



Sumukhi Suresh Turns Complexity into Comedy Gold

The comedian gets candid on her rise from food scientist to creator of the cult-favorite TV series Pushpavalli.

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Sumukhi Suresh in Pushpavalli (Amazon Prime)

Sumukhi Suresh has a stand-up comedian's deliciously uncanny ability to make you feel like you've always known each other. The 32-year-old actor, quarantining at home in Mumbai during our chat, released her first hour-long stand-up special *Don't Tell Amma* on Amazon Prime last December and season two of her TV series *Pushpavalli* this past March. And in 2016, she pioneered *Disgust Me*, an all-women, invite-only, stand-up extravaganza, a safe space where women could laugh openly. Over a grainy Google Meet on a rainy May morning, I asked Suresh how it feels to have *Amma* out in the world. "It's like your virginity," she said. "You've lost it! You can do whatever you want now! It's all good!" she laughed, before adding more seriously: "I'm truly happy. Because now I know I'm meant for stand-up, and I will keep doing it."

Indian comedy appears to have reached adolescence as it experiences growth spurts and finds its voice — it's no longer limited to slapstick, mimicry, or an hour on cable TV. The internet has ushered in the era of the “relatable” comedian: one who weaves jokes into a mix of first-person narrative and commentary on society, relationships, and politics. Platforms like YouTube and Instagram — with low overhead and the possibility of high reward — have allowed all manner of comedic content, delivered directly to hungry audiences, to flourish: from side-splitting Bollywood movie reviews and stand-up routines to entire web series.

As comedians become stars and influencers, Suresh — often called India's Tina Fey — is among those leading the charge. In a comedy world dominated by men, Suresh isn't just a stupendously funny woman — one who proudly writes for women and revels in the fact that the majority of her audience is female — with razor-sharp wit and deadpan delivery. She also has a taste for the absurd and a knack for observation that turns mundane characters into comedy gold.

“You don't have to worry about what your father or friend will think if I crack a blowjob joke,” she explained, listing assumptions men make when women laugh at certain jokes. “I want to cut that loop.”

Suresh is also the creator of the Amazon dramedy *Pushpavalli*, as well as one of its head writers and stars. In *Pushpavalli*, the eponymous lead, a food scientist in Bhopal, meets the dashing Nikhil at a conference. She develops a consuming crush on him and follows him to Bangalore, where she tries to get his attention with increasingly outrageous schemes, culminating in outright criminality. Pushpavalli is a stalker — not the romanticized Bollywood kind, but a manipulative, lying sociopath, with scant self-worth and deep-rooted insecurities. It is precisely these insecurities — deftly observed and portrayed with nuance and care — that endears the richly textured antihero to so many women. Her relatability makes the show a cult favorite, and the show's edginess has drawn comparison to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*.

In a time of nationalistic fervor, India's comics are regarded as no-nonsense truth-tellers, finding themselves the targets of moral and cultural policing, and even political ire. "Comedians are addressing the [largest youth population in the world](#)," Ravina Rawal, founder of [DeadAnt](#), a publication that tracks the Indian comedy scene, told me, referring to the 350 million-odd youngsters in the country. "One that doesn't trust mainstream media at all." What makes Suresh special, said Rawal, is that she owns every aspect of what makes her unique — from her life experiences, to her body, to her impeccable command of English, Hindi, and Tamil — in her stand-up and as a character on a TV show. "I'm sure it's come from a great deal of working on personal growth, but she's reached this remarkable space where, more often than not, her peers — industry players and fans alike — stay focused on her work," she added. "And there's a lot of it — she's always up to something."

Suresh never considered herself funny growing up in Nagpur. "I was always animated. But I was bullied heavily in school. So, anything that could've been expressed was *dabao-ed* a little bit," she said, making a tamping down motion with her hand. A food science graduate — and a gastronomic "snob" — Suresh worked in a food lab in Bangalore. She also sold cheesecakes from her home bakery. Always interested in theater and entertainment, Suresh trained at Theater Nisha while she was in college in Chennai. The first person to call her funny was her theater mentor, who told her she was a natural performer, even predicting that she would get into stand-up — well before she had an inkling of what it was. Suresh considered resuming acting in 2014, when she learned that the Bangalore comedy club *The Improv*, was looking for actors.

"I thought improv was a play. Turns out it was not," she chuckled.

I ask when she began to regard comedy as a career option. "14th June, 2014," the response tumbled out. The day before that, someone had dismissed her as not funny. "I'm cool with calling myself unfunny, but I'll be damned if I let someone *else* say that!" Suresh decided that she had nothing to lose, and gave a

life-changing performance at *The Improv*, a show where everything fell into place for her. “I had *so* much fun. I nailed the ‘yes, and,’ I advanced the scene, the jokes landed, I also did characters...” She sucked her teeth with relish.

The wheels began to turn. She soon met veteran comic Naveen Richard, and the duo hit it off. They created India’s first live sketch comedy show, [*Go Straight Take Left*](#). She starred in a viral parody video of Iggy Azalea’s “Fancy” in 2014, called “[*Anu Aunty Engineering Anthem*](#)” — which, to date, has amassed over 2 million views — then in Richard’s web series, [*Better Life Foundation*](#), India’s first mockumentary, with Debbi Rao as director. Both projects helped make Suresh a household name. Richard’s favorite collaboration with Suresh is *Go Straight Take Left*, even though it is the least popular of their projects. “In a way, it is the hardest and purest, natural version of us. We really connect when we write and act together, feeding off each other’s energy,” he told me.

By then, Suresh’s calling was undeniable. She quit her job at the food lab, closed her home bakery, and moved to Mumbai to focus on comedy. “Once everybody saw her in ‘Anu Aunty,’ they knew she was going places,” said Richard. “And that was before even I knew how hardworking she was. She is both a natural and hardworking superhuman.”

Streaming services that bypass censor boards and box office pressure, and cater to more niche audiences have enabled writers and directors to depart from the Bollywood blueprint and center more complicated female protagonists.

Amazon originals such as *Four More Shots* — often called India’s *Sex and the City* — and *Made in Heaven* have raked in accolades. *Pushpavalli*, which first aired in 2017, raises the bar. But even Suresh had to resist the urge to fall into the trap of making her titular character likable. Her writing team includes comedians Sumaira Shaikh and Richard, who also plays Pankaj, Pushpavalli’s potty-mouthed boss. Rao jumped onboard again as director.

“I felt like we had to have a female lead who was ‘likable’ or no one would watch the show,” Suresh told me, crediting fellow-writer Shaikh for pushing back on the likability. Rao was also keen on painting outside the lines of

traditional depictions of women. “It’s the cookie-cutter ideal I’m against,” Suresh told me. “No one is 100% good or bad. Everyone has flaws. Confident people can have insecurities, men can be victims, women can be assholes.”

In *Pushpavalli*, Suresh chose to depict “big girl issues and physicality” with subtlety. Viewers who witness Pushpavalli’s body shaming and the sting of callous, throwaway barbs fiercely empathize with her — and Suresh has experienced much of this firsthand. In Pushpavalli’s mother (Latha Venkatraman), we find a source of some of the character’s insecurities. In one scene, her mother matter-of-factly announces that she has found Pushpavalli a suitor who “doesn’t even mind that you are chubby.” But aside from a fleeting glimpse of Pushpavalli’s reaction, the scene continues as if they’ve been discussing the weather.

“Pushpavalli is so used to [body shaming]. It’s her normal,” Suresh told me. Pushpavalli’s mother doesn’t even perceive her comments as “shaming” either. “She’s a single mom. If Pushpavalli ever told her mother ‘I am sad you body-shamed me,’ she’d probably say, ‘What? Why do you have such luxuries?’” Pushpavalli’s mother is consumed with marrying off her daughter so that she is not perceived as a profound parental failure. The mother is grey — just like Pushpavalli.

Pushpavalli is neither passive nor a victim. She has agency and weaponizes her insecurities to get her way, in increasingly unsavory ways. One of Rao’s key conditions for joining the team was the non-glorification of stalking. “In the writers’ room, we all agree that Pushpavalli is the antihero. We are going to treat her badly,” Rao told me, of their intention to make the character pay for her misdeeds. And while the writers are guided by their principles — Rao often functions as a moral barometer — they don’t foist it on the audience, preferring a show-don’t-tell approach. As director, Rao trained a constant camera on Suresh, teasing out what was needed to make Pushpavalli both endearing and problematic. “In every episode and season, she pays a price. We constantly make Pushpavalli pay the price because she blurs lines a lot. And that’s not fair, and that’s not right.”

The consequences of her misdeeds are in sharp focus in the much darker second season. We see Pushpavalli for exactly who she is: manipulative, narcissistic, reckless, and toxic. Empathizing with her becomes impossible. In one scene, Pushpavalli garners her boss Pankaj's sympathy by lying that her fiancé, Vidyut, is ashamed of her body. "How twisted is she to do that?" asked Suresh. "And how normal is it for Pankaj to be like, 'I totally get [Vidyut]. If I had to touch [Pushpavalli], even I'd feel ashamed.'"

DeadAnt's Rawal admires this "delicious character" and the risk that Suresh took with playing her. "It's a solid example of the kind of very real characters you can explore and far you can push ideas, especially at a time when streaming platforms are gagging for shows that are different," Rawal said. She is also optimistic about the future for avant-garde storytellers. "It's a good time to bet on your wildest idea, because chances are you can make it happen in the new world where Bollywood isn't gatekeeping the content yet and talent is prioritized."

Suresh's unapologetic manner has rightfully turned her into an industry icon. "Some people still think in terms of giving extra points to someone who has achieved a level of success despite being a woman, despite coming from a certain background, despite not conforming, despite not fitting into the 'ideal body type' — whatever that means," said Rawal. "You'd imagine that's exhausting, but between her work and no-nonsense confidence, she has always found ways to shut that down, at least within her sphere of influence. Won't give me a role where I'm in the lead because I'm not your regular manic pixie girl? No sweat, I'll just make my own show, put myself in the lead, and have you wailing for Season 3. Good for her!"

Pushpavalli, set in Bangalore, also pushes back against the portrayal of South Indians as a monolith. Dialogue flits among English — the main language — Hindi, Tamil, and Kannada. "Enough of the '*aiyyo rama*' culture," Suresh told me. "And enough of underestimating North Indian audiences. Right?" Suresh

credits Rao for her commitment to representation. “Debbie is very particular about language, skin color, and body type,” she said. “We can’t just have fair people, skinny people. That’s very off. When we made season one, we didn’t think anyone would watch it. We’re learning representation with every season. If I get to write a season three, representation will be an even bigger aspect.”

Pushpavalli has, however, received criticism for failing to portray caste with sensitivity. For instance, T Boi (Ashok Pathak) is a tea stall owner who delivers chai to both the children’s library where Pushpavalli works and the office where the object of her obsession, Nikhil, works. Pushpavalli pays T Boi to do her dirty work, like passing along information about Nikhil to her, but treats him terribly, often taking out her rage on him. Suresh claims that Pushpavalli’s treatment of T Boi is not caste-based, but prompted by Pushpavalli’s own suffering and bitterness.

The best comedians hold a mirror to the worst of society, as is evidenced by comedians such as Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, and Eddie Murphy. “However, the young comedy scene in India has not matured enough to offer a humorous critique of the social system that Dalit humor easily lives off,” Dalit scholar Suraj Yengde, author of *Caste Matters*, writes. “If you look at the comedy of Black comedians, it is unapologetic,” Yengde told me. “It’s radical, it’s political, it’s deeply meaningful, and it doesn’t contradict the values of Black liberation. It’s a swell way of presenting your emotions in a way where one actually consumes [something], more than just laughing. For the Indian comedy scene to do that, first of all, you need Dalits,” said Yengde with a chuckle. “We need to create more spaces for Dalits, because, once Dalit comedy comes to the fore, the Indian entertainment industry and Indian public life will change for the better.”

Suresh herself is in the fraught space of reckoning with her privilege, coming across as both self-aware and defensive, off-the-cuff and cautious, during our chat. Like the very woman she portrays, she is grey. “I try to keep a constant check on myself, and I don’t mind swallowing my words or saying sorry,” Suresh told me, crediting fellow-writer Shaikh for shining a light on her caste

privilege. “We have constant conversations about this, and I learn so much. Here I was thinking I don’t have any privileges, and then I realize ‘oh fuck. I do.’”

Perhaps the critique is working. In *Don’t Tell Amma*, released after she’d written two seasons of *Pushpavalli*, Suresh identifies her caste privilege as she jokes about selling blood. “You know how much money I’ll get for O+ Brahmin blood?” she asks in the show. “In fact, my plan was to take any blood and sell it as Brahmin blood — it’s the same anyway.” She hops across the stage saying, “Oh casteism, we started it...we are the pillars! Might as well make money out of our delusion!”

Suresh still has so much more she wants to probe. “I was in my 30s when I realized what an entertaining family I have,” she told me. “If you think I’ve finished exploring stories about them, or my childhood, you’re so wrong! I have content for the next 20 years.” I ask how they’ve reacted to her success. “I hadn’t told them for the longest time,” she said, although they know now and have watched her show. “No one is addressing it though. That’s how we cope, by avoiding!”

These days, Suresh is cooking up ideas for three new shows. One is a crime thriller. The next is what Sumukhi calls a “butt-clench comedy” and the third builds on her mother’s 20s. “You know how Leslie Knope organizes the harvest festival in *Parks and Recreation*? Leslie asks herself: ‘What if I am the woman who put together a harvest festival and then did nothing?’” she told me. “I don’t want to be that girl. I don’t want to be the girl that did *Pushpavalli* and then nothing. I’m so scared of that. I want to do more.”

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