually stimulating.

Once some medical students were asked: 'Why is mother's milk the best?' Many students prided themselves on giving scientific reasons, while four of them who had a sense of humour answered differently. Their answers were: 1. Don't have to boil it, 2. Don't have to add sugar to it, 3. Cat can't get at it, and 4. Comes in flawless containers.

Dr Johnson had a sense of humour, when he defined the 'smoking pipe' thus: 'Fire at one and a fool at the other'. Oscar Wilde had a sense of humour when he said: 'A man's face is his autobiography. A woman's face is her work of fiction.' Mark Twain had a sense of humour when he advised the mosquito net users thus: 'First you tie it, get all the mosquitoes in, then sleep undisturbed outside.'

Thomas Carlyle once remarked 'The population of England is twenty million—mostly fools.' Everybody who read this considered himself one of the exceptions, and therefore enjoyed the remark. No doubt they had a sense of humour including Carlyle who too was an Englishman. The Roman Emperor Agrippa (63-12 B.C) one

day discovered to his dismay that he had a Greek slave who was almost a double for Agrippa. So one day he asked the slave: 'Did your mother ever come to Rome?' The slave smiled and answered: 'No, but my father did.' The slave, it is clear from this anecdote, had a sense of humour. Emperor Agrippa too laughed the insult away for he had a sense of humour.

'Humour,' said Sri Aurobindo, 'is the salt of existence.' A humourless man can't relax his facial muscles and so can't laugh. It has been scientifically proved that laughter is the best medicine for all ailments. Physicians advocate the therapeutic value of a hearty laugh. An old prayer reads: 'Take time to laugh. It is the music of the soul.' Folklore brings to us an inexhaustible supply of tales that speak of the medicinal value of laughter.

Once a teacher had a parrot for his student. Whenever the parrot committed a mistake while it was learning, the teacher corrected it by rapping the parrot on its head. In the process of learning, the bird lost the feathers on its head and soon became bald. Its very sight in the looking glass disturbed the bird and from that

time on, the parrot, who had previously appeared to be very intelligent, could not talk anymore. The teacher consulted several vets, but none could cure the bird. One day, as the bird was sitting on a bookshelf in its teacher's study, a bald-headed man entered. The parrot was very excited at the sight of the man. It flapped its wings, gambolled and, to the surprise of the teacher, it regained its speech and said to the bald man, 'Oh! You too have a teacher like mine.'

Philosopher Bertrand Russell tells us a story of a Chinese Emperor who constructed a lake full of wine and drove his peasants into it to amuse his wife with the struggles of their drunken drowning. And it is here that we find a definition to humour. Humour is something that fetches us a pat on the back while it boils the target in a cauldron. How true Mark Twain is when he says: 'Every humour is pathetic. The secret source of humour is not joy but sorrow. There's no humour in Heaven.' But as long as we live in this world, we need humour indispensably. Without it, life will be dull and disappointing, though we enjoy it at the expense of others. ■

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treat depressive disorder problems too. It is quite obvious that all those beneficial effects can never be dependent on the religious identity of a person.

Though *Om* originates in the Hindu religion which is the oldest religion in the

world, it is considered to be a sacred sound in Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism as well. The Sikhs refer to *Om* as *Omkar*. Christians use 'Amen', and 'Amin' is used in Islam. It is possible that the sounds that make up *Om* find echoes in 'Amen' and 'Amin' too. ■

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