

The Trend of Political Memes in India: A Tool for Discourse, Diss and Dissemination

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Abstract:

Social media has proved to be an effective medium of communication in this digital age. Social media has given a new meaning and dimension to the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression, being a medium that is widely accessible and impactful in reaching audiences worldwide. One emerging and popular element of the virtual space has been memes. Memes are basically iconic imagery based upon viral pop culture references that are used to indicate a message in a satirical manner on a given topic in text, image, or video format. Netizens have evolved the usage of memes from cracking lame apolitical jokes to being used for socio-political commentary. Their usage in the online domain is gaining popularity and getting recognition from even formal institutions and organizations. A meme is seen today as a legit opinion being expressed on the internet, and these opinions might even have strong political undertones in certain cases. The current research paper will try to understand the trend of memes as a modern-day digital phenomenon in India and their usage as a tool for expressing political opinions and creating awareness through different social media platforms by individuals and organizations alike. The paper will also examine the changes being observed in the style of political memes from being mediocre to dank in their content, which at times, can be inappropriate.

Keywords: Memes, Politics, Social Media, Opinions, Internet

Introduction

Comedy as a genre has been an integral part of human interactions and expression through vivid mediums. The purpose of this genre is to generate humour, which may be intentional or unintentional. Comedy is presented in different forms, such as slapstick, dark comedy, romantic comedy, and parody. Satire is also one of the most interesting facets of the genre. The Cambridge Dictionary defines satire as “a way of criticizing people or ideas in a humorous way” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Satire is a unique form of expressing opinions that can be critical, with a subtle humour. While its usage in communication may be low, it nonetheless creates a very strong impact on the audience, resulting in its popularity. The same idea

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resonates in the case of memes, as crafting them follows the same principles of satire: being critical and humorous.

Richard Dawkins, a British evolutionary biologist, first coined the term 'meme', in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins, in an interview with *Vice* (2018), defined memes as “the cultural equivalent of a gene... anything that you can say spreads through the population in a cultural way” (Vice, 2018). “Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (Dawkins, 1976, p. 192). The definition of a meme has, however, evolved since then, with a much broader scope and greater utility. In the twenty-first century, memes have turned into a form of visual communication. According to Holoatiuk (2020), memes are “something intangible (idea, image, concept, association, opinion, style of behaviour, phrase, sounds, etc.), in any way (verbally, non-verbally, virtually), transmitted from person to person and that ultimately can become material” (p. 72).

Milosavljević (2020) states that although memes may not have a defined function, their purpose may be entertainment or the expression of opinions. Internet memes are seen as a modern phenomenon, a product of the evolution of internet culture. In today's digital world, social media apps, primarily Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), and WhatsApp, have proved to be virtual spaces where memes are generated and shared amongst the network of users on the same lines as observed by Milosavljević. Memes can address diverse topics, such as sports, society, and politics, in a “pithy way” (The Hindu, 2016). Internet memes conveying political opinions have found new ground and importance amongst internet users in India. Internet memes have democratized social commentary (Jose, 2018).

News Memefied

With the internet a powerful source of trending topics and news, people today are better informed about major events occurring across the world. News channels have not remained the exclusive medium for news transmission. Every user on the internet serves this purpose by sharing live events and trending them in the news. Such social commentary on social media can also be seen in non-serious, informal forms, such as memes. “Issues which are sidelined by the media, gain a presence in memes and bring forward political issues not highlighted by other sources of news dissemination” (Rastogi & Kashyap, 2019, p. 47). Memes indeed provide a creative space to respond to socio-political happenings around us through trending pop culture references and, in the process, keep topics relevant among people. The 2016 Demonetization story in India can serve as an example. The 8th November 2016 address to the nation by the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, announcing the demonetization of Rs. 500 and Rs. 1000 currency notes, resulted in

chaos and anxiety amongst citizens, but at the same time, in a frenzy, a series of jokes and memes were launched upon the sudden announcement of the change. These reactionary memes expressed what people thought about the demonetization. (The News Minute, 2016; Indian Express, 2016) People used the internet as a space to talk about the latest currency notes, black money, and long ATM queues, all through the lens of memes.

Even the parliamentary proceedings are lately being used for meme purposes by netizens, as peculiar speeches and acts of MPs in the House, such as Rahul Gandhi hugging the Prime Minister, have been made into comic content by various social media handles. “The flow and distribution of memes have become almost instantaneous with real-life events to the extent that sometimes it becomes difficult to decipher whether the memes originated in response to a political event or vice versa” (Gupta, 2023, p.17). Fatima (2023) describes how social media’s advancement and the entertainment value it brought resulted in the sidelining of newspapers and magazines as media. These democratic digital alternatives served as platforms for light content creation, which eventually boosted the popularity of satire and comedy.

The Battle of Wits

Traditionally, digital media spaces such as television channels and print media in the form of publications, magazines, and newspapers were the platforms where political parties had the scope and opportunity to engage in debates and discussions with their rivals and contemporaries and spread their respective political agendas to the viewers and readers. Adding a new dimension to digital media, social media, with the rise of apps like X, has become a new and more effective digital channel to amplify ideas. Every major political party and leader today makes sure they have a presence on social media to engage viewers and eventually, in the process, win over voters. And as part of their strategic digital campaigns, political parties and leaders in India have joined and embraced the meme culture by engaging in banter against rival political parties and leaders using meme references. Digital media in the form of social media gives political marketers a platform to establish a political marketplace where government officers, political parties, and candidates can make use of social media to sway public opinion in a controlled manner (Safiullah et al., 2017).

Political parties in India are banking on memes to communicate agendas and propaganda. There have been various instances where the leading political parties in India have used humour and wit to take a dig at their opponents. The Defence Minister of India, Rajnath Singh, while addressing a public rally in Ghaziabad during election campaigning for the 2024 polls, picked up the viral ‘Moye Moye’ meme phrase in his speech and, hinting at the rival Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), said, “Desh ki janta



moye moye kar degi”. (Hindustan Times, 2024). Similarly, in November 2017, the X handle @yuvadesh, managed by Youth Congress volunteers, shared a photo of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi along with the POTUS, Donald Trump, and Prime Minister Theresa May of the United Kingdom. The image poked fun at PM Modi’s “chaiwala” past and was shown as unable to pronounce the term “meme.” (The Tribune, 2017). The X post got severe backlash from the supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party, with many criticizing it as being in poor taste. The Congress distanced itself from it, saying the party disapproves of and rejects such humour (Moneycontrol, 2017). The post was eventually deleted, and the Indian Youth Congress and the social media handler of Yuva Desh apologized for it.

Such witty tactics, by using memes formally and informally by parties and politicians, instantly find a place on trending charts on social media, making it the talk of the town. The possibility of adopting meme strategies may thus successfully win attention and votes, especially from the millennial crowd, or may backfire at times if not used with amicable intent.

Following the global trend, social media has been increasingly used by Indian political actors for routine political communication between elections to provide unmediated and direct communication to connect leaders and citizenry, and to re-energize the political landscape in the country (Rao, 2019, para 1).

The Delhi legislative elections of 2020 serve as a classic example where all three leading political parties—the Indian National Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the Aam Aadmi Party—were constantly involved in social media campaigns by using memes to woo the millennial voters and, at the same time attack and counterattack the rival parties in contention (Hindustan Times, 2020). Ultimately, AAP, which was at the forefront of the meme war, emerged victorious in the elections, and some credit went to the social media profiles of the party. Abhijeet Dipke, who was behind all these creative memes, said in an interview with Business Insider that “this time we thought about the millennial generation—the first-time voters—and how can we attract them... Youngsters started noticing our work because of all these references” (Business Insider 2020).

Men of Meme Culture

A society shows signs of maturity and progress when tolerance exists for ideas and opinions. The same context can be given to the idea of memes that are part of the larger virtual public space and have received acceptance from public figures in India, including politicians. There have been instances when political leaders have sportingly embraced this meme culture in India. In September 2023, meme pages and social

media accounts in India started a trend of “Melodi” memes after the G20 Summit held in India in 2023. These memes were a result of the candid interactions at the summit between Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The leaders were romantically picturized by memers in their content, with romantic Bollywood tracks playing in the background. While some saw the memes as light-hearted humour, others perceived them to be inappropriate. However, in December 2023, the Italian Prime Minister posted a selfie with PM Modi taken during the COP28 climate action summit in Dubai, with the caption “Good Friends at COP28 #Melodi” to which even PM Modi retweeted, expressing delight about the friendly meet. Meloni’s post got 2.96 lakh likes and 23.9 million impressions in less than 24 hours and broke the internet. (Indian Express, 2023). This can be observed as diplomacy that’s in process, where mutual friendship between the leaders of two nations is being showcased to the world. India, as a rising nation, is strengthening its "global status" through public diplomacy by effectively using social media for diplomatic communications (Palit, 2019).

In the state of Goa, in India, during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chief Minister of the state, Dr. Pramod Sawant, through video messages and press conferences, used to utter, in repetition, a phrase in Konkani language, “Bhivpachi Garaz Na!” which translates to “No need to worry!” as a way of consoling the distressed citizens during the pandemic. The ordinary phrase got extraordinary attention on the internet, and amongst the people, it was used as a viral meme reference among the Goan digital content creators’ community. Ever since then, Dr. Sawant has used it like a catchphrase, which is a very unlikely thing to happen in a political profession, but the use of it has definitely left an impact on the public. Even while ending the annual budget speech in the year 2022, Chief Minister Sawant made sure to utter this catchy line (Times of India, 2022). Such moves prove to be great strategies for politicians, as political survival also depends on cheeky rhetoric, which can start viral trends in today’s digital age. With the above two examples, it can be observed that sometimes the real charismatic personality and the cult following of a leader may give rise to them being popular virtually through memes, for example, Narendra Modi, while sometimes it may be the other way around when random meme surges help boost one’s virtual as well as real-life political prominence, as seen in the case of Dr. Pramod Sawant.

Ideas of Dissent or Defame?

Like jokes, memes also have the tendency to displease at times. Unapologetic extreme opinions being transformed into memes can be problematic because they can hurt the sentiments of individuals and communities. Derogatory memes defaming and abusing under the pretext of being “dank” have become a common trend on the internet these days. Experts have warned that such humour that is insensitive and



mocking can disrupt society if not monitored (Business Standard, 2019). However, this notion of what constitutes humour can be very subjective. “Policing the boundary between hate speech and humour is a difficult task.” (Singh, 2018). Thus, there is a very thin line between a meme being either funny or offensive, due to the fact that such content has created political controversies in the past and that such online posts have come under the radar of authorities for allegedly being derogatory and offensive.

Priyanka Sharma, a BJP Yuva Morcha leader, was arrested on May 10, 2019, by the West Bengal Police for sharing a morphed image of the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, upon the iconic and viral Priyanka Chopra look at the 2019 Met Gala held in New York. Under Sections 66A and 67A of the Information Technology (IT) Act and for defamation under Section 500 of the Indian Penal Code, Sharma was arrested and sent to judicial custody for 14 days (Hindustan Times, 2019). Later, the vacation bench of the Supreme Court, comprising justices Indira Banerjee and Sanjiv Khanna, granted Sharma bail with a directive to issue an apology for the act. Justice Sanjiv Khanna said the court would not have directed an apology if it had been a common man who shared the meme. “When it’s a political worker doing it, the insinuation has a different meaning,” he stated (Indian Express, 2019).

Political satire at times can become nasty with personal jibes, which can be seen through parody sketches on television programs and comic strips in newspapers. The same edgy humour has transcended into the world of memes, where hate, misinformation, and humour are being intentionally intermixed by social media channels and users with agendas. A study by Garimella and Eckles (2020) analyzing image-based misinformation on WhatsApp in India found that memes having “fake quotes or statistics” comprised 30 percent of the total misinformation image dataset of the research. Fake news, propaganda of hate, and trolling have been some of the recent trends that can be seen disseminated through memes. As Khanna (2022) puts it, “meme strategies are being used for propaganda to reinforce radical ideologies, nationalistic identities and discriminatory stereotypes, hyper-produced and circulated via troll ‘factories’ and bots that tout propaganda as genuine-appearing propaganda content.”

Conclusion

Political memes have definitely added a new, vibrant dimension to the existing political commentary setup in India. Gupta (2023) states that the political expressions of individuals and groups are indeed shaped by memes. In contrast, Kulkarni (2017) observes that memes have not had a paradigm shift in terms of political discourse, with them being just a small part of the changing medium. The degree to which an internet meme impacts political activities will be dependent upon factors such as the type of audience: urban-rural,

educated-illiterate, Boomers-Millennials. Political memes can be observed as an equivalent of the cartoonist column of newspapers: in terms of content, they are humorous, but their objectives are to give a political message. But memes can be created easily by anyone, unlike cartoons, so they can be misused in any manner (Yadav 2019). With the emergence of the internet as a significant battlefield, memes are being used as powerful weapons to create distrust (Adler 2018).

The rise of meme culture in India's politics surely helped to attract eyeballs. The culture can even prove to create participatory attitudes, particularly amongst the Millennials and the Gen Z population during elections. Engaging in political meme creation or sharing such content provides an opportunity for any user of the internet to be part of the politics of the time and realize socio-political interests that are relatable through memes. Thus, based upon the above discussion, it can be summarized that the consequence of a political meme in both virtual and real-world settings is determined by the context of the content. It may be purely for satire and humour, to inform or misguide the audience, or to shape people's perceptions and attitudes towards any particular thing into those of love or hate.

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