



Sharmila Ganesan-Ram | TNN

HARDLY NEWS

Last week, West Indian cricket captain Darren Sammy gave many Tamil wives a great reason to nag. Why, they griped, couldn't their husbands perform the 'sandhyavandanam' (a daily religious ritual that every Tamil Brahmin boy is expected to fulfill after his thread ceremony) when someone like Sammy did it regularly? The rant was triggered by a photograph of the Saint Lucian skipper sitting cross-legged on the floor in a half-folded veshti, sporting a holy thread and three caste lines on his forehead, and holding a brass vessel in one hand. The accompanying story established Sammy as an astute Tamil Iyer boy whose maternal uncle, Ambi mama, vouched for his religious discipline.

If only the women had gone beyond the cricketer's confusing surname or simply read the disclaimer below the "news report", their husbands would not be holding their paunches and smuggering at them right now. For, the widely shared rumour about Sammy's South Indian roots—which even resulted in a temporary elevation of self-esteem in some Iyers—was perpetrated by a news satire website called *The Unreal Times*.

With its fake news reports, *The Unreal Times* is one among dozens of portals on

line ventures that include *Faking News*, *Netes That Matters Not* and certain Facebook pages that are now actively involved in the pursuit of news satire. Though not quite as popular or effective as the internationally acclaimed *The Onion*, whose recent fake Obama magazine cover fooled even *The New York Times*, these nascent Indian parody websites try various gim-

Three of the fake news reports by *Faking News* can boast this glory. The most popular was one titled 'Unable to attract any girl, frustrated man sues Axe', which was reprinted by mainstream English dailies and leading news portals in India and even discussed on local FM stations in the Middle East and USA as genuine news. The website's other compliments came in the form of stories such as 'Men talking loudly on the mobile phone

Web of

News satire websites are gradually catching on in India. Some of their 'reports' have fooled even the mainstream media

micks, from announcing how "most roadside hawkers won't consume their own food" to manufacturing news about a "fairness cream for newborns" in their bid to get there. The last story, in fact, saw *Faking News* flooded with enquiries from readers asking where they could buy the cream.

But it's not only lay readers who fall for the claptrap—the mainstream media has been known to have bought it as well and published it.

have smaller penises" and "Unable to figure out Google Wave, youngster kills himself" that were believed to be true and published.

For *Faking News* editor Rahul Roushan, a former journalist who goes by the pseudonym Pagal Patrakar, this should be corroboration of what he believes a good parody news piece is all about: "relevant to the readers and making a point while being funny and humorous." "It can't be funny or absurd



TRUE LIES

TWO AND A HALF MEN A still from the parody video titled Mannohan Singham; (below) West Indian skipper Darren Sammy as an Iyer man

for the sake of it," he says. Tanay Sukumar of *Netes That Matters Not* lists social commentary based on keen observation, constructive sarcasm and creative imagination as the ingredients of a good news satire piece.

For IIM alumni C S Krishna and Karthik Laxman, it was "boredom" that saw them launch their portal *The Unreal Times*: the duo was doing work for the BJP's Yashwant Sinha on an alternate budget for India, one that was

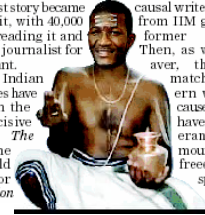
of course not presented in the public domain. To distract themselves from the "mentally draining" work, they wrote a piece on "how dropping money bags from the sky was the best way to implement a direct cash transfer program for poverty alleviation". It was received well and now, besides the Darren Sammy story, their website also boasts virals such as the piece on a CNN broadcast journalist mistakenly interview-

ing Bollywood actor Imran Khan instead of the Pakistani cricketer of the same name. The last story became a monster hit, with 40,000 Pakistanis reading it and berating the journalist for being ignorant.

However, Indian satire websites have yet to match the brilliant, incisive humour of *The Onion*. The reasons could be many—for one, *The Onion*

has a dedicated, professional writing staff while content providers here are largely causal writers who range from IIM graduates to former journalists.

Then, as writers here aver, they cannot match up to western websites because "westerners have a greater tolerance for humour and greater freedom of speech" which India singu-



A parody video titled Mannohan Singham, which superimposed the stoic Mannohan's face on Ajay Devgan's, and showed him in a number of stunts destroying inflation and corruption, had Congress workers up in arms

larly lacks. For instance, *The Unreal Times*' parody video titled Mannohan Singham, which superimposed the stoic Mannohan's face on Ajay Devgan's and showed him in a number of stunts destroying inflation and corruption, had Congress workers up in arms. Some even filed complaints with cyber crime cells, stating that the video had objectionable content. "It was ironic," says Laxman. "While at one end, some people abused us for being Congress supporters, these Congress guys actually accused us of being derogatory."

The future of such currently self-funded websites includes multimedia content, audio-spoofs and mock interviews which they hope to achieve by wooing investors. "We can be on par with westerners if we make as much fun of ourselves and society as they do with their politicians, media and celebrities," says Sukumar. Tamilians can start by forgiving Darren Sammy.