Article

Memes, National Identity and National Belonging: Visual "Nation-Talk" on Indian Social Media Pages

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Abstract

I collected data from political social media pages to show how memes serve as means to engage in heated "nation-talk." Contending claims are made through memes on the identity of an "Indian" and on the sense of belonging to India. I collected memes over a period of twenty months from two overtly political Facebook pages with hundreds of thousands of followers. After multiple rounds of coding and filtering we arrived at a final sample of memes to be studied in depth. The memes, from opposing political sides, draw inter-textual component elements from the same popular culture, mythology etc. Through the repetition of specific components, slogans etc. these memes exclude certain claims of belonging to India while enforcing others. Key to this repetition are the circulatory dynamics of memes over digital networks, and their performative aspects. India's history emerges as a significant battleground for these memes.

Keywords

memes, nation-talk, repetition, inter-textuality, circulation, performative

Introduction

Memes and memetic media content have slowly emerged as a popular form of communication in digital spaces in India along with the rest of the world. Users create multi-modal, remediated memetic texts drawing from a variegated popular and

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cultural landscape. They reflect attitudes and stances toward everything from romantic failures to woes of a student's life to corruption to nepotism in politics (Ask and Abidin 2018; Milner 2016). Their creation and circulation constitute an important vernacular for everyday communicative practices online. This paper analyzes the manner in which memes are often deployed online in order to make contesting claims in the Indian political context. The paper takes forward the notion of "nation-talk" propounded by Sahana Udupa, which is conducted by partisan, largely middle-class users online. The paper explains how opposing visions of national identity and national belonging emerge through the rambunctious manifestation of "nation-talk" in these political memes. The singular inter-textual characteristics of these memes, which make them comprehensible to a large audience, emerge as key to this explanation. The paper also conceptualizes an argument for going beyond inter-textuality to the circulatory ontology of memes to understand how identity and otherness are reinforced in the social imagination. With each iteration, the paper argues, the memes bring into being identity and otherness.

Political articulation through visual media has been deployed at different points of Indian history; Christopher Pinney demonstrates the forms such articulation took during the colonial period, for instance. Sometimes it was in the form of photographic evidence of colonial atrocities that helped mobilize popular opinion (Pinney 2015), sometimes through poster art where political and religious motifs intermingled, sometimes to promote "cow protection" and mobilize Hindus in the nineteenth century (Pinney 2004). Overtly political colonial-era visual expression faced censorship, so very often cultural-religious motifs served as a refuge for anti-colonial political aspirations. The contemporary Sangh Parivar formation had proven adept at the usage of audio-visual media forms such as audio and video cassettes by the late 1980s and 1990s (Christiane 2005). On the internet, Hindu nationalist discourses have registered their presence since the 1990s, and have been contending online with Dalit, Liberal and Leftist political orientations (Chopra 2006). The popular political-visual traditions of the past and mythology have also influenced offline visual cultures of politics in India in recent times due to their wide reach. Sangeet Kumar establishes a similar link between contemporary Indian memetic media online and India's history of subversive political satire since antiquity (Kumar 2015).

This paper focuses on political memes collected from partisan Indian Facebook pages, selected because of their massive followings. In this the paper is a contribution toward a growing scholarship on political memes, from the Global South as well as the North. Scholars have looked at memes on far-right ideological grounds on social media and the discourses around them (Guenther et al. 2020; Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo 2021). Scholars have also researched social media meme pages with more emancipatory leanings such as those by indigenous peoples pushing back against the erasure of their history (Frazer and Carlson 2017). Such research has advanced the understanding of how political and religious sectarian identity-formation takes place through memes in political Facebook pages, how political events are framed by memes etc. (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson 2016). This paper seeks to contribute toward these understandings and expand them, through the twin dynamics of circulation and inter-textuality.

Methodology

The means used for collection of data in the study of memes has evolved in the course of the last decade. Some researchers have utilized the metrics provided by Google such as Google Trends data on keywords (Aharoni 2019; Campbell et al. 2018). Such memes are usually cross-referenced with memetic material available on easily available meme-aggregator and archival sites such as knowyourmeme.com[1]. Sometimes the data is sampled from these meme sites themselves.

Other scholars have limited their memetic data gathering to one or multiple platforms over a specific period. Facebook, Twitter and Reddit are often the social media platforms where such research is contained (Bellar et al. 2013). Instagram has become another major site for research as it is a platform devoted specifically to visual artifacts (DeCook 2018; Leaver et al. 2020). These platforms are especially useful when researching the ecosystem around memes of a particular genre or around memes on a particular theme (such as religion and politics). These platforms also offer distinct, visible metrics regarding the quantum of interaction these memes have had from the users in the form of "likes," "shares," "comments," "re-tweets," "quote tweets" etc. These are sites where one finds concentrated discourses around memes on thematic/ideological lines.

Significantly, most studies of memes on social media do not rely on advanced data gathering and analysis tools, unlike "Big Data" research[2]. These studies often require visual, thematic filtering of data. This paper uses certain ready-to-hand tools that are in-built into Facebook, that allow a certain amount of targeted sampling of data. Facebook has a certain search function on topical pages that allows one to search for posts from a specific date.

Keeping in mind the objectives of this research, the data for this paper was collected through manual examination of memes on certain Facebook pages. A sample was selected purposively. The search for pages from which we extracted the data began as an exploratory step (Milner 2012). We chose those sites in popular social media platforms that host user-generated content, especially user-transformed images and memes sites that usually enjoy a high volume of traffic in content, and have a huge number of "Likes" and "Followers", going into the hundreds of thousands. Another criteria for choosing them was the avowedly political stance taken up by these sites on many issues. The sites of data collection have been selected after careful observation over the past few years.

The first of the two Facebook groups we chose was "The Frustrated Indian"[3] (TFI). It has over 1 million followers, and usually takes a stance that is avowedly pro-Hindu "nationalist" and pro-regime. Its content is often critical of what it considers to be hypocritical behaviors of "liberals," "seculars" and "leftists" in India. It hosts content critical of the earlier "secular nationalism" that dominated Indian politics. The owner of the page also runs rightlog.in, self-described as "India's Leading Right Wing Opinion Blog."

The other Facebook page we chose was Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy[4]. The anonymous founder[5] of the page had stated on many occasions that the political satire in his page was developed, among many other reasons, by the loud presence of Hindu

nationalists and fans of the Narendra Modi government online. The page hosts content that is supportive of communal harmony and secularism and critical of the Sangh Parivar's politics. "Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy" had started out parodying the noted public ideologue of the Hindu Right Subramanian Swamy. As a result, it was involved in some amount of controversy as well in 2014[6]. Later, Mohammed Zubair, co-founder of AltNews, one of India's leading fact-checking websites, finally revealed that he was the person behind Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy[7]. As of now the page has nearly 700,000 followers.

The entirety of the visual content hosted by the 2 Facebook pages from a period stretching from January 2017 to October of 2018 was manually examined one-by-one. We decided upon this period because it included a major provincial legislative election (Uttar Pradesh 2017) and included periods of lull as well. We went through hundreds of images, some of them memetic, to choose the ones featured in this paper.

Coding

The coding was done based on emergent categories through prolonged study of the memetic content from the sites of data extraction. The initial sample was of 2,079 images across the two sites, from January, 2017 to October, 2018. By trawling through this cache of images we found 1,262 memes. The first step of coding involved extracting memes along the lines of themes that were pertinent to the subject of this paper—nationalism, religiosity and belonging-ness to the nation. The definitions of these terms for this paper are based on the supportive/antagonistic stances of the social media pages selected (as discussed above). After going over this cache several times, we were able to filter out a sample of sixty-seven memes that dealt with either two or all three of these subjects.

In the initial 1,262 memes we found certain themes emerged as pre-eminent—(i) Islam and Muslim communities (ii) Hinduism and Hindus (ii) Pakistan (iii) elections (iv) public policy (v) Opposition party leaders (iv) loyalty to the nation (v) beef. Therefore, in this first level memes that had these themes were selected. This is similar to the "content" of memes as defined by Shifman, the "ideas and ideologies conveyed" by a meme (Shifman 2014, 40).

The referential elements toward religiosity and nationalism (and the intersections of two) might manifest in the form of "banal" nationalism—everyday, "banal" practices and interactions with certain symbolic forms representing the nation (and belonging-ness to the nation) which do not register too obtrusively in the mind of the denizens. This could be in the form of flags, emblems, currency, anthems, popular songs, colloquial expressions etc. that demarcate a sense of belonging to a particular national entity (Billig 1995). Religiosity and national-belonging also operate in a similar manner on pieces of online humor such as memes. It induces in the denizen-subjects a sense of a particular artifactual, symbolic or cultural form as being undeniably "ours" and creating a feeling of "we" (Shifman et al. 2014). But the nationalism on display through these memes might also be "hot," in the form of aggressive expressions and performances in these memes that connote antagonism toward individuals and groups considered to be harmful or enemies of the nation, or an out-group (Udupa 2019b).
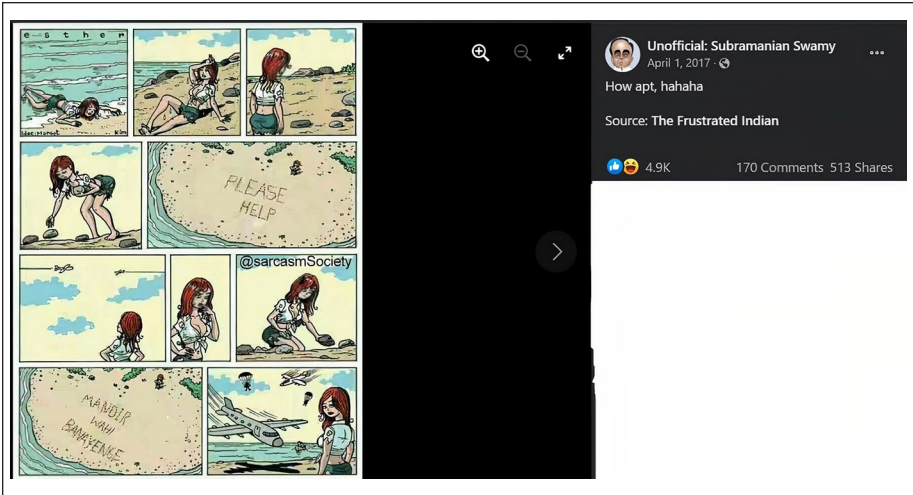
Figure 1.[8]

Thus, the compositional elements could also be mobilized toward connoting identity and belonging. The subsequent step involved identifying the most recurrent compositional elements of the memes. Based on this the following categories emerged—(i) Popular culture (in Hindi)—Bollywood and Indian television (ii) celebrities—cultural and political (iii) mythology (iv) news media (v) Popular Indian meme templates (vi) Popular global meme templates (vii) Popular culture from the Global North. Shifman's notion of the "form" characteristic to memes is closer to these—"the physical incarnation of memes, perceived by our senses." This will primarily include visual and textual elements of the meme in this paper (Shifman 2014, 40).

The final level of coding involved looking at the metrics of "Likes" on the tweet or post. Arranging the memes in descending order of "Likes" after the first two levels of coding helped us corral a final set of five memes for in-depth analysis.

Loyalty Tests and Identity Reinforcement

The personnel in charge of running these pages on a day-to-day basis often draw from templates and trends of memes that are popular across the globe. One such case in which a memetic trend is made to speak to a South Asian context is seen in Figure 1.

The meme follows a webcomic strip that features a young Caucasian woman who has apparently been marooned on a tiny island. Her signs pleading for "Help" are ignored by the aircrafts flying overhead[9]. The crux of the meme, where the "anchoring" element is edited to convey specific messages to a specific audience, is the ninth panel. The anchorage plays two roles here. First, it helps appropriate a collectively recognized template, especially to those who have regular exposure to widely popular meme trends.
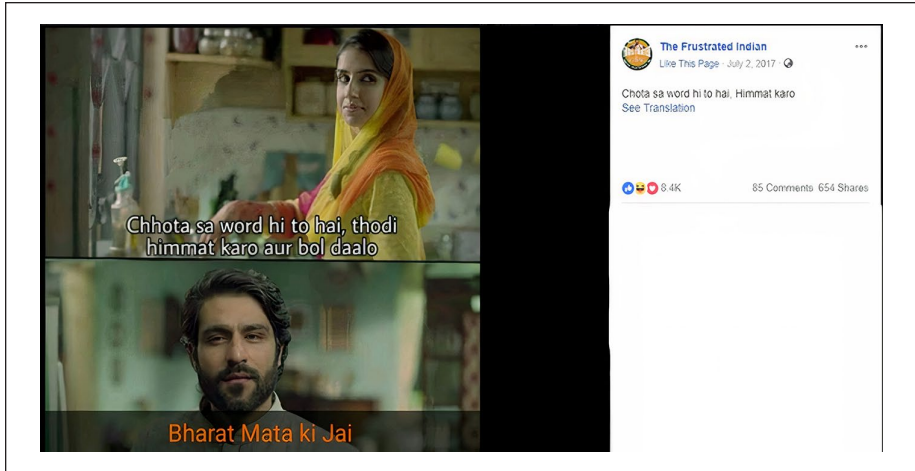
Figure 2.[10]

It also delivers a specific message that is sufficiently recognizable to those who are well-acquainted with contemporary Indian politics, and the increasing weightage of issues related to religiosity in politics, Hindutva nationalism, secularism etc. The anchorage element is "Mandir wahi banaenge," which roughly translates as "We shall build the temple there/The temple shall be built *right there*," referring to the attempts at construction of a Ram Temple in Ayodhya on grounds that once housed the Babri Masjid, illegally demolished by a communal mob in 1991. Arvind Rajagopal remarks that the "overt emphasis" of the slogan made the "prior act of destruction" (of the mosque) "indispensable" (Rajagopal 2009). In many ways this slogan serves as a representative of the operationalization of the religious-nationalist upsurge in India over the past few decades. The event of the demolition and slogans such as "Mandir wahi banayenge" has had a significant impact on the politics of national identity and "othering" in the subsequent decades, and the meme is emblematic of such politics. Memetic components that play a crucial role are often metonymic—they serve as a "stand-in" for an entire political discourse and world-view (as the slogan here stands for the Hindutva orientation) (Mielczarek 2018).

The memetic comic ends with aircrafts that had perhaps hitherto ignored the marooned woman diving in together after she forms the slogan "Mandir wahi banaenge" on the beach. This is a reference to the primacy of emotive religious issues such as Ayodhya over other pressing concerns. As can be seen, the text caption that accompanies this post credits "The Frustrated Indian" as the source of this meme. This is both a knowing, acknowledging wink to a competitor and antagonist in the same craft/trade. This is a part of "nation-talk," the mostly fractious to-and-fro between avowed liberals and nationalists in Indian corners of social media platforms, and that provides tangibility to ideas of nation and national-belonging online (Udupa 2019a).

The sample of memes selected often pose a commentary on the intertwined issue of loyalty to the nation and inalienable belonging to India. The meme in Figure 2 is an

instance of how the thorny issue of identity is dealt with by the right-wing page "The Frustrated Indian."

The meme is drawn from an advertisement for the "Ghadi" detergent brand[11]. It features a Muslim couple celebrating Eid and entertaining guests from all religions including Hinduism. The wife asks the husband to mend ties by uttering a single word ("sorry") to his estranged friends. In this meme by "The Frustrated India" the connotative direction of the advertisement is channeled away in the second panel where the text caption, placed as though it were subtitles, says "Bharat Mata ki Jai" (Glory to Mother India), a slogan that has seen wide usage by right-wing Hindutva supporters. The placement of the slogan in this panel is another display of metonymic reference, as there have been some controversy over whether Muslims should have to utter such slogans (or sing the anthem "Vande Mataram") that venerate the country in the anthropomorphized form of a mother (Mother India)[12]. Islamic belief prohibits idolatry, and hence slogans and anthems directed at "Mother India" are in a theological gray area. Politicians and commentators belonging to the Hindu Right have been seen to use this as a test of loyalty for Muslims in India.

Norms such as the articulation of a certain slogan and other litmus tests of one's loyalty to the nation are concretized through repetitions such as the ones seen in these memes. This contestation over the identity of an Indian, and who has claim to it, is dependent upon such recurring performances, even in an artifact as innocuous as a meme. This "boundary-work" creates a clearly demarcated identity from a far more nebulous sense of belonging. Such boundaries create an "other" to reinforce this identity (Gal et al. 2016). For "The Frustrated Indian" this "other" seems to be those Muslims and others that stand for a distinct Muslim-Indian identity and sense of belonging-ness to India that does not fall within the contours prescribed by the Hindutva right. It also includes those that have allegedly indulged in the "appeasement" of Muslims to the detriment of Hindus. The push-back comes back from those who consider themselves to be heirs and protectors of a legacy of secularism and liberalism, as seen in the memes from "Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy".

Circulatory and Performative Aspects

Before proceeding to examine the other memes, we must understand the explanatory scaffolding used in this paper to understand the wider potential of memes to influence notions of national identity and national belonging. In this section we look at the entwined roles of circulatory and performative aspects of identity-formation, while in the next section we lay out the inter-textual force that drives such circulation.

The memetic content in Figure 2 does not have a textual/semiotic/referential function alone, referring to the state of affairs "as it is" or to some primordial, stable identity. In the process of reiteration and circulation, through the figures, artifacts and narratives of mythological deities and characters, Bollywood scenes and characters, appropriated media texts, celebrities, memes enact the very identity of who an Indian is through these memes. An important aspect of this is the circulatory potential of

memes, which expands the scope of the identity formation to make it into a communal-collective one (LiPuma and Lee 2002). In LiPuma's and Lee's conception, performativity, which creates meaning, and circulation, which transmits meaning, are not divorced from each other. Rather, circulation itself is performative; circulation constitutes the very community whose existence it pre-supposes. This is an important conceptual tool that helps us understand the agency and impact of "nation-talk."

Circulation informs the "social imaginary" at large, of how a group of people make sense of the world around themselves and demarcate distinct entities in it (Taylor 2002). This circulation, thus, is intimately intertwined to the performativity of these memes. Figure 2 seems to suggest that this active, performative aspect of producing national identity has the potential for structural reproduction of exclusion of groups such as Muslims. Certain ritualistic processes have to be performed by them to prove their Indian-ness beyond suspicion, and this is not a mere reflection of the hegemonic social imaginary, but is a part of it (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2014). Of course, social location, power differentials and access to technical infrastructure would determine these communities and social imaginations (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003). Once out of the influence of a single human node, the fates of the objects in circulation are often beyond the control of human beings. This camouflages the potency of these objects such as mere artifacts/memes in circulation, as we often consider the community to pre-exist the circulation (LiPuma and Lee 2002). The functions of memes to engender a collective with differing understandings of the nation and nationality also holds great political potentiality to give rise to online collectives.

Media texts such as the memes in this paper also perform a ventriloquist act. They claim to speak for an entire "people" (the Indian "people" in this case) and place certain groups outside this definition (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003). This is foundational to their ability to form larger collectives along the lines of "liberal," "nationalist" and others. Although memes might be seen as every-day, banal objects that do not register in the realm of large-scale politics, they are produced by social subjects that inscribe in these memes their worldviews, bounded social entities and norms. They are consumed/viewed by those that come from a similar milieu and use them as texts or artifacts of sense-making (DeCook 2018; Katz and Shifman 2017). The delegitimization of certain modes of cultural and religious ways-of-life, not to mention political orientations with a critical outlook, is seen in Figure 2. Memes can serve as delegitimization vehicles, a rhetorical tactic often employed to ridicule, mock and demean the discourses of one's opponent in public (Ross and Rivers 2017). This delegitimization is often done by "discursively creating and transmitting a negative image of the Other," through the portrayal of the Other as acting in contravention of prevalent "moral values" (Van Leeuwen 2007).

The tonality and the stance of Figure 2 is that of detached ironical humor. In the worldview of TFI and others who share their ideology, the positionality of those who support nationalist chanting of slogans are universal and natural (Ross and Rivers 2017). For them, it is quite unthinkable that one would be hesitant to something as "natural" to "Indians" as the chanting of "Bharat Mata ki Jai." The dominance of majoritarian sentiments is reinforced and naturalized, as bearing no particular affiliative connections. It is the assertions of different ways of belonging to the nation of the "other" that come under the scanner as something that deviates from the natural order (Gal et al. 2016).

Intertextuality and 'Nation-Talk'

In this section we lay out the dynamics through which intertextuality provides the force that drives the circulation of these memes regarding national identity. It is interesting to note the ways in which intertextuality is mobilized in user-generated memes that are political critiques. Content of this type are dependent on the popular cultural knowledge and knowledge of folk-culture and mythology of the audience to create meaning (Ott and Walter 2000). It also lends tangibility to the idea of the nation in these online spaces through combative "nation-talk." Both "nationalists" and "liberals" draw from the same cache of mutually-recognized "content" to create their political memes. But it is in their confrontation in online spaces from which many staple barbs seen in the memetic form emerge, leading to a "polyvocality" among antagonist parties (Milner 2013). Udupa suggests that both the "nationalists" and "liberals" display "proto-agentic" potency in this, rather than being passive recipients (Udupa 2019a). This is informed by notions of civic activism that emerged after the post-liberalization "new middle class" (Fernandes 2010).

The constituent elements of the memes as has been seen in the analyses above seems to appeal to a particular middle-class sensibility, both from urban and mofussil areas, and those working in professional and semi-professional sectors. Mohd. Zubair, who created Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy worked as an IT professional. This middle-class character is hardly surprising, as scholars have found the prevalence of mostly middle-class values, cutting across ideological lines, in social media platforms. The same applies to meme groups (Doron 2016; Udupa 2019a). The publics that form around these memes find in them a reassurance of the imagination of the nation, but also a field of contending imaginations.

The intertextual constituents of memes such as the ones in this paper are drawn from a popular archive that encompasses popular and folk culture, mythology, political images, press photographs, popular memetic templates etc. According to scholars of visual studies, the Indian political archive is "continually spewing the past into the future" (Pinney 2014). This political archive provides "a resource of images, concepts, and actions that are dynamically folded back into protest spaces, media representations, and public culture" (Webb 2015). The political deployment of images in such recent moments of political ferment such as the India Against Corruption movement bear testament to the popular visual culture of India and the politics playing out through it (Webb 2015). Bricoleur-like attributes are not restricted to those online denizens with access to photo-editing softwares alone; such as an esthetic practice is also seen in political articulation through visual means in posters and other offline means. Visual material from the past constitutes a ready to hand repertoire from which to draw not only visual components but also vitality (Pinney 2014). In the specific case of memes, Baishya has noted a similar vital force retained by the intertextual constituents of memes in his conceptualization of "memetic visuality." An "intertextual relay" carries the force of all the visual material used in a meme, whether from digital or pre-digital sources (Baishya 2021). Thus it is that the bricoleur-like creators draw from a variety of sources, such as "past national events," but also "performance traditions" as well as "filmic and theatrical histories" (Pnina et al. 2014).

A majority of the content in these online sites are in English, although content in Hindi is present too. The English used is usually not archaic or overly verbose and is accessible. It is made considering a mostly North Indian audience, with its political being mostly Delhi and Hindi-belt centric. Compared to issues of secularism, communalism, misgovernance etc. caste finds relatively lesser focus in the social media platforms selected.

Borrowing From Mythological Television

The purchase that mythological tales such as The Mahabharata and The Ramayana has on in the Indian imaginary often means that it is used a resource for memes. The meme in Figure 3 taken from "Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy" is a case in point. The stills in the top and bottom panels have been taken from the television serialization of Indian epic The Ramayana by the state broadcaster. It was a media event of some proportion, and has its own chequered history with Hindu nationalism[13]. In this panel the speech bubbles pin down this meme as a lampooning of the Hindu Right during the Uttar Pradesh state legislature elections of 2017, especially the usage of the figure of the deity Ram and the Ram temple in Ayodhya[14]. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's ruling party, often faces accusations of using hot-button topics such as the Ram temple during electoral campaigns for polarizing voters along religious lines as well as a distraction from issues of governance and the Indian economy. Such polarization can have an impact upon the sense of identity and "otherness" that the electorate has, as well as their sense of who belongs to the nation and who does not. The meme highlights this issue, and critiques certain forms of identity performance along religious lines.

We can unpack the essential ingredients to memetic humor in the meme in Figure 3.—"superiority, incongruity and playfulness," as put forth by Shifman (Shifman 2014). Through associational linkages and allusions encoded the reader of the meme is able to comprehend that the object of ridicule here is the BJP and the right-wing. Overtly political memes often feature humor at the expense of opponents, and this tendency to poke fun at those not part of one's in-group is a part of a lot of other memes too. Superiority is often encoded with delegitimization, and in the case of Figure 3 delegitimization is done based on failures of "authorization" and "rationalization" (Ross and Rivers 2017). The BJP government in power is accused of improperly handling its authority and simultaneously being irrational by focusing on volatile, polarizing issues over issues of governance.

As we see in Figure 3, the intertextual potential that is key to the inception of these memes is dependent upon the ability to productively harvest the source material. Recontextualization of the various semiotic components leads to productive deployment of commentaries and critiques of one's choosing. But for the newly minted memes to find wide acceptance one has to ensure that the intertextual borrowings are from sources that find mass recognition and affective affiliation (Varis and Blommaert 2018). This is key to forming collective identities and publics online, through the recognition that there are others like "me" out there who would identify with a particular media text (Warner 2002). In the case of claims to national identity such as Hindutva,
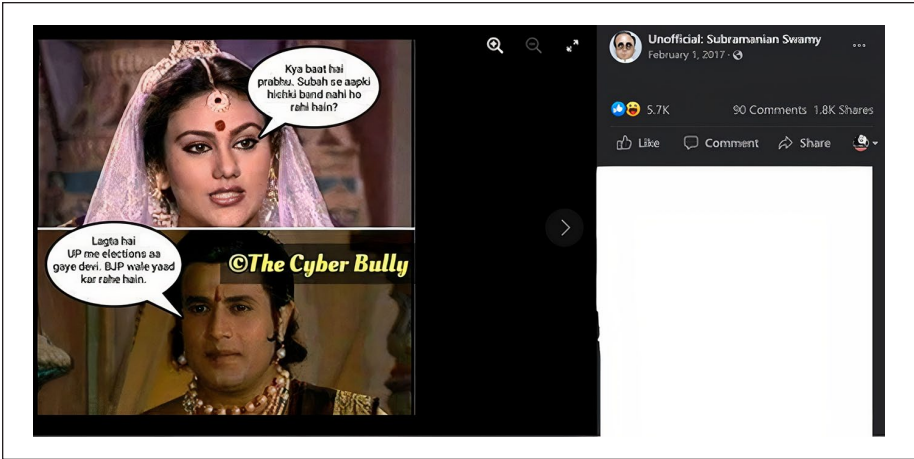
Figure 3.[15]

they are also "unimaginable communities," "empirically extant" but that are beset by transgressions, contentions and counter-claims at the very moment of their avowal. Online collectives staking an identity are communities formed through the national and transnational flow of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), bolstered by such flows while being challenged at the same time as millions of people imagine and re-imagine their communities through their ICT device screens (Kumar 2006).

As such, Hindu mythological TV serials offers a fertile field to draw memes from, in a political environment charged with religious and secular tensions. The memes from Figures 1 to 3 also bear testament to the centrality of religious/theological currents in identity politics in India, which has grown overt over the last decades. The issues over the deity Ram and the Ram temple in Ayodhya has reverberated loud as one of the pre-eminent national issues. This enmeshing of "god-talk" and "nation-talk" brings rich electoral dividends the Hindu nationalist cause. "God-talk" involves the "religiofication of politics"—usage of religious symbolism and rhetoric for sectarian goals. It has emerged as a major avenue to capture social and electoral power on a foundation of religious identity. The meme in Figure 3, with its religious-mythological constituents, thus, represents well the political field of the country. (Campbell et al. 2018; Duerringer 2016).

Borrowing From Bollywood

We have already noted in previous sections how "filmic and theatrical histories" inform political images such as the memes in this paper. We have also noted how constituent elements from popular cultural sources such as mythological television shows carry great intertextual impact as they are recognized and understood by a
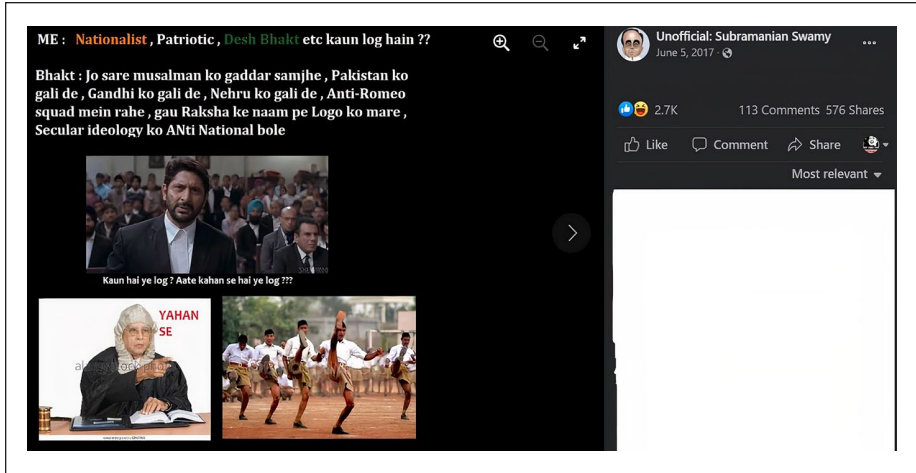
Figure 4.[16]

large number of viewers. This also applies to Bollywood movies. Pinney notes how concepts and motifs drawn from Bollywood movies such "Lage Raho Munnabhai" and "Rang de Basanti" figured in the India Against Corruption movement, for instance (Pinney 2014). Memes have continued this tradition, as is evident in the meme in Figure 4, which draws from "Jolly LLB," the sequel to "Lage Raho Munnabhai." Bollywood's presence is all-pervasive in a large chunk of the sub-continent (perhaps less so in the Southern states which have their own robust filmic popular cultures).

The meme is a collage of text captions and images, the topmost of which has the titular character Jolly (played by Arshad Warsi), an advocate. The meme appropriates a famous dialog from the film where Jolly pleading his case before the judge rhetorically wonders– "Who are these people? Where do they come from?"[17]. This is a scene that has been used in a lot of memes. This constituent scene of the meme carries the force of the bemused wonderment and bewilderment that the scene had in its original cinematic context over to memes. In the meme in Figure 4 the scene has been re-appropriated to ask where do "patriots, nationalists, *bhakts* (an epithet for Hindutva supporters, connoting blind devotion) " come from—who consider all Muslims to be traitors, maligns Gandhi and Nehru, supports anti-Romeo squads and cow vigilantes etc. In this case the bewilderment is directed at the people whose identity politics seeks to establish those who belong to India and those who are "others" and "enemies" of the nation. The judge's indexical reply points toward a volunteer of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) marching. The RSS is a volunteer-driven organization that is a part of the Sangh Parivar, a conglomerate of Hindu nationalist organizations of which the ruling BJP is a part. The meme carries a critical force aimed at attempts to establish a narrow national identity that excludes Muslims, those with different cultural practices and dissident voices.
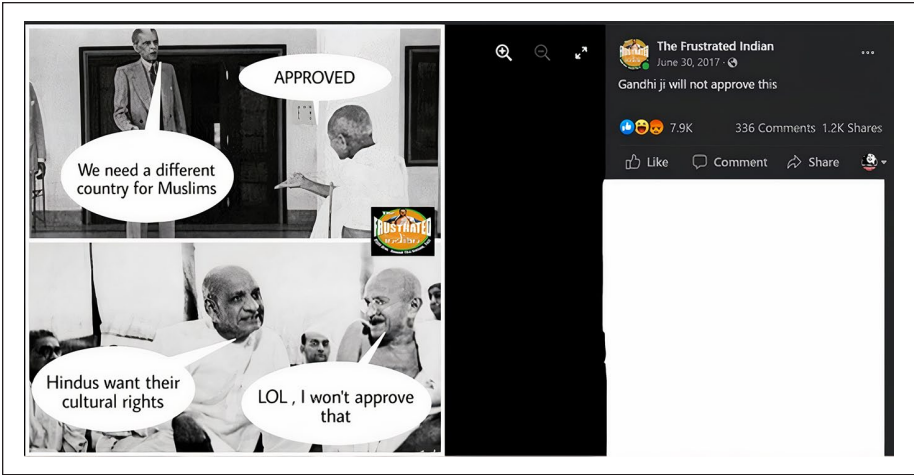
Figure 5.[18]

History as a Memetic Battlefield

One of the fertile subjects of meme-making where we see hotly contested "nation-talk" unfold is the subject of Indian history. Memes are a part of a repertoire of social media forms where we see a restatement and/or rewriting of history by "liberals" and "nationalists." It serves a particularly interesting avenue to explore how agency is exercised through memes to shape the identity of India and who belongs in it.

Treating history as a theater of war to re-write India's ancient, medieval and modern history online has been an ongoing effort of the Hindu Right for long (Mohan 2015). The works on history emerging out of academia as well as India's post-colonial, Nehruvian inflected secular-nationalist historiography is considered highly suspect and inimical to the interests of the nation. These memes are often at the expense of prominent figures of the Indian freedom movement and post-colonial stalwarts such as Gandhi and Nehru, while valourising certain figures such as Savarkar and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. Once such instance is seen in Figure 5.

In spite of repeated interventions by noted historians, Vallabhbhai Patel (noted freedom fighter and the first Home Minister of India) is often pitted against Nehru and Gandhi[19], and in Figure 5 Gandhi is seen dismissing an apparent plea by Patel to secure the cultural rights of Hindus in India. The implication is that Pakistan is for Muslims in the continent, while India is to be the country where Hindus assert themselves culturally (but due to machinations of Congress leaders such as Gandhi who were instrumental in "minority appeasement" this was thwarted). The meme takes sides on a historical issue, with a clearly defined "us" and "them," and holds Gandhi responsible for the alleged victimization of Hindu Indians. The frivolous reply attributed to Gandhi on a matter that was of grave concern to him, however, does display some amount of ironic distancing (Milner 2012). The "intertextual relay" that Baishya

posits lends force to the portrayal of Gandhi as being glib about the "cultural rights of Hindus", through the recontextualization of the expression "LOL" (Laugh Out Loud) in the fictionalized quote in the speech bubble attributed to Gandhi. The intertextual force of Gandhi as a memetic component also stems from the fact that Gandhi remains a principal antagonist in the discursive foundation of Hindutva. For the Hindu Right, Gandhi's actions were and are an obstacle to the completion and manifestation of a pure Hindu nation because of his "appeasement" of Muslims, and led to the partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan in 1947 (Kumar 2006, 132). Gandhi as a visual icon still retains vitality in memetic media, although Shanti Kumar argues while this icon (connoting a specific strand of nationalism that was inclusive, non-violent and promoted national self-sufficiency), might have been "overwritten to death" in other contexts.

Conclusion

Social media platforms have always been a fertile ground for the exploration, negotiation and solidification of identity. This paper has demonstrated how media texts (for instance, the detergent advertisement) can be appropriated and transformed to be interpreted according to the necessities of one's political orientation (Frazer and Carlson 2017; Guenther et al. 2020). This mixture of "fun"/funny elements and serious politics provides a refreshing divergence for the user from the usual news reportage and commentary on politics (Tay 2014; Penney 2020). We have seen memes how using popular culture (mythological TV shows and Bollywood films) as a resource can make for impactful memes regarding national identity and belongingness. We have seen how components drawn from an innocuous advertisement can be made into a meme that establishes a loyalty test to the nationalist idea of the nation. Figure 5 again is a tart meme that reflects how the Hindutva revision of Indian history can be used to establish a narrow national identity (Pakistan is for Muslims, so India should be for Hindus). Religious identity emerges as the major fault-line, and there is plenty of "god-talk" involved in the "nation-talk."

These memes replete with mythology, popular culture and history are delivered in a colloquial idiom and humor that is absorbed quicker. The juxtaposition of these intertextual constituents brings the humor as well as the force (through their "memetic visuality") which makes them impactful, as has been highlighted in the paper. The paper also argues that this intertextuality helps in their capacity for circulation. This circulation helps in the performative enactment and formation of identity, national identity in this case. The contentious "nation-talk" through these memes stakes a claim on the identity of an Indian and notions of belonging to the nation, with both "nationalist" and "liberal/secular" memes critiquing and delegitimizing each other's claims.

The paper shows how, consequently, the idea of India and belonging-ness in memetic "nation-talk" is shaped by these aspects. There remains scope to further examine closely the aspects discussed here, especially the aspect of conflicting narratives about history in this contentious "nation-talk" through memes and its relation to

national identity. We have seen how memes can be a great channel through which to transmit the re-statement of established histories or re-write history from a different political stand-point. This can be a point of departure for future works.

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Notes

1. https://knowyourmeme.com/
2. There are certain free-to-access tools such as TAGS Hawksey (https://tags.hawksey.info) for Twitter. However, most Big Data studies that involve scraping significant amount of data from these social media platforms require the payment of considerable sums of money. Free-to-use APIs (Application Programing Interface) that allow crawling and scraping data on these platforms get blocked after a while.
3. https://www.facebook.com/TheFrustratedIndian/
4. https://www.facebook.com/SusuSwamy/
5. He had made it known in few interviews with online news portals that he was an IT professional
6. In a case of mistaken identity, Facebook had deleted the political figure Subramanian Swamy's official page when he had complained about this Facebook page lampooning his name. See Firstpost Staff (2014) *Oops! Facebook accidentally deletes Subramanian Swamy's real account, parody page lives on*, 19 December, [Online], Available: http://www.firstpost.com/living/oops-facebook-accidentally-deletes-subramanian-swamys-real-account-parody-page-lives-on-1857147.html [19 August 2017]
7. https://www.outlookbusiness.com/enterprise/big-idea/in-a-post-truth-world-alt-news-has-been-unflinching-in-its-pursuit-of-truth-5982 accessed October 21, 2020
8. https://www.facebook.com/Sususwamy/photos/a.1438827716375814/1899458433646071
9. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/esther-verkests-help-sign, accessed June 8, 2020
10. https://www.facebook.com/TheFrustratedIndian/photos/a.383308258371325/1383433145025493

11. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ol7O3ghAGI, accessed February 8, 2021
12. See Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Maps, mother/goddesses, and martyrdom in modern India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. (3) (2008): 819-853, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20203426 and Zo Newell and Sumathi Ramaswamy, "The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India,." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70, no. 2 (2011): 626, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911811000775
13. See Arvind Rajagopal, Politics after television: Hindu nationalism and the reshaping of the public in India (Cambridge University Press 2001)
14. Here, Sita, the consort of the deity Ram, asks him about his hiccups since morning. Ram states that it might be because of the upcoming state elections in Uttar Pradesh (in 2017). It's a folk belief in India that being remembered by others might lead one to have hiccups.
15. https://www.facebook.com/Sususwamy/photos/a.1438827716375814/1867557226836192
16. https://www.facebook.com/Sususwamy/photos/a.1438827716375814/1936963633228884
17. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roTe_x_oJE8, accessed April 12, 2018
18. https://www.facebook.com/TheFrustratedIndian/photos/a.383308258371325/1381928271842647
19. https://scroll.in/article/953052/nehru-vs-patel-why-is-external-affairs-minister-s-jaishankar-trolling-historians-on-twitter, accessed 12 May, 2019

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