

## A RESPONSE TO NAITHANI'S REVIEW

I have been pleased to see that six years after publication *The Taste of Laughter: Aspects of Tamil Humor* received another review (*AFS* 57: 175–76). I would, however, have preferred the reviewer to be a scholar familiar with the Tamil language and culture. Such a reviewer would not have written that there is “no way in which a reader can understand how popular the cited humorous works of literature are, or to what section of society they communicate best.” He would have known that *Ananda Vikātan* and *Kumutam*, from which most of the thousands of jokes examined have been derived, cater to the Tamil middle-class and are the two magazines with the largest distribution. He would also have known that books of Tamil humorous stories are constantly republished, that the popularity of Marina’s comedies is such that they are performed even outside Tamilnadu in areas where a sizable Tamil minority lives, and that on its author the honorary title Kalaimamani (Great jewel of art) has been conferred. A reviewer familiar with Tamil folk narrative would hardly have written that I based my work “on insufficient sources of folk humor,” since the books cited contain hundreds of humorous folktales. From an Indian reviewer I would have also expected some comment on what I have called “echo joke,” which does not exist in Western languages (I happen to know several of them), but might be connected with the echo word construction, an Indian areal feature.

More disappointing than the lack of any pertinent criticism on the ethnographic part of the book is the fact that Naithani seems to be also unfamiliar with humor theories. In the one paragraph dealing with them he does not point out a single essentialist theory that might not be falsified by my arguments. Since he calls the book “largely descriptive” and claims that there is no reference to the validity of my hypothesis, he must have skipped the pages and pages of demonstrations that none of the presumed essential features of humor proposed in more than two thousand years of humor studies runs through all humorous folktales nor through all Tamil jokes mentioned.

In a monograph on non-Western humor some comparison with Western humor seemed to be unavoidable. It must have been this minor purpose of the book that caused Naithani’s completely unjustified ire. Rather than casting generic doubt on the few and tentative differences between Western and Tamil humor proposed, it would have been better to show at least one case in which I was wrong. He seems to think that whatever belongs to the past is “backward” and that backwardness and progressiveness can be applied to social structures like joint and nuclear families. My observation that with the near demise of the joint family in the West mothers-in-law lost much of their power and mother-in-law jokes much of their humorous potentials induced him to write, “By inference Tamil society seems to represent the ‘Western past’ or to be ‘backward in time.’” This inference sounds like an involuntary joke, since some Indian tribes, as he should know, have nuclear families.

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