

# Between Solidarity and Sanction: Profanity as a Social Resource in Contemporary India

Charvi Sharma

Independent Researcher, South Rajasthan, India

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## ABSTRACT

Using taboo language is a powerful tool for expressing emotions, creating humor, and bringing people together, but it can also transgress and violate social norms and expectations. Since the impact of swearing depends largely on context, the acceptability of swearing must be considered in the context of particular cultural norms and the situation. This article presents the framework of Contextual Legitimacy that explores the context of acceptability of taboo language from the perspective of the speaker's intent, audience, target, power dynamics, and social consequence. Drawing on several theoretical frameworks and literature reviews, including the psychology of swearing, the speech-act theory, and politeness theory, as well as the works of researchers and philosophers like Timothy Jay, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michel Foucault, the article also incorporates Indian theoretical frameworks and literature, such as Bhartrhari's Sphota doctrine and gaali-geet, a form of ritualized obscene folk performance. The article applies the framework of Contextual Legitimacy to modern Indian culture and explores the use of taboo language in Gen Z's peer-to-peer communication, digital comedy, and student protests. Applying the framework to these three areas demonstrates how one and the same swearword can be perceived and used in several different contexts, each with its own set of social and cultural norms and rules of engagement. Something that can be used in friendly male-to-male conversations, such as an obscene double entendre, may become an instrument of humor and satire in digital comedy or a tool for political expression in student protests. Something that is acceptable in peer-to-peer communication can be viewed as taboo and transgressive in a political context, and thus be subject to censorship and repression by the state. The article suggests that evaluating the context of swearing helps to determine its social and cultural legitimacy in a given situation more accurately than distinguishing between acceptable and taboo language. Contextual Legitimacy helps to understand why and how people use taboo language in specific contexts and what social and cultural factors contribute to such use. The article argues that the dynamics of using taboo language in India are particularly relevant to the phenomenon of Contextual Legitimacy, given the complexity of social norms and expectations in a country with multiple cultural and linguistic traditions. The framework can help to understand the intricacies of the use of taboo language in Indian society and its impact on social interactions and relationships.

**Keywords:** profanity; swearing; contextual legitimacy; sociolinguistics; India; Gen Z; digital comedy; student protest; multilingualism; taboo language

## INTRODUCTION

Profanity involves a confrontation with one of humanity's perennial tensions: the dual human urge for transgression and the social imperative for decorum. To swear is to transgress, and to transgress is to invite correction. Correction, however, does not come in a uniform shade. The same expression may be celebrated in one setting, tolerated in another, and punished in a third. This very fact, that profanity is neither uniformly offensive nor innocuous, is the starting point for this work.

This work is a conceptual paper; there is no primary study reported. This paper reports on the development of an original theory, the Contextual Legitimacy Continuum, and illustrates its applicability across three analytically distinct but conceptually linked domains in contemporary Indian society: youth peer interaction

among Gen Z speakers, stand-up comedy (India's Got Latent controversy, 2024–25), and organized student protest. The three domains are considered illustrative of different applications of the five variables of the theoretical model.

A synthesis of five theoretical traditions underlies an analysis of five variables (intent, audience, target, power relation, and social consequence) around the question of profanity's social legitimacy. These theoretical traditions are Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, Communities of Practice, dramaturgy and the carnivalesque, and Foucauldian discourse analysis, hidden transcripts, and Benign Violation Theory. Added to these predominantly Western theories are three theoretical resources that exist in Indian discourse: Bhartrhari's Sphota doctrine (5th century CE), the indigenous ethnographic tradition of gaali-geet, and Indian sociolinguistic scholarship on multilingualism and code-switching and persona-based legitimacy (Annamalai, 2001; Chand, 2011; Udupa, 2018).

India is not merely a convenient backdrop for this analysis. Its linguistic and sociolinguistic diversity, its intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, religion, gender, its colonial decency law legacy, and its emerging youth digital culture together create a sociolinguistic context in which the negotiation of taboo is particularly visible and theoretically rewarding. The conclusion drawn, namely that Contextual Legitimacy rather than any uniform category of acceptable or unacceptable speech may more accurately reflect how profanity is negotiated in multilingual, hierarchically complex societies.

## THEORETICAL AND LITERATURE CONTEXT

### Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory

A speech act communicates an intention through language (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Expletives then can threaten, bond, satirize, insult, or mobilize, and what they do does not arise from the lexical item or items selected, but from the pragmatic frame in which they appear. Function overlaps critically with Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which distinguishes between positive facework (affirming the addressee's desire to be liked and included) and negative facework (respecting the addressee's autonomy). Profanity among peers frequently constitutes positive facework: it signals that the speaker considers the relationship close enough that formal registers are unnecessary. The same expression directed downward at a subordinate, or across an asymmetric power relation to a stranger, produces a face-threatening act of a markedly different order.

The context-dependence of the face-threat is not incidental but structural. Brown and Levinson's formulation, that the weight of a face-threatening act is a function of social distance, relative power, and the ranking of the imposition within a given culture, provides the sociolinguistic scaffolding for the Contextual Legitimacy framework proposed here. In multilingual India, where the choice of language itself indexes caste, class, regional identity (Annamalai, 2001), that scaffolding must be understood as operating across multiple linguistic codes.

### Communities of Practice, Performance, and the Carnavalesque

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) Communities of Practice model provides a second theoretical anchor. Language is not merely a system of shared rules but a repertoire of social practices that index group membership. Different communities develop different norms, and the linguistic practices and expressions that serve as in-group markers (which include profanity) derive their meaning from those norms rather than from any intrinsic property of the words themselves. This explains why an expression which might be an affectionate address to one peer can sound like a hostile slur to a member of a different community.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework extends this insight into the domain of performance. Bounded performance frames (comedy shows, theatrical spaces, video platforms) create contexts in which violations of everyday linguistic norms are expected, bracketed, and evaluated according to different criteria. Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the carnivalesque provides cultural-historical grounding for this bracketing: humor has historically been the designated social space for temporarily inverting power hierarchies and suspending

linguistic propriety. McGraw and Warren's (2010) Benign Violation Theory provides the formal logic: for a profane expression to function as comedy, its violation of social norms must be perceived as simultaneously genuine (transgression is real) and benign (performance frame renders it safe). When that benign condition is perceived to fail (target is not abstract but individual, not distant but present), the carnivalesque license collapses and the expression moves up the Contextual Legitimacy Continuum toward sanction.

### **Discourse, Power, and Hidden Transcripts**

At the level of institutions and power, Foucault's (1972) account of discourse explains the impulse toward institutional regulation of profanity. Discourse, in Foucault's sense, encompasses not merely language but the full range of practices that determine what may be said, who may say it, and under what conditions. Institutional policing of taboo language is thus a discursive mechanism through which social hierarchies are reproduced: what counts as offensive, indecent, obscene is not a natural fact but a social judgment that reflects the interests of those empowered to make it. Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis provides the methodological tools to trace how these judgments are operationalized in specific texts (a newspaper report, a university disciplinary notice, a regulatory complaint) in ways that may systematically advantage particular social positions.

Scott's (1990) analysis of hidden transcripts describes the complementary dynamic from below. Subordinated populations develop forms of discourse that circulate beyond the reach of dominant power: indirect expressions of hostility, coded criticism, transgressive language that would be punished if uttered in the presence of those in authority. When those hidden transcripts are made public (profanity that circulates privately among protesters is displayed on banners or broadcast through social media), it constitutes a political challenge to the authority that had suppressed it. The public profanity of student protest is, in this analysis, not a breakdown of decorum but a deliberate illocutionary act.

### **Indian Theoretical Traditions: Bhartrhari, Gaali-Geet, and the Persona-Legitimacy Problem**

The western theoretical traditions outlined above provide essential analytical tools, but their application to India requires supplementation with theories grounded in South Asian intellectual history, indigenous folk practice, and contemporary Indian sociolinguistics. Three resources are relevant: Bhartrhari's classic philosophy of language, the Indian ethnographic tradition of ritualized obscenity, and the emerging question of persona-legitimacy in digital comedy contexts.

The most significant Indian theoretical contribution to the analysis of language and social meaning is Bhartrhari's Sphota doctrine (5th century CE), outlined in his Vakyapadiya (On Sentence and Word). Bhartrhari argues that the meaning of speech is not reducible to the sequence of sounds that constitute an utterance; meaning is grasped holistically through what he calls the Sphota, the indivisible whole that carries semantic and pragmatic force. In the context of the present framework, Bhartrhari's doctrine underlines a fundamental claim: the social meaning of a profane utterance cannot be determined by its lexical content in isolation. The utterance must be grasped as a whole, in relation to the social context in which it is embedded, including the identity and established social persona of the speaker. Meaning, like the Sphota, is holistic and context-constituted. This resonates directly with the Contextual Legitimacy framework's insistence that no single variable (the word, the intent, the audience, in solitude) determines legitimacy.

A second Indian theoretical resource is the ethnographic tradition of gaali-geet: the ritualized obscene song that has been a constitutive feature of wedding ceremonies and life-cycle celebrations across the Indian subcontinent for centuries. Gaali-geet (literally, "abuse songs" or "slang songs") are performed, typically by women on the bride's side, when the groom's wedding procession (baarat) arrives. The songs are explicitly sexual, ribald, and deliberately offensive to the groom and his male relatives; their content would be wholly unacceptable outside the ceremonial frame. Yet within it, they are not merely tolerated but expected and structurally required: their performance signals that the liminal event of the wedding is underway (Raheja, 1994; Henry, 1988). The tradition is documented across regional variants: Bhojpuri and Awadhi gaali-geet in the Gangetic plains, similar practices in Rajasthani peepli songs, Punjabi boliyan and tappe that feature frank

sexual teasing between families, and equivalents in Bengali, Maithili, and Haryanvi wedding traditions. In the Jakari folk songs of Haryana, women use the wedding ceremony as the sanctioned occasion to voice desires and frustrations that patriarchal social structures normally suppress (Misra, 2020). The Biraha folk tradition of Bihar similarly uses coded and metaphorical erotic language, ostensibly addressed to absent husbands, to articulate women's suppressed sexual and emotional experience through the protective cover of a known genre (Misra, 2020; Udupa, 2018).

This tradition is theoretically significant for the Contextual Legitimacy framework in two respects. First, it establishes that the relationship between profanity and social sanction in India is not a modern or Western-imported phenomenon but a deeply indigenous one: Indian culture has long recognized that certain forums and occasions license expressions that are prohibited elsewhere. The wedding ceremony is a bounded performative space, structurally analogous to Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque and Goffman's (1959) performance frame, within which the temporary suspension of linguistic propriety serves identifiable social functions: breaking the ice between unfamiliar families, releasing collective tension around a life-transition, and providing women in particular a socially sanctioned channel for feelings and expressions that have no outlet in ordinary life. Second, the gaali-geet tradition makes explicit what western frameworks only imply: that the legitimacy of profane speech depends not merely on the content of what is said but on the recognized social identity of who is speaking, to whom, and in which ritual context. A gaali-geet sung by the women of the bride's family is licensed profanity; the same words spoken by an unknown man on the street would be harassment. The words are identical; the speaker's socially recognized role within a sanctioned frame determines the legitimacy entirely.

This insight leads directly to the third theoretical contribution: what this article terms the persona-legitimacy problem. In contemporary Indian digital culture, the question of who is speaking has become analytically inseparable from the question of what social persona, the accumulated public identity built through years of audience-facing content, that speaker has established. Udupa's (2018) sociological analysis of gaali cultures on Indian social media is relevant here: she argues that the social meaning of online abuse and obscenity in India cannot be understood without reference to the moral frameworks and identity performances of those participating since the same expression carries different valences depending on whether it aligns or conflicts with the speaker's established public character. Annamalai's (2001) observation that linguistic legitimacy in India is multiply determined by the prestige of the language chosen, the social position of the speaker, and the institutional context of utterance extends naturally to digital platforms, where a speaker's established persona functions as social capital to authorize or delegitimize a given utterance. Chand's (2011) work on Hinglish as a deliberate identity performance among Delhi youth, further, is relevant: the choice of register is itself a social act that positions the speaker within a hierarchy of identities, and when a speaker's registered persona suddenly shifts register, the audience experiences it as a category violation, which has its own social meaning, independent of the content of the utterance.

These three Indian theoretical traditions converge on a single claim that the western frameworks approach but do not fully articulate: in India, what may be said is always mediated by who is recognized to be speaking. The gaali-geet singer has a socially recognized license; the wedding guest who oversteps the frame does not. The stand-up comedian who has built an edgy persona has a carnivalesque license; the wellness influencer who suddenly attempts obscenity within that same space has not established the social identity that would authorize the transgression. Profanity in India has always been negotiated through the intersection of content, context, and the recognized persona of the speaker, and contemporary digital culture has made that negotiation more visible, more contested, and more consequential than ever.

## Conceptual Framework: Contextual Legitimacy

### The Five Variables

Contextual Legitimacy is suggested as a conceptual tool for understanding how social acceptability might be attributed to profanity. The authors combine five sociolinguistic variables to characterize a contextual position within a Continuum in which the profane utterance exists.

**Intent** is the pragmatic goal of the utterance. The use of profanity may be cathartic, a means of solidarity-building, humor, political resistance, intimidation, harassment, and so on. Intent is distinguished from effect: a speaker may intend solidarity but offend, and the difference between the two is in itself socially significant.

**Audience** is the social composition of those who receive or witness the utterance. The same utterance directed to a peer group, to a comedy audience that has opted in, to a general social media audience, and to an institutionally authoritative figure will have greatly divergent consequences. Audience also includes those who receive the utterance secondarily, such as through news outlets.

**Target** is who or what the profanity is directed at, describes, or implicitly refers to. An utterance of profanity directed at no specific person (cathartic self-talk), at an institution, at a public figure who holds significant social power, or at a vulnerable individual or marginalized group, will have different connotations of social weight. In the Indian context, the target must also be understood in terms of caste, religious, and gender identity dimensions that may affect the social consequences of the utterance.

**Power relation** is the social asymmetry between speaker and target. Following Foucault (1972) and Indian sociolinguistic tradition (Annamalai, 2001), power in the Indian context is not exercised formally by institutions but reflects social class, gender, and language prestige, as well as the ways in which communities assign the right to speak in particular registers. Profanity directed upward (from student to institution, lower-to higher-caste target) and downward or across comparable power positions will have different connotations.

**Social consequence** is the effect on the utterance: bonding, catharsis, humor, political solidarity, harm, reputational damage, institutional sanction, and so on. Social consequence is the one variable that is most easily observable in retrospect, and it is this variable that public controversy often revolves around, while the other four remain contested.

The five variables are not independent, but they interact. One utterance might be characterized by prosocial intent, an intimate audience, a non-vulnerable target, a lateral power relation, and a bonding social consequence: close to the acceptance end of the Continuum. Another might share the same word content but have hostile intent, an institutional audience, a vulnerable individual target, a downward power relation, and a harmful social consequence: close to the sanction end. Between the two lies a range of contested positions in which one or more of the variables point in different directions. It is important to remember that movement along the Continuum is not linear or automatic. The same utterance might occupy different positions for different communities: an expression of solidarity within a protest movement but a threat to institutional authorities, and an empowering act of witness to sympathetic bystanders. Contextual Legitimacy is not a single-value judgment but a mapping out of the social field within which a profane utterance operates.

## The Contextual Legitimacy Continuum

Table 1 presents their Contextual Legitimacy Continuum as a six-stage descriptive model. The stages are not rigid categories but reference points that reflect the range of positions a profane utterance might occupy, depending on the configuration of the five variables. This is a descriptive Continuum rather than a value judgment: a position close to the formal sanction end is not morally worse than a position close to the private acceptance end.

**Table 1: The Contextual Legitimacy Continuum**

| Position on Continuum | Typical Configuration                                       | Variable | Social Consequence                | Illustrative Example (India)                                             |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Private Acceptance | Intent: catharsis; Audience: self; Target: none; Power: n/a |          | Emotional release; no social harm | An urban college student muttering a Hindi expletive after a failed exam |

|                                        |                                                                                                                                         |                                                                         |                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2. Peer/In-Group Solidarity            | Intent: bonding; Audience: trusted peers; Target: none/self; Power: lateral                                                             | Intimacy reinforcement; in-group cohesion                               | Gen Z friends using gaali-inflected banter in a WhatsApp group or hostel corridor                                          |
| 3. Performative Humor                  | Intent: comedy; Audience: consenting public; Target: abstract/institution; Power: upward or lateral                                     | Entertainment; cathartic laughter; social critique                      | A stand-up comedian using Hinglish profanity to satirize government policy on a YouTube channel                            |
| 4. Public Contestation                 | Intent: resistance; Audience: general public + authority; Target: institution; Power: upward                                            | Political solidarity; institutional discomfort; media attention         | Student protestors at JNU or Hyderabad Central University displaying profane slogans on banners                            |
| 5. Institutional Disapproval           | Intent: resistance (from speaker); Audience: authority; Target: institution; Power: upward; Consequence: negative from authority's view | Disciplinary proceedings; press coverage framing profanity as the story | University administrations issuing notices against "indecent" protest language; media reporting on protesters' "obscenity" |
| 6. Formal Sanction / Legal Consequence | Intent: (any); Audience: individual/group; Target: deemed vulnerable; Power: any; Consequence: harm                                     | Legal complaint, platform ban, FIR, criminal indictment                 | Comedian Ranveer Allahbadia's content generating FIR filings; IT Act Section 67 invocations against online speech          |

Note: The cases listed in the final column are illustrative examples drawn from the Indian context. They are not presented as empirical findings from a primary data study; their function is to anchor the abstract variables in recognizable social situations.

## Operationalizing the Framework

Table 2 specifies how each variable may be assessed in each of these cases. A given situation is not a mechanical set of procedures to follow, but rather a matter of assessing the context and using judgment as to what might be going on and what it might mean within this specific social context. This table should not be used as a codebook.

**Table 2: Operationalization of the Five Variables**

| Variable | Key Analytical Question       | Example Indicators                                                                            | Movement on Continuum                                                                  |
|----------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Intent   | Why is profanity deployed?    | Humor, catharsis, solidarity, insult, political resistance, intimidation                      | Humor/solidarity → moves toward acceptance; intimidation/harm → moves toward sanction  |
| Audience | Who receives or witnesses it? | Intimate peers, strangers, authority figures, children, the general public, digital audiences | Intimate/consenting → acceptance; authority/non-consenting → institutional disapproval |

|                    |                                                   |                                                                                                       |                                                                                                     |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Target             | Who or what is referenced?                        | Self, peer, abstract institution, vulnerable individual or group                                      | Abstract/institutional target → tolerance or political legitimacy; vulnerable individual → sanction |
| Power Relation     | What is the asymmetry between speaker and target? | Lateral (peer-to-peer), upward (subordinate to authority), downward (authority to subordinate)        | Upward profanity may read as resistance; downward profanity risks coercion                          |
| Social Consequence | What effect does the utterance produce?           | Bonding, cathartic release, political solidarity, reputational harm, hostile atmosphere, legal action | Positive consequences → acceptance/solidarity; harmful consequences → contestation/sanction         |

A critical complication arises when variables contradict one another, for example when profanity is performed humorously but is directed at a target whose caste or gender identity renders them socially vulnerable. In such cases, the framework does not yield a single solution; it highlights the contested nature of the legitimacy judgment. The India's Got Latent controversy, discussed in Section 4.2 below, is such a case: the variable of intent (humor) pointed towards performative legitimacy, while the variable of target (individuals in the audience, arguably in a position of social vulnerability relative to the comedian's platform) pointed towards sanction.

### Distinguishing Types of Social Consequence

The social consequence variable deserves elaboration, as it encompasses a variety of responses that are substantively different in kind and must not conflated. This article distinguishes four levels of consequence:

Interpersonal response includes the immediate reactions of those present: laughter, discomfort, offense, recognition, or bonding. These responses may be ephemeral or may shape the longer-term relationship between participants.

Community response includes the broader reception of the utterance by the in-group and by adjacent communities: approval, condemnation, exclusion, or reputational enhancement or damage within specific social networks.

Platform or institutional response includes the actions of media platforms, universities, employers, or regulatory bodies: demonetization, content removal, suspension of access, disciplinary proceedings, or public statements of condemnation or endorsement.

Legal response includes formal legal proceedings: the registration of a First Information Report (FIR) under applicable Indian law (such as the Information Technology Act, 2000, Section 67, or the Indian Penal Code, Section 294), prosecution, court orders, or conviction.

This distinction is particularly salient in the Indian context, in which the boundary between platform response and legal response is frequently contested, and in which the threat of legal action is itself often employed as a form of institutional power (Rajagopal, 2001).

### Illustrative Analysis: Three Domains

The following three sections apply the Contextual Legitimacy framework illustratively to three different domains of contemporary Indian social life. Each section presents the domain, identifies the characteristic variable configuration that distinguishes it, notes where that configuration is internally contested, and shows how the framework illuminates the social dynamics at stake. The illustrative examples are drawn from publicly documented events and existing scholarship; they are not the products of original fieldwork.

## Gen Z Peer Interaction and In-Group Validation

Swearing frequently indexes group membership among younger urban speakers in India. In many Gen Z peer groups, particularly those operating through digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Discord, and X (formerly Twitter), profanity is a shibboleth: a linguistic marker of in-group membership and social intimacy that is unremarkable within the group but would violate norms in more formal or intergenerational contexts. The variable configuration is characteristic: intent is solidarity or humor; audience is trusted peers; target is typically absent, abstract, or self-referential; power relation is lateral; and social consequence is cohesion and affective bonding.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) Communities of Practice model explains why: when digital-native Gen Z speakers form communities whose primary interaction is via platforms that structurally favor informality and directness, the linguistic norms of those platforms become the baseline against which formality is measured. Chand's (2011) ethnographic research on code-switching among Delhi youth is particularly relevant here: she documents a pattern in which Hinglish, the Hindi-English mixed code prevalent among urban Gen Z speakers, is used not merely as a linguistic convenience but as a deliberate performance of cosmopolitan identity. Profanity in this register frequently straddles between languages: English expletives are deployed for emphasis in Hindi-primary speech, and Hindi *gaaliyan* appear in English-primary digital text. The hybrid code itself is a social act.

In Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, peer-group profanity of this kind constitutes positive facework: it signals that the speaker regards the addressee as sufficiently trusted that the face-protective conventions of formal register are unnecessary. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) corroborate this empirically: self-reported intimacy and solidarity are among the strongest predictors of profanity use in conversation. Ljung (2011) identifies a similar pattern in Swedish digital youth communities, suggesting that the lowering of profanity taboo in internet-mediated communication is a broader sociolinguistic tendency, though Ljung's finding must be applied to India with caution, since the hierarchical pressures on Indian youth (from family, caste community, and educational institutions) create a more complex negotiation between private digital norms and public linguistic performance than his Northern European data captures.

On the Continuum, in-group profanity among urban Indian Gen Z speakers typically occupies the space between Private Acceptance and Peer Solidarity (stages 1 and 2). It becomes contested when it crosses into institutional spaces such as classrooms, family gatherings, and formal workplaces, where different Communities of Practice govern linguistic norms. It does not indicate that the profanity has become toxic; it indicates that different communities apply different legitimacy criteria to the same expression.

Importantly, a complication arises from India's multilingual and caste-stratified context. The social meaning of profanity in peer groups is not uniform across urban India. In many contexts, the choice of which language to swear in is itself socially significant: English profanity may indicate cosmopolitan identity and relative class privilege, while Hindi or regional-language profanity may be read differently depending on the caste and regional background of speaker and audience. Kinship-based abuses (those that sexualize the target's female relatives, a pervasive category in Indian profanity) carry a specific social charge that English-language frameworks, focused predominantly on expletives of the "fuck" type, may systematically underestimate. The *gaali-geet* tradition reminds us that the legitimacy of any expression in India has always depended on who is socially recognized to be speaking and within which sanctioned frame: the same words carry different moral weight depending on the structural position of speaker and target relative to each other, a relationship that the Contextual Legitimacy framework's power-relation variable must register.

## Digital Comedy: The India's Got Latent Controversy and the Persona-Legitimacy Problem

To understand the India's Got Latent controversy, it is necessary first to recognize that Indians have a long and deeply rooted tradition of licensed obscenity in performance contexts, one that predates digital media by centuries. The *gaali-geet* tradition, described in Section 2.4, establishes a fundamental cultural principle: certain social forums authorize expressions that are categorically prohibited outside them, and the legitimacy

of the obscenity is inseparable from the identity of the person performing it within that frame. Bhojpuri folk songs at weddings are ribald and sexually explicit in ways that would cause serious offense if spoken in any other setting; Rajasthani peepli songs, Punjabi boliyan, and the Biraha lament tradition all contain expressions that navigate far beyond the boundaries of everyday propriety. None of these is experienced as transgressive by their communities, because the singer is recognized to hold the social role that authorizes the performance, and the occasion is recognized as one that licenses it. India has always known that the same words mean entirely different things depending on the mouth they come from and the occasion on which they are spoken.

Digital stand-up comedy is, in this sense, the contemporary inheritor of the gaali-geet logic. YouTube comedy platforms, operating outside the broadcast regulation that governs television under the Cable Television Networks Act, 1995, have created what Bakhtin (1984) would recognize as a contemporary carnivalesque: a bounded performative space in which participants temporarily suspend ordinary norms of conduct to engage collectively in transgressive humor. Goffman's (1959) performance frame explains the interactional mechanism: the digital comedy audience, by choosing to watch, brackets its ordinary evaluative criteria and applies the norms of the comedy frame instead. McGraw and Warren's (2010) Benign Violation Theory specifies the precise condition under which that frame sustains the comedy: the violation of social norms must be both genuine and perceived as benign, safely enclosed by the frame and not causing real harm to a real, present, non-consenting individual.

The India's Got Latent controversy of February 2025 illustrates not merely the failure of the benign condition but a phenomenon the gaali-geet tradition illuminates with particular clarity: the catastrophic social consequence of a mismatch between a speaker's established persona and the register of their utterance. The controversy arose when Ranveer Allahbadia, known online as BeerBiceps and with a brand identity built on self-improvement, fitness, productivity, and motivational content, appeared on comedian Samay Raina's show and made a sexually explicit, deeply offensive remark about the parents of a contestant (Gulf News, 2025a). The remark generated multiple FIR filings across Indian states under Sections 67 and 67A of the Information Technology Act (2000) and Sections 294 and 509 of the Indian Penal Code (The Hindu, 2025). The National Commission for Women summoned Allahbadia, Raina, and five other participants (Deccan Herald, 2025). The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology was convened, and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting issued a formal advisory on digital content standards (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2025). Allahbadia himself publicly apologized, stating that "comedy is not my forte" and that his behavior "wasn't cool" (Gulf News, 2025b).

The most analytically precise account of why the backlash against Allahbadia was so disproportionately severe was offered not by a journalist or regulator but by Samay Raina himself, in his stand-up special *Still Alive* (2026), released on YouTube on 7 April 2026, fourteen months after the controversy, and reaching the number-one position on YouTube India within hours of publication. In the special, Raina addressed the asymmetry directly: he argued that the intensity of the backlash was inseparable from Allahbadia's carefully constructed public persona as a clean, spiritual, self-help figure, memorably described by Raina as "the monk who sold my Ferrari." Raina's observation was that a comedian who had built their public identity around edgy, transgressive humor, as Raina himself had, would not have generated the same institutional and public response for making an equivalent joke, because the audience's expectations of that speaker already included transgression. Allahbadia, by contrast, had spent years cultivating an audience that trusted him precisely because he maintained the image of a morally upright, spiritually inclined public figure. When he stepped into the carnivalesque space of India's Got Latent and made a profane and offensive remark, the audience experienced it not merely as a bad joke but as a betrayal of an implicit social contract: a violation not just of propriety norms but of the persona-based trust his audience had invested in him (The Print, 2026; Brut Media, 2026).

This observation maps precisely onto the gaali-geet logic. In the wedding ceremony context, the legitimacy of the obscene song derives from the singer's recognized social role: it is the women of the bride's family who sing the gaali-geet, not a random attendee. A guest who is not recognized as holding that role but who attempts to sing the same songs would produce offense rather than celebration, because the license is not attached to the content alone but to the speaker's socially recognized position within the performative frame. Allahbadia,

in the terms of the gaali-geet logic, was an outsider to the frame who attempted to perform as though he were its recognized practitioner. Raina, as the show's host and a comedian whose entire public persona was built around exactly the kind of transgressive improvisation that India's Got Latent performed, held the recognized role. The same remark, from the recognized practitioner, would have landed differently, not because the words would have been less offensive in isolation, but because the audience's expectation of the speaker would have prepared them to receive it within the carnivalesque frame rather than as a category violation.

This is the persona-legitimacy problem in its most visible contemporary form: profanity and obscenity in India are not evaluated solely against a fixed standard of what is acceptable, but against the accumulated social identity of the person speaking. Udupa's (2018) sociological analysis of gaali cultures on Indian social media identifies a parallel dynamic: she demonstrates that the social meaning of online abuse cannot be assessed without reference to the identity performance of the speaker, since the same expression carries entirely different valences depending on whether it coheres with or violates the speaker's established moral character in the eyes of the community. Bhartrhari's Sphota doctrine supports this at the level of linguistic philosophy: meaning is not in the word but in the utterance as a whole social act, and the identity of the speaker is part of the whole that must be grasped.

On the Contextual Legitimacy Continuum, the trajectory of the controversy is analytically instructive precisely because it was the speaker-variable that determined the movement, not the content-variable. The show initially occupied stage 3 (Performative Humor) as a carnivalesque comedy platform with a consenting digital audience. When Allahbadia made his remark, the five variables shifted simultaneously for a large portion of the audience: intent was re-read as genuine offensiveness rather than edgy humor; target moved from abstract to a real, present, non-consenting individual; the power relation was recognized as asymmetric (a creator with millions of followers versus an audience member with no platform); and social consequence shifted from entertainment to harm. The expression moved from stage 3 through stages 4 and 5 (Public Contestation; Institutional Disapproval) to stage 6 (Legal Consequence) within weeks. Foucault's (1972) analysis of institutional discourse illuminates the regulatory response: the FIR filings, the NCW summons, the parliamentary committee discussion, and the ministerial advisory are all exercises of discursive power: decisions about where the boundaries of permissible speech will be drawn, enforced by institutions with the authority to enforce them. Rajagopal's (2001) analysis is again relevant: such institutional responses in India are frequently selective, targeting content that transgresses the respectability norms of those with regulatory authority, rather than constituting a neutral application of consistent legal standards.

The India's Got Latent case thus reveals a dimension of the Contextual Legitimacy framework that Western theoretical traditions are less well equipped to capture: that in India, the authorization to speak profanely in a given frame is not merely a function of the frame itself but of the speaker's recognized social identity within and prior to that frame. This is a specifically Indian insight, grounded in the gaali-geet tradition and confirmed by the dynamics of contemporary digital culture. Indians have long understood that the same words in a different mouth mean something categorically different. What the India's Got Latent controversy demonstrated is that this understanding travels into the digital age with its logic intact.

### **Student Protest: Profanity as Hidden Transcript Against State Power**

The most overtly political domain in which profanity serves as a social resource in contemporary India is organized protest: no episode in recent Indian public life demonstrates the Contextual Legitimacy Continuum better than the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) agitation at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, between June and July 2026. The CJP erupted in response to remarks by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, who described certain activists and unemployed youth as "cockroaches" and "parasites of society" during a court hearing on 15 May 2026 (Al Jazeera, 2026a). Within days, Abhijeet Dipke, a 30-year-old political communications strategist based in Boston, launched the satirical Cockroach Janta Party online as a humorous inversion of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. The movement's demand was the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over irregularities in the 2026 NEET medical entrance examination and related national assessments that, according to the movement, had caused at least twelve students to die by suicide (Al Jazeera, 2026b). Over thirty-seven days of sit-in protest at Jantar Mantar, the

CJP became one of the main locations where profanity directed at the highest levels of state authority was generated, contested, and instrumentalized by both protesters and institutions.

Scott's (1990) hidden transcript is a particularly illuminating theoretical vantage point for this domain. Scott argues that subordinated populations create forms of discourse (insolent language, coded resistance, transgressive humor) that traffic outside of the reach of dominant power structures. By rendering the hidden transcript public, the act of publicity itself is both a political challenge and a symbolic inversion: the private defiance is displayed where it cannot be denied, and its visibility is itself an assertion of the right to speak. In the case of the CJP, this publicizing of the hidden transcript was literal: young protesters (Primarily Gen Z, and many of whom had personally appeared for the compromised examinations) carried posters with caricatures of Prime Minister Modi, performed satirical skits that mimicked his mannerisms and speech patterns, and chanted slogans that included profanity directed at the prime minister and his government (The Diplomat, 2026).

Applied to Austin's (1962) speech act framework, the profane sloganeering at Jantar Mantar constitutes a layered set of illocutionary acts, the most salient of which is the direct assertion of social equality. To direct a profanity at the Prime Minister of India in a public square is to perform a radical assertion of social equality, rendering the head of government as an entity that can be sworn at, which categorically refuses the protocols of deference that traditionally insulate those in the highest positions of state authority from the language of popular contempt. The utterance enacts a speaker's refusal of subordination far more viscerally than any policy demand could, in that it operates at the level of social form rather than political content.

The CJP's relationship to its own movement's profanity is analytically significant in and of itself: CJP spokesperson Ashutosh Ranka urged protesters to restrict sloganeering to four officially sanctioned chants: "Bharat Mata ki Jai," "Inquilab Zindabad," "Jai Bheem," and "Dharmendra Pradhan Istifa do," explicitly warning that "negative slogans" should be avoided because the authorities were "looking for a chance to make a narrative" (The Print, 2026). The CJP leadership understood, in its deployment of the Contextual Legitimacy Continuum, that profane slogans directed at the Prime Minister, however organic their origin, would be seized on to reframe the political demand as a story of public indecency: the profanity being politically generative at stages 3 and 4 (Performative Humor and Public Contestation) but potentially accelerating the movement to stage 5 (Institutional Disapproval) in ways that would delegitimize the protesters' substantive claims. That the slogans continued to circulate despite official CJP discouragement, captured in viral social media videos and international media coverage, demonstrates that the hidden transcript, once partially publicized, cannot be fully recalled by movement leadership.

The variable configuration of the CJP protest profanity is instructive precisely because it is contested across each of the five dimensions. From the protesters' perspective, intent was political resistance and righteous contempt for a government held responsible for the deaths of students; from the institutional perspective, it was deliberate provocation and disrespect for constitutional office. The audience was a simultaneous consenting protest community (for whom the profanity was an act of solidarity and cathartic political expression), the national media (for whom it was a story about decorum and public order), and international observers (Al Jazeera, 2026a; France 24, 2026), for whom it was an index of a broader crisis of youth-state relations in India. The target was the Prime Minister and the government, the most powerful institutional actor in the Indian polity and not a private individual or a vulnerable group, which unambiguously positions the profanity as upward speech: subordinate to supreme authority. This upward directionality is analytically crucial. Profanity directed downward, from power toward the powerless, reads as coercion and harassment; the same expression directed upward, from a disenfranchised Gen Z student to the Prime Minister of the world's most populous democracy, reads as resistance. The social consequence, finally, was simultaneously cohesive within the movement (the CJP grew to millions of online followers in part because of the movement's defiant irreverence), contested in the public sphere (opposition leaders expressed solidarity while distancing themselves from the specific language), and threatening from the institutional vantage of the state.

Bakhtin's (1984) conception of the carnivalesque illuminates a particular dimension of the CJP that distinguishes it from more conventional political agitations: the CJP was not a mere pressure group. Its name

itself was an act of inversion, adapting the Chief Justice's insult and transforming it into an emblem of resilience. The cockroach as symbol performs exactly the Bakhtinian logic of carnival: the degraded, the despised, the marginal is elevated and celebrated, inverting the hierarchy of the original slur. The profane slogans directed at the Prime Minister belong to this same carnivalesque register: they are the linguistic analogue of the caricature poster and the mimicry skit, all of which temporarily suspend the protocols of deference that normally govern the relationship between citizens and the state's highest office. The Diplomat (2026) noted that the CJP accomplished something that few observers thought possible in Narendra Modi's India: it made mockery of the prime minister feel normal. This normalization of irreverence toward supreme authority is precisely what the carnivalesque accomplishes, and precisely why institutional authority finds it threatening.

Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis reveals the institutional counter-move: Delhi Police's response to the Sansad Chalo march of 20 July 2026, in which thousands of protesters attempted to reach Parliament during the monsoon session, involved lathi charges, tear gas, and the detention of approximately seventy protesters, with legal action initiated against them (Al Jazeera, 2026b). Amnesty International publicly characterized the police action as a suppression of peaceful dissent (Al Jazeera, 2026b). Media coverage immediately following the clashes demonstrated a characteristic discursive displacement: the focus was on the protesters' slogans and confrontational posture, not on the underlying examination scandals that had caused at least twelve student deaths. By making the transgression of respectability norms the primary story, institutionally and media discourse attempted to reframe political actors as public order problems. This is Fairclough's mechanism in operation: the linguistic form of the protest is weaponized against its political content.

The CJP protest also intersects with the long history of profanity in student political speech in India, for which this case study provides important comparative context: the protests at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in 2016, where students were booked for sedition in part because of the language of their slogans, established the precedent of using the register of protest speech as grounds for legal action against political dissent (The Hindu, 2016; Rajagopal, 2001). The protests following the institutional death of Rohith Vemula at Hyderabad Central University in 2016 involved not only profane slogans directed at university administration but a confrontation with the specifically caste-inflected nature of institutional power, a dimension that the Contextual Legitimacy framework's power-relation variable makes analytically visible. The anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests at Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University in 2019–20 similarly produced profane sloganeering that was instrumentalized by state authorities (through police action, university disciplinary proceedings, and media coverage) to reframe political dissent as a law-and-order problem.

The distinguishing characteristic of the CJP from these precedents is the scale of the audience and the extent to which the protest's irreverent linguistic register was constitutive (rather than incidental) of the movement's identity and political effectiveness: the movement was born online; its humor, its satirical naming, and its defiance of authority were inseparable from its mobilizing power among Gen Z constituencies. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) Communities of Practice framework explains this: for a generation whose primary political formation occurs via platforms that structurally reward irreverence, authenticity, and the refusal of institutional register, the profane slogan is not a deviation from political speech but its most legible form. The willingness to direct a taboo expression at the Prime Minister in a public square, at potential personal legal risk, functions as a credibility signal within the protest community: the speaker is not merely a digital participant but a physically present, personally committed actor.

On the Contextual Legitimacy Continuum, the trajectory of the CJP protest profanity maps the entire range of the model: stage 2 (Peer Solidarity) in private digital spaces where Gen Z youth expressed contempt for the government, stage 3 (Performative Humor) through the CJP's satirical online content (caricatures, mimicry videos, meme culture) that made irreverence toward the Prime Minister a form of entertainment, to stage 4 (Public Contestation) at Jantar Mantar, where the profane slogans formed part of a politically organized, publicly visible demand for accountability. The police response and detention of protesters represented stage 5 (Institutional Disapproval), and the legal actions initiated against detained protesters (threat of charges under provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) governing public order offenses) gestured toward stage 6

(Formal Legal Consequence), even though the eventual settlement between the CJP and the government included a provision that police cases against protesters would be withdrawn in all NDA-ruled states (Wikipedia, 2026). The movement's ultimate political success, the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on 25 July 2026 (Britannica, 2026), was achieved not despite the transgressive register of its language but in part because of the mobilizing and solidarity-building functions that it performed.

The CJP case thus exemplifies the central claim of the Contextual Legitimacy framework: that the same profane expression can occupy every position on the Continuum. The expression of the Prime Minister from a protest site at Jantar Mantar in July 2026 was, simultaneously, an act of cathartic release for students whose futures had been destroyed by institutional failure, a solidarity-building signal within the protest community, a performative political act that asserted the speakers' equal standing with the highest office in the land, a legal risk that the state attempted to criminalize, and a contribution to a political outcome of national significance. No single-variable assessment of its legitimacy could capture that complexity: Contextual Legitimacy can.

## Broader Significance and Limitations

Across three analytically distinct domains, the Contextual Legitimacy framework demonstrates its central claim: profanity cannot be evaluated solely according to the lexical item, but only according to the interaction of intent, audience, target, power relation, and social consequence working in tandem. Depending on configuration, the same expression may perform in-group solidarity, constitute legitimate political hyperbole, generate platform removal, or attract criminal prosecution. Approaches that treat profanity as a fixed category, either inherently offensive or inherently liberatory, will systematically misread the social dynamics at stake.

India offers a theoretically productive setting for this analysis not despite, but because of its complexity: the intersection of approximately 780 recognized languages (Ethnologue, 2023), a caste hierarchy that structures the social meaning at the level of the utterance, a colonial inheritance of criminal law governing obscene language (particularly Sections 292–294 of the Indian Penal Code, derived from Victorian-era British statute), an emergent digital youth culture that actively negotiating those inheritances, and a regulatory landscape that is contested between central government, courts, and digital platforms, creates conditions in which the contextual negotiation of taboo language is unusually visible. Allan and Burrridge (2006) argue that there is no unitary social standard for taboo language in any diverse society, and India makes this argument inescapable.

Bhartrhari's Sphota doctrine supports the framework's holistic epistemology: just as the Sphota holds that linguistic meaning cannot be reconstructed from its phonological components but must be grasped as an indivisible whole-in-context, Contextual Legitimacy holds that the social meaning of profanity cannot be determined from the word alone, but only from the utterance-in-social-situation. This is not a superficial parallel; it reflects a deep convergence between Indian philosophy of language and contemporary sociolinguistic pragmatics.

This article has several limitations that future research should address: as a conceptual paper, it relies on illustrative examples, and the claims made about Gen Z peer interaction, digital comedy, and student protest require validation through primary research (ethnographic observation, interview data, corpus analysis of social media discourse, or systematic analysis of media and legal texts). Second, the analysis is weighted towards English-language and Hindi-language profanity; the role of regional languages, kinship-based abuses, casteist language, religious insults, and sexist profanity in Indian social life has been noted but not analyzed in-depth.

Third, the framework's application to the specific languages and social contexts of South India, Northeast India, and rural contexts is underdeveloped: warranting dedicated attention. Fourth, the normative implications of the framework, namely what it means morally and politically that profanity can simultaneously be solidarity and harm, are deliberately held at arm's length in this article, and constitute a significant agenda for further work.

## CONCLUSION

This article began with the observation that profanity does not simply exist but must be justified: transgression invites correction, and correction reveals social logic of norms enforcement. In seeking to understand how this logic operates in contemporary India, it proposed the Contextual Legitimacy Continuum: a descriptive framework organized around five variables (intent, audience, target, power relation, and social consequence) that interact to produce the social meaning and social position of any given profane utterance.

The framework's core argument is that there is no fixed boundary between acceptable speech and profanity: what there are instead are five forces that align, conflict, and change in response to social context, producing a continuum of positions from private acceptance to formal legal sanction. The position any expression occupies on that continuum is not determined by the word itself, but by the social field in which it is embedded; India's field is multiply structured by language, caste, class, gender, religion, region, institutional authority, and the colonial inheritance of decency law.

Applied to three illustrative domains (Gen Z peer interaction, digital comedy via the India's Got Latent controversy of 2024–25, and organized student protest through the Cockroach Janta Party's Jantar Mantar agitation of July 2026), the framework demonstrates that profanity in contemporary India is not a social problem to be regulated away, but a social practice that warrant rigorous, contextually attentive analysis. Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, Communities of Practice, Goffman's dramaturgy, Bakhtin's carnivalesque, Foucault's discourse analysis, Scott's hidden transcripts, and Benign Violation Theory each illuminate a dimension of that practice. Bhartrhari's Sphota doctrine, the gaali-geet tradition of licensed ceremonial obscenity, and contemporary Indian sociolinguistics ground that analysis in the specific social formations of South Asia, and together illuminate a principle Indians have always understood: that the same words in a different mouth, on a different occasion, carry an entirely different social meaning.

What follows from this analysis is not a normative conclusion about when profanity should be permitted and when it should be punished. It is, rather, an epistemological claim: the social meaning of taboo language is always context-constituted, always multiply determined, and always contested. To understand how societies negotiate profanity, we need frameworks that can hold that complexity, frameworks that recognize, as Bhartrhari did, that meaning is grasped only in relation to the whole social situation in which it appears.

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