

MEMES AS A FORM OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract. Social media is a multi-sensory experience that uses aural, visual and linguistic cues to create a sense of hyper-reality. Political memes on social media have gained a tremendous amount of acceptance as a part of the cultural framework of urban India. They do not just lighten up serious political issues with a bit of humour, but also the satire inherent in them seeks to imbibe a culture of interactive communication on the political narratives of our times. This study seeks to understand how memes on social media act as a form of political discourse and seeks to study if they enable active participation and create a culture that opens up a space for discussion, debate and expression of dissent on key political issues. The present study qualitatively analyses political memes pertaining to contemporary events in Tamil Nadu politics on social media. Political memes studied focus on recent political issues which are mostly a satirical representation of political statements and actions by politicians. Their content borders on dissent against political hegemony. Findings indicate that scenes and shots from Tamil movies are an integral part of the meme culture and these memes generate positive reactions and are shared extensively. However, the commentary in terms of debates and discussions on them are minimal. Commentary on memes was either counter-hegemonic or served as reinforcement of existing political beliefs. Helping voice the public opinion and offering alternative, satirical and humourous views of political issues, memes have become an integral part of the political discourse on social media.

Keywords - *Social Media, Political Discourse, Memes, Dissent, Debate, Politics*

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Introduction

Social media, today, has gone beyond the realm of new technologies and has scaled up to become a phenomenon with a strong cultural positioning (Boyd, 2015) that touches upon major aspects of individual lives and society, at large. Lives are lived on social media; the personal, professional, political, cultural, sociological, moralistic, altruistic and intellectual facets of individuals are put out there on social media—showcased for all the world to see, share and experience. There is an ‘unprecedented supersaturation’ of life with the media (Couldry, 2015). This has led to the evolution of a world of transparency on social media (Matei, Bertino & Russell, 2015) wherein heterarchy rules over hierarchy, purports its own rules of irrelevance in the societal melting pot. The ‘open book’ climate inherent in social media also lends itself to a ‘free for all’ milieu wherein opinions are stated, not only by conglomerates and corporations, but also by individuals, who then, turn into opinion leaders, disseminating ideas and thoughts that would in turn, influence a whole bunch of individuals, who do the same unto others (Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu & Homero, 2015). And the circle of influence continues to grow wider and more prolific. This fluidity and elasticity that this medium affords seem to work seamlessly when it comes to political discourse, as well.

Social media is also a forum for discussions that are political in nature, where opinions are floated around, assimilated, analysed, accepted or dissipated (Stieglitz & Linh, 2014). In keeping with the interests and the scattered attention span of the social media audience, political discourse on social media primarily focuses on aural, visual and linguistic content that are short, crisp and laser-sharp in style. When it comes to extolling their opinions on recent political phenomenon, social media users have widely experimented with satire as a form of political expression (Jones, 2017). The ‘meme culture,’ in particular, is aptly used in social media to comment on politics. The meme, a fragment of popular culture on the web (Stryker, 2011) is a form of expression and participation of online communities (Vickery, 2014) that uses humorous viral images and videos to communicate messages through satire. Memes offer commentary on political events with doses of humour, satire and an alternative opinion.

Mememes are an integral part of the parallel universe created by the Tamil-speaking audience, who are a small but distinct part of the online space (The Hindu, 30, July 2019). Tamil mememes are mostly film-based and satirical commentaries, or sometimes even a reflection of contemporary Tamil society.

Tamil mememes with political themes have gained popularity owing to a series of upheavals that have occurred in Tamil Nadu’s Dravidian politics with the death of two political icons of Tamil Nadu—M. K. Karunanidhi and J. Jayalalithaa—and the ensuing uncertainty and political drama that seem to unfold on a daily basis (Muruganandam, 2018).

Political Mememes: Varied perspectives

Globally, mememes—especially political mememes—have become entrenched in most of the technically-forward communities, more so in places where democracy affords the voice of debate and discussion. Researchers across the world have also taken up the study of mememes to gain better understanding of mememes and their role in civil society.

According to Pew Research Center (2018), Facebook and YouTube are the most used social media sites by U.S. adults. However, younger adults aged between 18 and 24 years also use Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter. A majority of the younger social media users visit these platforms several times in a day. Kulkarni (2017), while studying memes in India found that internet memes can be considered as a tool for political discourse.

However, these political memes do not have a major effect on the voting behaviour or political decisions of people. They help frame issues in the minds of the audiences but predominantly they are considered as sources of entertainment due to the humour element present in them. Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero (2016), while studying the use of memes by political parties on Twitter during the #DEN 2015 debate, found that political memes are a careful representation of content on the Web and are based on images released on Twitter during political events. Their study ponders upon the notion that social media is a political play field based on the fact that some images and issues have a greater memetic potential than others. Surya Dewi et al (2017), while studying the #pilgubdki memes from Indonesia on Instagram found that they were used to attack political opponents. The memes go beyond being satirical and are very outspoken in nature. Memes use signs related to ethnic backgrounds, racial and religious views to attack political opponents. According to Calimbo (2016), political memes in the Philippines use an aggressive form of humour to ridicule the political elite for their undesirable qualities and practices. Political memes debunk certain political myths, deconstruct political ideologies and bring awareness on real issues behind normal events. Thus, the Filipino brand of humour, apart from being fun and entertaining, also expresses dissent against certain political thoughts and behaviours.

Ross and Rivers (2018) discuss the 'polyvocality' of memes meaning that there were a plethora of memes based on one primary political event, in this case, the 2016 election and each new meme pertaining to the above mentioned event represented a new voice or a different perspective that added to the online public discourse about the elections. The anonymity of the creators of the memes and the ability to share them virally adds to the polyvocality in terms of delivering even controversial ideas around a political event.

Sreekumar and Vadrevu (2013) discuss the potential of memes to combine playful interpersonal practices with social networking to increase political awareness. However, in order for memes to activate citizens, it should work within the bigger context of social, political and cultural order. Memes are also seen as a less serious form of political engagement. Memes, with their inherent humour, cultural resonance and as a form of personal identity, is a popular communication and entertainment culture, but as a political tool, the response to memes is still laid-back. Plevriti (2014) identified that satirical political memes were used for political criticism, for expressing creativity of users, and for encouraging critical thinking for political engagement. Political memes also have the potential to make politics accessible and inclusive to young people.

Tay (2014), while studying political humour through internet memes in the 2012 US Presidential Election, found that Hillary Clinton capitalised on internet memes for political participation. She is certainly not the first politician to capitalise on Internet memes or popular forms of political participation. Barack Obama did the same in the 2008 elections

wherein he used online tools which were used by young people. The Republicans too used LOLitics or the politics of LOL (Laugh Out Loud) but were not as well-received as their Democratic counterparts. However, memes and other forms of online humour are more about entertaining people online rather than engaging in heated political debates.

Mazambani et al (2015), while studying the influence of meme consistency and intragroup status on the spread of memes found that memes that were initiated by low-status members spread faster than memes initiated by high- or moderate-status members. Memes whose themes were consistent with those of a particular online forum were spread more frequently than those with inconsistent themes. Handayani et al (2016), while studying memes about the social condition in Bekasi with regard to social media and public opinion, found that opinions expressed in memes spoke about several social issues. Memes are used to carry political messages because the format is funny, easy-to-understand and more likely to elicit a response. The study also found that sharing or repathing the meme does not necessarily mean agreement with the message of the memes.

Theoretical Framework

German Philosopher Jürgen Habermas had brought forth the concept of the public sphere, which he describes as a virtual community that does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. A place where individuals come together to freely discuss and debate on social and political issues, which then, would help society get closer to societal or political change. The views expressed in this forum, which dwells in the no-man's land that is delicately placed between the State and the People can be conducive or opposing the norm of the land. Nevertheless, the public sphere is a discursive space where individuals and groups interact and share meanings on the issues that surround them. In this way, the public sphere seeks to influence public opinion, at large.

In today's world of new media technologies, social media has taken on the role of being the public sphere where ideas and ideologies are shared, discussed and elucidated. Memes are steadily gaining momentum as a preferred mode of communication about pressing societal and political issues in this public sphere. In this situation, it is imperative to understand the role of memes as a part of the political discourse in this very public sphere, engaging audiences with discussions, debate and dissenting views which eventually, in a large framework, may influence public opinion.

Statement of the Problem

Memes are a major form of expression in the online space. Memes function by appropriation and resistance to dominant media messages (Huntington, 2013). Memes with their satirical brand of humour showcase alternative ways of looking at the world. This is especially true when it comes to politics as politicians, political events and issues are showcased in a creative, funny and satirical manner through memes while delivering alternative or even controversial perspectives. The inherent humour in memes makes them a very popular and viral form of political commentary online. Do memes as a humorous form of political discourse go beyond being funny and entertaining and do they encourage

political discussion, debate and dissent among people in the online space? This study aims to throw light on this issue in order to better understand the role of political meme culture with regard to the volatile environment that is Tamil Nadu politics.

Research Objectives

- To assess the popularity of memes pertaining to political issues
- To examine the nature of political content and political issues discussed in memes
- To understand audiences' interaction to political memes
- To study the role of political memes in creating a culture of discussion, debate and dissent in public discourse

Research Questions

- What kind of political themes, issues and content are presented in the form of memes on Facebook?
- How do audiences engage with these political memes on Facebook?
- Are Facebook memes on politics a tool to create discussions and debates on politics?
- Can Facebook memes on politics be used as an expression of dissent?

Research Design

This study uses qualitative techniques to study political memes on Facebook and to identify their role in creating a culture of discussion, debate and dissent. The researcher has undertaken a content analysis of political memes based on Tamil Nadu politics. For this, the researcher has chosen four popular Tamil Nadu-based Facebook meme pages:

- **KaatuPoochiMemes: (General Interest Facebook Meme Page)**
 - Liked by 479,097 people
 - Followed by 477,024 people
- **Chennai Memes: (General Interest Facebook Meme Page)**
 - Liked by 1,151,590 people
 - Followed by 1,270,351 people
- **Tamil Funny and Political Memes: (Political Facebook Meme Page)**
 - 10,300 people like this
 - 10,528 people follow this
- **Tamil Political Memes: (Political Facebook Meme Page)**
 - 10,300 people like this
 - 10,528 people follow this

KaatuPoochi Memes and **Chennai Memes** are the top two (based on Facebook search - user likes and followers) general interest Facebook meme pages.

Tamil Funny and Political Memes and **Tamil Political Memes** are the top two (based on Facebook search - user likes and followers) political Facebook meme pages that cover political issues relevant to Tamil Nadu.

The rationale behind choosing the above mentioned Facebook pages are:

- The greater the number of likes and followers, the larger the traffic to the above mentioned Facebook meme pages, which translates into greater visibility
- Facebook was chosen as the primary platform as the virality of social media affords the sharing of the Facebook memes on platforms like Instagram and Whatsapp.
- Two popular general interest Facebook pages were chosen because the reach and visibility of general interest Facebook meme pages is very high when compared to politics based Facebook meme pages. As general interest Facebook meme pages also randomly post politically themed memes, it is important to understand how they are also part of political discourse in Tamil Nadu and also to compare them with politics-based Facebook meme pages.

The duration of the study was for a period of one month (November 2018). For the content analysis, two days of the week were randomly selected (Wednesday and Saturday) and the content of the above mentioned Facebook meme pages were analyzed for those particular days, along with the likes, shares and comments to understand how memes are a part of the political discourse in Tamil Nadu.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A qualitative study using the content analysis approach was undertaken on four Facebook meme pages that focus on Tamil Nadu based themes. The pages chosen were:

- KaatuPoochi Memes (General Interest Facebook Meme Page)
- Chennai Memes (General Interest Facebook Meme Page)
- Tamil Funny and Political Memes (Political Facebook Meme Page)
- Tamil Political Memes (Political Facebook Meme Page)

Table 1. Number of Memes on Political Issues

Meme Pages	Memes - General	Memes - Political	General%	Political%
Tamil Nadu Funny and Political Memes	6	7	46.2	53.8
Tamil Political Memes	0	2	0	100
KaatuPoochi Memes	11	0	100	0
Chennai Memes	27	1	96.4	3.6

The analysis of the content of the four Facebook meme pages and their interpretations are presented in Table 1. As expected, the number of political memes are higher in the politics-based meme pages with 'Tamil Nadu Funny and Political Memes' recording 53.8 percent and 'Tamil Political Memes' having 100 percent of the memes which are political. The general interest pages have a relatively low count of politics-based memes with no political memes in 'KaatuPoochi' memes page. In fact, most general interest meme pages focus on themes like films, lifestyle, college life and other socially relevant themes.

Majority of the non-political memes were about the rescue operations during cyclone Gaja and also about the need for relief and support during Gaja. This was followed by non-political memes on the movie ‘Sarkar’.

Table 2: Political Issues in Memes

Meme Pages	Political Themes	Content Type
Tamil Nadu Funny and Political Memes	Sarkar – Sagayam IAS	Image from the movie ‘Sarkar’
	Statue of Unity	Image of the Statue of Unity
	Diwali given a political tint	Image featuring Comedy Scenes from Tamil films
	Biryani politics of Rajinikanth fans	Image of Biryani packs
	Gaja – Din. Srinivasan statement	Images of politicians
Tamil Political Memes	Rajinikanth statement	Film Clip featuring Comedy Scenes from Tamil films
	Cyclone Gaja Helicopter Visit	Image of helicopter visit to cyclone affected areas in a helicopter
KaatuPoochi Memes	-	-
Chennai Memes	Petrol Price Hike	Image from Television news

Majority of the memes used humourous captions and witty one-liners to satire upon political issues. Film clips featuring comic scenes from popular Tamil movies with funny dialogues are also used to satire upon political issues. Majority of the memes were images of politicians, followed by images of events.

Table 3: Reactions to the Political Memes

Meme Pages	Political Theme	Reactions				
		Likes	Laugh	Love	Surprise	Anger
Tamil Nadu Funny and Political Memes	- Sarkar – Sagayam IAS	23	0	4	0	0
	- Statue of Unity	9	0	0	0	1
	- Diwali given a political tint	12	0	0	0	0
	Biryani politics of Rajinikanth fans	2	1	0	0	0
	Gaja – Din. Srinivasan statement	8	10	0	0	0
Tamil Political Memes	Rajinikanth statement	11	6	0	0	0
	Cyclone Gaja Visit	61	31	0	1	0
KaatuPoochi Memes		0	0	0	0	0
Chennai Memes	Petrol Price Hike	511	249	0	0	57

The political issues that were discussed in the memes were mostly based on Tamil Nadu state politics like statements by politicians on pressing issues like the helicopter visit during cyclone Gaja, petrol price hike, etc. Only one national issue, the Statue of Unity, was covered during this particular time frame. Majority of the memes satire upon the activities and statements of politicians. As expected, the politics-based meme pages had greater volume of political memes, when compared to general interest meme pages. 'KaatuPoochi Memes' did not have any political memes. Majority of the memes were on issues pertaining to the ruling parties at both the Centre and the State levels. (refer Table 2).

In 'Tamil Nadu Funny and Political Memes', the 'Sarkar' meme which is a scene from the movie of the same name that talks about a need for change in the political leadership of Tamil Nadu has garnered the most positive reactions in this Facebook page. In 'Tamil Political Memes', the helicopter visit to cyclone affected areas has received the greatest likes and laughs. Due to the higher rate of followers of the Facebook meme page, 'Chennai Memes' have a greater number of reactions to their posts. Moreover, H. Raja's comments on the petrol price hike statement evoked a lot of angry reactions by social media users (refer Tables 3 and 4). Majority of the respondents liked or laughed at the memes while a few expressed anger at the issues discussed in the meme. A satire on the Statue of Unity and an insensitive statement made by a politician on the Gaja cyclone were shared the most. Very few comments were posted on the memes. Majority of the comments posted were counter-hegemonic in nature. It should be noted that the shares and reactions were greater than comments. While social media users reacted to memes and shared them, the commentary on them was minimal. Some of the comments agreed with the tone of the meme and further reinforced the message of the meme.

Table 4: Shares and Comments on the Political Memes

Meme Pages	Shares	Shares	Comments	Nature of Comments	
				Positive	Negative
Tamil Nadu Funny and Political Memes	- Sarkar – Sagayam IAS	4	1	For change in TN politics	-
	- Statue of Unity	5	0	-	-
	- Diwali given a political tint	1		-	-
	Biryani politics of Rajinikanth fans	3	1	-	Against Biryani politics
	Gaja – Din. Srinivasan statement	5	0	-	-
Tamil Political Memes	Rajinikanth statement	4	1	-	-
	Cyclone Gaja helicopter Visit	29	0	-	Call for greater sympathy
KaatuPoochi Memes		0	0	-	-
Chennai Memes	Petrol Price Hike	139	22	-	Against petrol price hike

Discussion and Conclusion

Tamil memes on political issues on Facebook provides an opportunity to build into a platform for political communication if used with proper constituents (Ruby and Kuppuswamy, 2017). This was found to be true as the majority of political memes focused on recent political issues related to Tamil Nadu politics. The memes generated likes and shares and also a few comments on the issues addressed through them.

Satirical takes on statements made by politicians were also popular political memes when it comes to Tamil Nadu politics. Majority of the memes expressed dissent against what the meme creators perceived as political hegemony. This corroborates with (Jones, 2017) statement that social media has proven itself to be an important place for the emergence of satire and counter-hegemonic content, which in its simplest form is the meme. The politics-based meme pages had greater volume of political memes, when compared to general interest meme pages. This is to be expected as political meme pages have a specific area of interest unlike the general interest pages. Most general interest meme pages focus on themes like films, lifestyle, college life and socially relevant themes that are currently the focus of mainstream media. Internet memes typically evolve through commentary, imitations, parodies or even through related news in other media (Bauckhage, 2011). Most of the memes used humourous captions, witty one-liners and funny dialogues from Tamil movies to satire upon political issues. Images of politicians, images of the events and film clips featuring comic scenes were the formats used to convey satire in most of the memes. Tamil celebrity domination through symbols from films (Ruby and Kuppuswamy, 2017) are popular when it comes to Tamil Nadu meme culture.

The reactions garnered by most of the memes were likes and laughs while very few garnered angry reactions on social media. While social media users reacted to memes and shared them, the commentary in terms of debates and discussions on them were minimal. (Tay, 2014) Memes are more about entertaining people online rather than engaging in political debates. The comments were counter-hegemonic or agreed with the tone of the meme and further reinforced the message of the meme.

Internet meme is a word that is used to describe evolving content that rapidly gains popularity or notoriety on the Internet (Bauckhage, 2011). Political memes on Tamil Nadu politics are liked and shared on social media. They help voice the opinion of the common man and give an alternative, satirical and humourous view of political issues. They are an important part of the political discourse when it comes to Tamil Nadu politics. Hence, they must be taken seriously by politicians and political parties who could use this medium to understand the citizens' view of the political world in Tamil Nadu.

Further research could focus on political meme culture across India. Also, a comparative analysis of meme culture with regard to Central and State-level politics would add to the repertoire of knowledge regarding memes for political expression. The so-called meme culture is a satirical reflection of the politics of the times and of a particular place. It is a phenomena that is global as well as local. A study of the global meme scenario with regard to democracies as against non-democratic countries would further shed light on memes and the freedom of political expression. Also, memes in developed economies as

against developing countries would help gain insights into the political economy of the meme culture. Memes are a funny and satirical take on politics, society and life in general. Memes are here to stay. As long as they continue to serve as a form of expression for the citizenry, they would remain an essential part of the alternative political discourse.

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