

Sushmita Mukherjee

The Politics of Humor

–Manohar Khushalani

Come elections in India, and we have an old wine in a new bottle. A television soap, *Public Hai Sab Janti Hai*, which takes a good humoured look at Indian politicians is back on air. India is a democracy with the largest number of women politicians in the world. The central character in this soap too is always a woman politician, who changes in each episode, but not the central actresses, Sushmita Mukherjee, who mimics them all. Not too long ago, at an award ceremony in Mumbai, the Bollywood capital of India, Sushmita Mukherjee lost narrowly to Supriya Pathak for an award for the best comedienne.



Above: *Sushmita As Rabri Devi*

This was because the serial for which she was nominated, *Ram Khilawan CM and Family*, had a very short run – five episodes as compared to Supriya Pathak's *Khichri* which is still on air. It thus enabled Pathak to demonstrate the full range of her comic repertoire.



Above: *As Vijay Raje Scindia*

A recent meeting between Laloo Yadav and Monisha Koirala was highly publicised indicating the Bihar chief minister's love for the media. But do the Indian politicians love only those who are on their side? Do they take take themselves so seriously, that they cannot tolerate a joke at their own expense, even if it is in good taste? Let's examine the

case of *Ram Khilawan...*, according to Sushmita, the TV Serial was a political spoof, loosely based on a UP/MP cow belt type of Chief Minister. However this was not taken well by the Bihar chief minister. "They filed cases against us," she added, "some of them as ludicrous as 'Sedition against the state of Bihar'. Warrants were issued against us. So we had to hide ourselves and the serial had to go off the air. The matter is still subjudice, so mum is the word. In any case I am only an actresses, the content is the producers department." She concluded.



Above: *As Sonia Gandhi*

During Sushmita's early years in theatre, I had the occasion to work with her as a co-actor. While referring to her abilities to communicate cryptically through facial expressions, I used to often joke with her; "You make more faces than I have met in my life!" That statement turned out to be most prophetic.

SABe TV, the producer of *Ram Khilawan CM & Family*, which prides itself in being different, decided to continue with the idea of a political satire on television, so they launched a broader based political spoof: ***Public Hai Sab Janti Hai***, with the same cast of artists. In this serial Mukherjee has lampooned, in over 75 episodes, an amazing variety of different women in high places. The screechy voiced 'Didi' of Bengal, Mamta, becomes Shomta Banerjee. She assures her Calcutta audiences: "Hum Dilli me jake shobse phight korega." The irrepressible Mayavati is irreverently played as Kalavati.Devi,. In a spoof on Uma Bharti, Mukherjee was astride an artificial horse, and careening down the road in her Rath. The Shiela Dikshit episode was devoted to the CNG problem. Jaya Jaitley was a museum minister, in whose museum a pistol gets stolen – tickling the audiences funny bone over General Niazi's pistol. Apparently this serial too had to be taken off the air because some other politician was not too

pleased with the way she was depicted.



Above: *As Uma Bharti*

But the Soap is now back with a vengeance because lampooning politicians is old hat now. Whether it is the puppets of NDTV, or Shekhar Suman in Star TV, or Javed Jaffrey in Aaj Tak, or Jaspal Bhatti in Zee News, everyone is having a whale of a time taking pot shots at our beloved leaders. Even in the west, imitating politicians and celebrities has turned into a lifelong profession for some people, who devote their entire life imitating just one person. Pat Rick has made a career out of playing as Bill Clinton on television. Dennis Du Pont has been playing George W. Bush. so well that he was invited to Israel to shoot a commercial for ACE Hardware. In London Charles Haslett was the official double for Prince Charles at his 50th birthday celebration at the Lyceum Theatre. Closer home, Kao Li-fong, a rusting Taiwanese actor found renewed fame impersonating Taiwanese Premier Chang Chun-hsiung at the Golden Melody Awards in 2001.