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FROM MEMES TO MINDSETS: THE NORMALISATION OF SERIOUS SOCIAL ISSUES THROUGH ONLINE HUMOUR

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INTRODUCTION

On their own, the words of a joke don't do anything. However, when millions of people are exposed repeatedly to humour that is about domestic violence, mental health issues, body shaming, misogyny, or cyber-bullying, it begins to take a toll that goes far beyond just a few laughs. Humour online, in the form of memes especially, is so much more than a source of entertainment, it becomes a source of knowledge, influencing attitudes and defining what is considered acceptable to society. The more engaged people are, the faster content travels via algorithms online, and memes, in many ways, are one of the most powerful forms of communication in the world today.

What is particularly significant about the cultural impact of memes is that they turn serious social issues into extremely sharable commodities. Historically, satire has been one of the most important mediums through which people are able to question power and critiquing social injustice; but the line between social critique and the trivialization of issues has been heavily eroded online. If a person sees something related to a sensitive issue many times on social media, they become less affected emotionally, more tolerant of unacceptable social behaviour, and the once-unacceptable behaviour becomes ordinary and normalized. This is particularly worrying, given how easily many younger people learn about social norms from social media.

Legally and ethically, this trivialization of unacceptable social behaviour is problematic. While the right to freedom of expression under Article 19(1) (a) of the Indian Constitution¹ permits creative expression, it does so on the condition that this expression respects the rights of others. The question is not whether speech can be restricted, but rather whether constant exposure to jokes that contribute to stereotypes, discrimination, and harassment hinders the progress of the society.

This paper explores how memes evolved into a phenomenon much larger than just a simple mode of online entertainment, and is now one of the leading forces shaping society's perception of pressing social issues. Moreover, this article will explore whether humour, as an important element of democracy, has to be accompanied by certain ethical awareness and legal responsibility to avoid normalisation of harmful behaviour.

THE EVOLUTION OF MEME CULTURE: FROM ENTERTAINMENT TO SOCIAL INFLUENCE

The idea of the "meme" was formulated prior to the Internet revolution by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book "The Selfish Gene" (1976)². With the emergence of social media, the concept has undergone quite a significant change, today memes are viewed as influential but at the same time entertaining digital communication tools using humour, irony, satire, and imagery to convey messages that can reach millions of people in minutes.

Not just entertaining, memes have become one of the key aspects of modern public discourse that shape the way people perceive social, political, and cultural phenomena.

The unique influence that memes have is due to their easily accessible and interactive character. Unlike traditional media, where information flows one way from the institution to the audience, memes thrive in an environment of active participation. Every person who uses social media can not only read but also manipulate, interpret, and share information that is available there. Algorithmic recommendations of memes and rewarding system for sharing posts make them cross geographical, cultural, and language boundaries incredibly fast. Therefore, memes became powerful tools that shape public narratives; reinforce cultural identities, impact politics and social discourse.

The uniqueness of memes as compared to any other kind of online communication lies in their capacity to translate complex realities in terms of entertaining content. Humour reduces

¹ INDIA CONST. art. 19, cl.1(a)

² Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene (1976)

critical consciousness that allows messages to penetrate a person's subconscious mind. While this characteristic gives an opportunity for memes to simplify public awareness campaigns and inspire civic engagement, it is a tool that can be used to normalize potentially harmful ideas through frequent exposure. Content that trivializes domestic violence, mental illnesses, misogyny, body shaming, or cyberbullying can initially be seen as satirical jokes. But the more these issues are shared the more tolerant society is of them.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ONLINE HUMOUR: UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF NORMALISATION

Social attitudes cannot be changed by one single message. Instead, social transformation is the result of the gradual change of what people consider acceptable because of their repeated exposure to new ideas. Humour on the Internet works according to this principle. In contrast to the technique of persuasion, the purpose of the meme is not to convince people to accept some specific point of view or behaviour. Rather, the idea is to gradually change the interpretation of the issue through humour, irony or satire. It is not humour that poses a problem, it is the potential impact of this form of expression on social attitudes that is dangerous.

The first reason for such effect of humour on social perception is the phenomenon of desensitization. According to psychological theories, repeated exposure to the same stimulus gradually decreases the emotional reaction to it. As a result, a person who constantly sees jokes related to domestic violence, mental illnesses, misogyny, body shaming or cyber bullying becomes less sensitive to those topics and starts seeing it as a regular example of internet humour. Although the change happens gradually and unintentionally, this is one of the ways in which repeated exposure affects emotional judgment.

Another mechanism by which online humour impacts the social attitudes of people is related to social learning. People tend to imitate attitudes that seem socially approved and that are popular among others. In the context of the digital society, it means that the popularity is judged by the number of likes, comments and reposts. In this situation, prejudiced jokes and stereotypical attitudes become accepted because of their repeated popularity, although their essence is clearly harmful.

Understanding all the mechanisms of impact of humour on social perception does not mean denying humour and satire as ways of communication. Humour and satire have been the tools of fighting against injustice and oppression and encouraging people to discuss different issues

for centuries. However, there is a difference between humour that challenges the prejudice and humour that trivializes the issue. While the former has important functions, the latter creates social attitudes that it should change.

WHEN HUMOUR BECOMES HARM: THE NORMALISATION OF SERIOUS SOCIAL ISSUES

Humour has long been recognised as a powerful weapon for dealing with adversity, for discussing issues, and for challenging social conventions. The social value is lost when it stops questioning injustice, and starts trivialising it. Today, the never-ending flow of memes about domestic violence, mental illness, misogyny, body shaming, cyberbullying and other sensitive issues in the digital environments has blurred the line between satire and insensitivity. The concern is not about an isolated joke or meme, but about the cumulative effect of repeated exposure, through which harmful conduct gradually becomes familiar, normalised and socially tolerated.

This is evident in the portrayal of domestic violence. On social media, controlling behaviour, manipulation, and even physical aggression are often framed as funny parts of romantic relationships, rather than serious abuse. While such content is often defended as innocent entertainment, the continued circulation of such material may, however, lead to a desensitization of the public to behaviour that causes profound physical and psychological harm. Survivors may feel that these portrayals dismiss their lived experiences and audiences may become less able to recognise abusive behaviour in everyday life. Jokes that are only intended to make people laugh can inadvertently play their part in the normalisation of violence in intimate relationships.

The same anxiety applies to mental health. States of mind such as anxiety, depression, trauma and emotional exhaustion are increasingly recurring themes in internet humour, often expressed through exaggerated stereotypes or self-deprecating memes. While it's certainly true that humour can be a healthy coping mechanism for people discussing their own experiences, the blanket trivialisation of mental illness risks perpetuating misconceptions about its seriousness and discouraging meaningful dialogue about the importance of seeking professional help. So the problem isn't humour that builds resilience; it's humour that takes real psychological pain and makes it cheap laughs again and again. No empathy, no understanding.

Similar trends can be seen in memes about body image, gender stereotypes and cyberbullying. Content that usually mocks people's appearance often reinforces unrealistic beauty ideals, also bias against weight, skin tone, or other physical attributes. Memes that reduce women to degrading stereotypes are also contributing to the gender-based discrimination in digital spaces. Cyber bullying often hides under the guise of humour, allowing it to be directed at victims and dismissed as "just a joke," despite the severe emotional and psychological harm that it causes victims. In all these cases humour is not mere entertainment, but a means through which negative attitudes are reproduced, legitimised and spread to ever-wider audiences.

Equally troubling is the speed at which real-life tragedies are turned into online entertainment through digital humour. It's a meme, a viral reel, a reaction image, or a popular comment template within days, sometimes hours, of an incident involving a violent crime, public humiliation, domestic abuse, or other trauma. These references are being repeated so often that they are slowly becoming divorced from the human suffering that created them, existing merely as recurring jokes in digital culture. Words that have real tragedy attached to them are thrown around lightly in comment sections and online discussions, often without a hint of understanding of the real and deep emotional trauma felt by victims and their families.

While Internet users may consider this type of material harmless fun or creativity, by continuing to spread it we risk turning real human suffering into a kind of public entertainment. In doing so, we erode empathy and normalize a lack of sensitivity to trauma. So memes are not just the ephemeral entertainment, but the normalisation of serious social issues through online humour is a prime example. Their real power is not in any one post but in the cumulative effect of millions of interactions that slowly change collective attitudes about dignity, respect and acceptable behaviour. This influence needs to be recognised if we are to understand why digital humour needs to be evaluated not just in terms of entertainment value but also in terms of wider psychological, ethical and legal consequences. Only by recognizing this difference can society keep humour as a valid way of expressing itself. This ensures that it does not turn into a way to make prejudice, violence, and human suffering seem acceptable.

MEMES AS INSTRUMENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Any medium that can influence the opinion of the masses is a tool for building up or tearing down society. No exceptions are memes. But the same medium has demonstrated repeatedly

its capacity to educate, organize communities and galvanize significant social change, even if the prevailing discussions today focus on their role in trivializing serious social problems. So the question is not so much about whether memes are good or bad, but how they are created, understood and spread around the digital ecosystem. Ultimately, their effectiveness depends on the values they carry and the purpose for which they are designed. Memes have the ability to innovate through the use of humour, satire and visual storytelling to communicate complex ideas in an accessible and engaging manner.

Instead of a long article or a formal campaign, memes can reach different audiences in seconds and initiate conversations about issues that might go unnoticed by the public . Therefore, activists, schools, government bodies and civil society organisations are increasingly using memes in their awareness campaigns on mental health, gender equality, environmental protection, voting, cyber security and other issues of public importance. Memes have become a powerful tool of digital civic engagement, distilling complex legal and social concepts into a simplified form that doesn't dilute the meaning.

But the very things that make memes powerful also make them susceptible to abuse. Humour that points out injustice, challenges the abuse of power, questions discrimination, or encourages empathy plays an important democratic function in promoting public dialogue and accountability.

Conversely, humour that mocks victims, reinforces stereotypes, glorifies violence or trivialises discrimination risks reinforcing the very prejudices it appears to mock. The distinction, then, is not between humour and seriousness, but between humour that encourages critical reflection and humour that, by repetition, slowly legitimises harmful attitudes. This duality is what we need to appreciate if we are to understand the wider relationship between digital communication and social responsibility. Memes are not just trivial entertainment to be dismissed, nor are they inherently harmful forms of expression to be condemned. Rather, they are to be regarded as culturally potent tools, the power of which depends on the ethical decisions of those who produce, distribute and consume them. When used responsibly, memes can be tools for fighting injustice, encouraging better public conversations and promoting democratic participation.

But, if misused, they pose a danger of turning prejudice, discrimination and human suffering into just another aspect of online life. The challenge for contemporary society is not to reject

humour, but to ensure that its great communicative power is exercised with responsibility, empathy and respect for human dignity.

BALANCING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND DIGITAL RESPONSIBILITY

What was once seen as harmless online entertainment has become a matter of constitutional and ethical significance with the growing influence of memes in public discourse. As digital humour increasingly shapes public attitudes and influences social norms, it poses a fundamental question: how should a democratic society protect freedom of expression while preventing the normalisation of harmful behaviour? The answer cannot be to suppress humour itself, because satire and parody have been indispensable instruments of democratic expression, social criticism and political accountability throughout history. The challenge, rather, is how to preserve the constitutional guarantee of free speech and at the same time ensure that the exercise of the right does not erode the values of dignity, equality and mutual respect which are the bedrock of a democratic society.

In India, the right to freedom of speech and expression³ is protected under Article 19 (1) (a)⁴ of the Constitution of India. This freedom is not without limits however. Article 19(2)⁵ allows the State to put reasonable restrictions on the freedom of expression in the interests of sovereignty and integrity of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence. So, while memes and humorous material generally enjoy protected speech status under the Constitution that protection does not extend to speech that incites hatred, promotes violence facilitates targeted harassment, or unlawfully infringes upon the dignity, reputation, and rights of others⁶. The constitutional scheme tries to create a balance individual liberty with the larger public interest.

The law itself cannot solve all of social ramifications of humour. The material that plays a part in the normalization of destructive behaviour might not always be subject to the legal criteria that enable censorship. However, such material can still result in serious ethical and societal repercussions. Memes that mock mental illness, or make light of domestic abuse need not be legally actionable in order to affect public opinion and sensibility in relation to disadvantaged groups. Digital citizenship entails the application of ethical principles even in

³ Shreya Singhal v. Union of India, (2015) 5 S.C.C. 1.

⁴ INDIA CONST. art. 19, cl.1 (a)

⁵ INDIA CONST. art. 19, cl.2.

⁶ Subramanian Swamy v. Union of India, (2016) 7 S.C.C. 221.

the absence of legal obligations, acknowledging the fact that not every wrongdoing constitutes a crime.

It is also imperative for the task of creating a better environment online to be a collective effort by various parties. The social media platforms shape the dialogue on social issues by using algorithms which give preference to visibility, engagement and virality without differentiating between healthy and unhealthy content. The content creators decide what narratives they want to convey, while the users help promote them by sharing, reposting, commenting and reacting to them. Normalising harmful jokes thus needs a concerted effort from all these aspects and cannot be achieved only through legal measures.

On the contrary, ensuring the freedom of expression and the non-normalisation of the social harm should not be considered as conflicting principles of the constitution but as supportive ones. In a democratic society, people need to be free to question the authorities, criticise social norms and use humour as a way of expressing themselves. At the same time, such freedom needs to be used responsibly, with empathy and respect to other people's dignity.

Thus, the future of online communication is not contingent on limiting humour, but rather on establishing a culture where there is a balance between free expression and responsibility so that the tremendous power of memes is harnessed for constructive conversation, rather than being used to erode constitutional values.

CONCLUSION

With the increasing popularity of meme culture, the awareness has also increased that online humour is no longer merely a form of entertainment, but a potent weapon capable of swaying public opinion, moulding social attitudes and testing the limits of social acceptability. Memes are repeated and circulated widely through digital media and thus have the power to normalise both positive and negative behaviours and therefore are far more serious than their apparently light-hearted nature suggests. Their power is not limited to individual screens but extends to the collective consciousness of society.

As this article has shown, they have a great potential to promote legal awareness, to encourage civic participation, to challenge injustice and to inspire democratic discourse. The question is not really about the humour itself, but about how it is used. Used responsibly, memes can educate, empower and inspire meaningful social change; used irresponsibly, they risk trivialising violence, discrimination, trauma and human suffering, thereby contributing to

their gradual normalisation. The constitutional challenge is thus not to a preference for too much regulation over unfettered expression. Instead, it is about striking the delicate balance between the basic right of freedom of speech and expression and the equally significant constitutional obligation of dignity, equality and social responsibility.

Laws form the scaffolding for the protection of expression, but enduring change is ultimately a question of the ethical choices of content creators, digital platforms and society as a whole. In a more interconnected world, every meme is more than a moment of humour ,it's a reflection of the values society chooses to amplify. Moving from memes to mindsets can be subtle, but its effects can be deep and lasting. In this age of digital communication, in which contemporary culture is being shaped, the onus is on every participant in the digital ecosystem to ensure that humour is a vehicle for awareness rather than apathy, empathy rather than prejudice, dialogue rather than division.

“What is a joke to one person could be a lifetime of trauma to another; humour should never be at the expense of another’s suffering”