



Analyzing Political Memes in the Light of the CAA Bill as the Voice of Accord and Discord

Neethu Mariya Shaji¹, Sneha Ann Mathai²

¹Department of English, Christ (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India

²Department of English, Christ (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India

ABSTRACT

In the present tech-savvy world, political memes have become the means of political commentary and India currently being the brewing pot for the rising action, holds the center stage for hosting these political memes. The CAA bill, which keeps the nation on its toes, is a matter of contention at the moment, thereby becoming the prime subject of the political memes that flood the internet. For these memes stand not just as mere artistic mediums that communicate information through humor and satire, but the witty outpourings of the voiceless crowd. They cater to not only the voice of dissent but also the voice of accord, an expression of protest and assertion. This research paper thus analyses how political memes have been used to communicate political satire specifically keeping in focus the emerging discord over the CAA bill. The study examines how a simple form of visual art becomes the means of protesting with or against the political establishment. A content and discourse analysis of the political memes enables to analyze how art stands as the voice of protest against politics. The research thereby establishes that political memes, which is a form of visual art, lends a voice to the voiceless mass. An art that both the voices of accord and discord employ with, thus impacting not just the political situation but the social situation as well.

Keywords: Visual Art, Political Memes, Meme Culture, CAA, Protest, Power, Political Discourse, Internet Memes

As India reels in the aftermath of the much-contended Citizenship Amendment [Act] (CAA) Bill 2019, the beacon of art once again shines bright in the most politically charged moment. The creative spirit of the people not only made its expression through myriad slogans, songs or poems but through their tongue-in-cheek humor, flashing not just across the cross-roads as placards but across the Internet, entwined in hundreds of hashtags as - Political Memes. But, before one ventures further into the vast understanding of the two prime subjects of this paper, a background study enables to comprehend and perceive the same in greater clarity.

When Richard Dawkins in 1976 coined the term ‘memes’ what he meant was, as - ‘a unit of cultural transmission or imitation that spreads from person to person (Dawkins, 2016). It is to this that he attributes three key features: Copy- fidelity, fecundity and longevity which make a meme truly successful. To explain in Dawkins words, copy-fidelity can be identified by a strong core idea that remains intact despite the numerous variations that a meme can have. While fecundity is characterized by rapid replication, followed by a sustainable replication pattern on a long-term basis which is referred to as longevity. While these three features form key characteristics of a successful meme, one can consider the same in the context of political memes. To define political memes, one needs to examine the very definition of Internet Memes (IM) which Shifman defines as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (Shifman,2013). When Shifman says that Internet Memes (IM) are ‘units of popular culture’ looking into context of politics, any day to day political situation or any ideological position which finds their medium of communication through memes becomes a ‘Political Meme’-

which is later circulated, imitated and transformed by a certain human agency thereby creating a shared cultural experience that is a consolidated collective experience.

As one defines the medium one cannot ignore the very subject, which for this paper is CAA Bill (2019). The Citizenship Act is no novel introduction into the legislative body of India but has a history which traces back to 1955, which was amended over the course of time by the Citizenship (Amendment) Acts of 1986, 1992, 2003, 2005, 2015 and 2019. In 1986 the Amendment Act restricted the citizenship by birth which was acquitted in the Citizenship Act of 1995, rather it stated that to require citizenship of the country at least one parent had to be an Indian citizen. But, the 2003 amendment further levied restrictions to once citizenship by requiring that a parent could not be an illegal immigrant. Along with this, the 2003 amendment also mandated the Government of India to construct a National Register of Citizens (NCR). The recent one being the 2019 amendment which provided an easier path to citizenship for persecuted selected minorities, - the Hindus, the Sikhs, the Buddhists, the Jains, the Parsi and Christians from the neighboring Muslim-majority countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan who entered India before the 31st day of December 2014. But unlike the other amendments, the 2019 Amendment of the Citizenship Act arose large- scale protests across the nation. For with the amends made, the big question arises as to why were the provision extended to people based on their religion which is ideally against the very fabric of the Preamble. Having said that further questions rise as to why only six religions are considered and not Muslims and only coming from the three countries stated.

With the fierce protests raging across the country against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, the reasons remain several across the geographical length of the country. While some protest seeing the secular identity of the country in danger, others do so in fear of loosing their linguistic and cultural identity. Many hold the opinion that as much as CAA itself

may seem innocuous but the Act combined with the proposed nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC) becomes an aid to ostracize the Muslim population of the country. Having said this, one cannot shut an eye to the flip side of the coin which makes peace with the Bill and acts as a voice of support to the same. Thereby exhibiting how as much as voices of discord rage across the country so does the voices of affirmations and support.

Having the background being set, it now becomes vital to express the intended purpose of the paper which is to examine how the voices of assent and dissent in regard to political situation find their medium through various political memes across different avenues. These political memes serve not just as mere campaigning tool or a PR's magic trick from the magic hat to engage the audience but also as a powerful medium to express the voice of the common mass engaging in political discussion. Humor being their vehicle, political memes serve scathing jabs on those in power, serving as a platform to critique and condemn them, thereby making known as to what the people at grass root have also to say about the matters of importance. Chen noted the same in his study, where memes become as agents of participatory media, enabling people to shift from passive culture consumption to an active democratic culture production. (Chen, 2012). For most memes are situated in the day to day mundane actions, and aim at a social and political critique of the same through parody or humorous appropriation (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005).

Plunging deeper into the study, political memes that made an appearance during the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019 also speak the same narrative. Taking from the different popular culture and reframing them specifically according to the context at hand, these CAA memes provide a first exposure to the topical 'hot' and debated dilemma. For such an engagement not only mix critical commentary with absurd meta-comments but also

guarantees the involvement of the people, of the myriad opinions of the nation (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017).

For this study a total of five random samples of political memes are taken into consideration keeping in mind the ease of availability and convenience. The selected five memes using a content and discourse analysis are analyzed, thereby enabling to decode not just the manifest content but the latent content of the memes. The analysis is done in two ways, firstly, the memes will be analyzed by searching just for mentions of specific words within the four categories (Religion, Governance pattern, Eminent people and Ideology) and not taking the context into consideration, which would we done so in the second way of analysis. In the second way not only would the context be analyzed, but the content, the color palette, the emotions referred and the latent ideology will also be looked into.

Following the first method of analysis a total of seven words can be selected to represent the four broad categories stipulated above (Religion, Governance Pattern, Ideology and Eminent People refereed to). Table1 below displays the words chosen to represent the respective categories meaning that the five memes selected, have the following words and reflect the ideas of the four categories.

Table1: Categories for meme - analysis

RELIGION	GOVERNANCE PATTERN	IDEOLOGY	EMINENT PEOPLE
Hindu	Fascists/Fascism	Nazi/ Nazism	Hitler
Muslim			Narendra Modi
			Mamata Banerjee

Looking at the table, and only looking at the selected words under the over-arching categories one can deduce how the text/data that is being analyzed is indeed political in nature and have references to religious identities coupled with the very governance pattern and

ideologies of governance. The main religious identities to be in focus come out to be Hinduism and Islam which is coupled with the fascist regime invoking back to the past of the Nazi rule thereby also instilling the images of genocide associated with it. While this coding gives a vague and surface level understanding, but it makes clear the very categories that the memes are dealing in. Diving into the second way of analysis, a detailed understanding of each meme removes the vagueness and in turn enables to not only scratch the surface of the affair but to understand the latent content of the text.

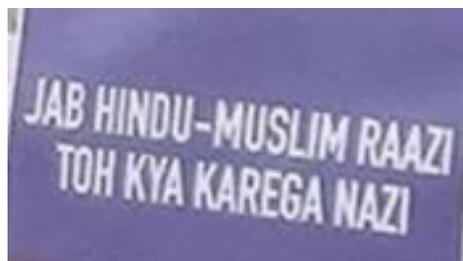


Figure1. *Jab Hindu-Muslim Raazi Toh Kya Karega Nazi*

Figure 1 rephrases the popular Hindi proverb 'Jab Miya Biwi Raazi Toh Kya Karega Qazi' which is reiterated as 'Jab Hindu – Muslim Raazi Toh Kya Karega Nazi'. The original proverb is a popularly used, which often finds its utterances in the different media, film being one of them. The film 'Haathi Mere Saathi' has a reference to the proverb, thereby reinstating it to be a part of popular culture and hence being employed in memes, for as Shifman defines 'memes are units of popular culture.' Looking closely into the retold version of the proverb, the original words are replaced by words like 'Hindu' 'Muslim' and 'Nazi'. All the three words are words of significance for the first two talk about the religious identity of an individual while the third one refers to a specific past, a specific identity. A past where not just millions of people of a certain minority community lost their lives (Jews) but also a past of the fact that 70 million people of the majority race (Germans) were convinced that it was necessary to commit Holocaust for the greatness and goodwill of their country. This aligns to the present state of

affairs where the majority of Indian population deem mob lynching's to be justified. A supposed Hindu Rashtra ought not to have people of other religious identity. But, revolt against this very notion is this political meme, showcasing how not all have the same thought process as the government in power. The meme stands as a voice of dissent against the very notion of acquitting citizenship based on once religion, for nor the Hindus or the Muslims have any problem and agree to live in harmony, thereby what could 'Nazis - tic' ideology do to them.

The emotions that can be noted in the proverb is that of challenge and questioning – 'Toh Kya Karega' thereby daringly expressing the essence of harmony and brotherhood, against the dividing forces.



Figure2. *Orange is the New Black*

Figure 2 is another political meme that takes its reference from another popular culture source. The original phrase is in fact “_____ is the new black,” where the blank is filled in by something that suddenly becomes the ‘in’ thing of the time. While the phrase is often used to refer to anything, it was originally particularly relevant to fashion. Used repeatedly in the 1980s to indicate the trend color which temporarily displaced the color black position in fashion. In the present context, the phrase once again caught the limelight owing the popular web series titled the same as ‘Orange is the New Black’. Looking at the phrase in the political context, the very colors take an entirely different meaning in themselves. As much as orange becomes the ‘in’ colour in comparison to black but it becomes so owing only to the meaning of orange in

the political context where orange is predominantly the color of the extreme right wing – The BJP, the RSS and the very color the entire Hindutva ideology is painted in. The significance of the color orange to these parties also lies in Hindu mythologies referring to ‘vermilion’(sindhur), and to the many mythologies associated with the same. Having said this, the political meme yet stands as a political critique of the ruling government by reinstating that all the other colors fade out and what stands as the prime colour is Orange the colour of the Hindutva Propogandist movement.

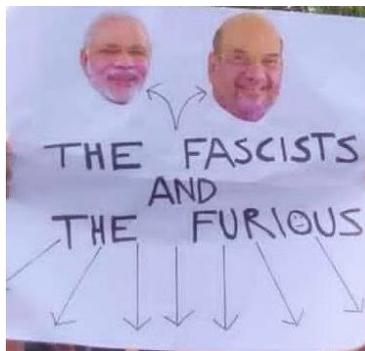


Figure3. *The Fascists and The Furious*

Figure 3 is yet another example of political memes that takes its reference yet again from the popular media/culture. The original phrase refers to the popular movie title - 'The Fast and the Furious', which is reiterated as 'The Fascists and the Furious'. Here the two words are of great intensity and weightage. As soon as the word 'Fascists' are established with the headshots of the two great influencers of the government in power, the words like dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition, and strong regulation of the society and of the economy are not far away from the political scene. Mussolini himself defines fascism as the "complete merger of the state and the corporate power" where the corporate fund the state, and in turn, the rulers allocate their funds to help corporates with the taxpayer's honest hard-earned money. If these terms foreshadow as the early signs of a fascist regime, then many of it can be seen in the Indian context. From the regulation of the media, the suppression of any kinds of

opposition, to intertwining of religion and governance. While all of this speaks of the ‘Fascists’, the very emotion of the meme can be recorded in the Furious, which may refer to the fury on behalf of the government itself, levying out their atrocities and brutality by the hands of the police force on the people or it can also refer to the very sentiment of the protesters who stand against the fascist regime. This meme calls out against the very power structure of the government expressing their dissent, using the vehicle of humor and agency of memes.



Figure4. (Hitler holding baby Narendra Modi – a Lion King reference)

Figure 4 is a perfect amalgamation of popular culture reference, the manifest content and the latent content. As the picture, is viewed the very first reference that come into one’s mind is the Lion King scene – where young Simba is presented to the animals residing in Pride Rock. But contrary to the cute, innocent representation, this holds sinister forewarnings, for history stands witness to the great massacre of an entire race owing to the persuasion and dictatorship of one man, who led 70 million others to think in the same way, removing an ounce of humanity and invoking all but a sense of false pride, enmity and irrational fear driving people to do the incomprehensible atrocity. The picture represents the Hitler holding a baby Narendra Modi - a ruler presenting its successor. While as much as a danger is the successor who comes later, so are the dangers of vicious cycle that may repeat itself. The subtle symbols of the Nazi

band and the lotus in the hand of young Narendra Modi are symbolic of The Nazi Party and the Bhartiya Janta Party thereby referring to what was and what is, and to what it would become. Further analyzing the meme, the color palette also is specific to the political party- with a bright orange background, characteristic of the Hindu Rashtra as the Hindu Nationalists deems it to be. Thus, the voice of alarm rings loud, trying to alert the people of what is to be come if one doesn't act immediately.

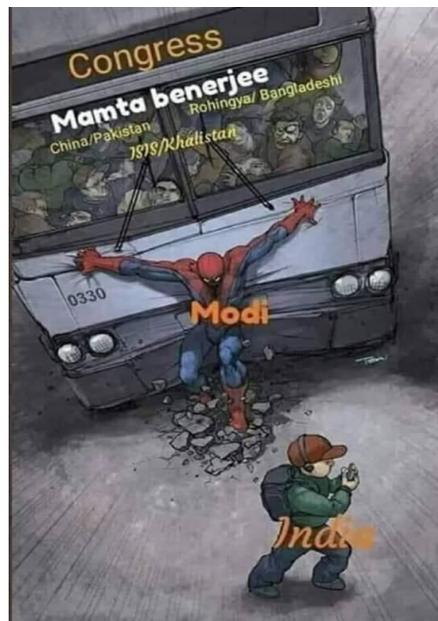


Figure5. *Narendra Modi protecting India against the supposed threats of the country*

Figure 5 is a political meme that ventures into the other side of the coin and expresses the voice of those who support the government. For as shown in the meme, the Hero who ought to save the common man is the one who faces the brunt of the countless threats that surround the innocent civilian. The hero – Spiderman is the Prime Minister Narendra Modi who saves the common folk against the threats of those who seek to harm the nation. Be it the schemes of the opposition (Congress, Mamata Banerjee) or the external threats that pose to take the country down. Such political memes stand as the voice of assent and express the engagement of the common folk in the realms of the big political talks.

Thus, one can clearly argue and conclude that memes have the capability to affect people's political perspectives or opinions using humor as the persuasion tool, the vehicle of achieving it.

References

- [1] Aitwani, Sanya Kumar. "Taking Internet Memes Seriously - A Literature Review." *Academia.edu - Share Research*, www.academia.edu/38491333/Taking_Internet_Memes_Seriously_-_A_Literature_Review.
- [2] Blackmore, Susan, et al. "The Power of Memes." *Scientific American*, vol. 283, no. 4, pp. 64–73. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26058899.
- [3] Börzsei, L. K. (2013). "Makes a Meme Instead: A Concise History of Internet Memes." *New Media Studies Magazine*. Retrieved from https://works.bepress.com/linda_borzsei/2/
- [4] Chagas, Viktor, et al. "Political Memes and the Politics of Memes: A Methodological Proposal for Content Analysis of Online Political Memes." *First Monday*, 4 Feb. 2019, firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7264.
- [5] Chen, C. (2012). "The creation and meaning of internet memes in 4chan: Popular internet culture in the age of online digital reproduction". *Institutions Habitus Spring*, pp. 6–19.
- [6] Dawkins, R. (2016). *The Selfish Gene*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.es/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ekonDAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=dawkins+selfish+gene&ots=kB9UYVi1Ev&sig=vuZLW3CJdlOHgpIFLYmBQBRefGg#v=onepage&q=dawkins+selfish+gene&f=false>
- [7] Deka, Kaushik. "Everything You Wanted to Know about the CAA and NRC." *India Today*, 23 Dec. 2019, www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-the-caa-and-nrc-1630771-2019-12-23.
- [8] Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2005). "Memes and affinities: Cultural replication and literacy education." Miami. Retrieved from https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/30956354/10.1.1.89.5549.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1512316865&Signature=gtaCyssyFpJFQX7YNtVNrvjHgs%3D&response-contentdisposition=inline%3Bfilename%3DMemes_and_affinities_Cultural_r
- [9] Laineste, L., & Voolaid, P. (2017). "Laughing across borders: Intertextuality of internet memes" *The European Journal of Humour Research*, vol. 4 no. 4, pg. 26. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2016.4.4.laineste>
- [10] Shifman, L. (2013). "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol.18 no. 3, pg. 362–377. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013>

[11] Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in Digital Culture*. Retrieved from https://books.google.es/books?id=cZI9AQAQBAJ&dq=memes+in+digital+culture&lr=&source=gbs_navlinks_s

Authors Biography

Neethu Mariya Shaji – A post graduate student in Christ (Deemed to be University)

(Email Id: neethu.shaji@eng.christuniversity.in)

Sneha Ann Mathai – A post graduate student in Christ (Deemed to be University)

(Email Id: sneha.mathai@eng.christuniversity.in)

Navajyoti Aug 2020