

Memes as Political Commentary: Analyzing India's 2024 Election Results Day Memescape

Dr. Surbhi Tandon¹, Prof. (Dr.) Durgesh Tripathi², Prof. (Dr.) Ramesh Kumar Sharma³

1Assistant Professor, Vivekananda School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies (VIPS-TC), New Delhi

2Professor & Dean, University School of Mass Communication, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi

3Professor, Vivekananda School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies (VIPS-TC), New Delhi

Abstract

Memes have become ubiquitous with digital culture and tend to go viral during important points in history including events like elections. They are increasingly playing a crucial role in setting the narrative for political debates and engagement especially among younger age-cohorts including Gen Z and Millennial. Memes have also given impetus to digital and visual politics in the countries with political parties leveraging the new juxtaposition of the visuals and sounds for the strengthening their agenda, attacking the opposition leaders and attracting the electorate especially the young voters. India concluded its general elections in 2024 with the none of the national parties getting a comfortable mandate (272 seats in Lok Sabha out of 543 required) to form a government despite the claims of getting 2/3rd or 3/4rd majority by different parties. Thus, the social media was flooded with memes on the vote counting day i.e. 4th June 2024 with the memes on the varied themes which set the political narrative for the political debates and narratives on the subsequent days until the new government was formed by NDA (National Democratic Alliance) and the return of coalition politics after a decade in the Indian political system. The paper attempts to analyse the various political memes on diverse political issues especially pertaining to the election results that were viral on the election vote counting day. It also reflect upon the templates and political themes from the popular culture such as popular web series, hindi films and television characters of the contemporary times.

Keywords:

Digital Politics, Memes, Election Results Day, Indian elections 2024, Indian Politics, Visual Communication

India's Elections in 2024 : An Overview

The elections in India have always been viewed with much fanfare, a celebration of democracy and a commitment to constitutional ideals. Above all, Elections in a democracy showcase the citizens' power to choose a government to govern themselves through their representatives every five years. The general elections in India for selecting their representatives to the lower house of the parliament is the world's democratic exercise with universal adult franchise at its core.

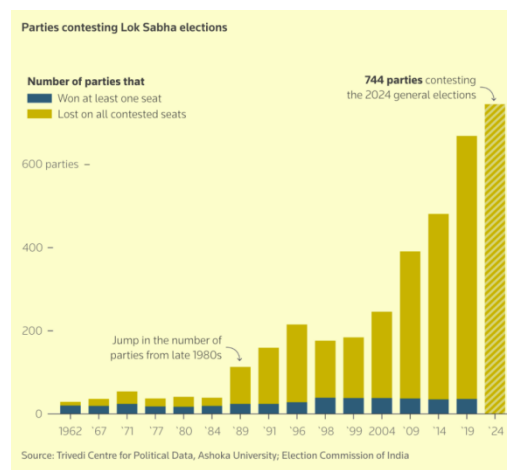
India concluded its general elections in 2024 where the electorate chose their representatives to be sent to the lower house of the parliament to form the 18th Parliament in the history of independent India. There were more than 900 million eligible and registered voters in India's 2024 elections. The elections were conducted in seven phases between April-June, 2024 by

the independent constitutional body i.e. The Election Commission of India. It was a crucial election as the ruling party since 2014 i.e. Bhartiya Janta Party was fighting the elections to seek a consecutive third term with Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking re-election for the third successive time. The two key coalition formations in the 2024 elections for the contest on 543 seats were the BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party) led NDA coalition and the Congress-led India alliance.

India's electoral rules specify that there should be a polling station every two kilometers from every habitat for the voters to exercise their civic rights which means that India had more than a million polling stations in the country for the elections. The voting was conducted in seven phases beginning from April 2024 and concluding in May 2024 with 4th June 2024 being scheduled as the results day for the elections by the Election Commission of India.

The 2024 elections were not just significant due to the sheer large size of the electorate but also due to the sheer number of aspirants who participated in the electoral battle. Some of the unique factors especially in terms of the political aspirants and the contestants reported by Reuters in 2024 were :

- There were more than 769 political candidates were fielded by the two of the largest national political parties i.e. Indian National Congress (Principal Opposition Party) and Bharatiya Janta Party (Ruling Party)
- Besides the two principal parties mentioned above, 30 other parties became a part of the heated political contest. These smaller parties had won more than a single seat in the last elections i.e. in the 2019 elections. Some of the important political parties are Biju Janta Dal, Aam Aadmi Party, National People's Party, Telugu Desam Party, and Bahujan Samaj Party.
- Besides these, there were more than 700 political parties that fought the elections for Lok Sabha having varied political ideologies and diverse ambitions aiming to represent the Indian population in the lower house of the parliament. This is crucial as there has been a steady rise in the number of political parties participating in the world's largest democratic exercise and the 2024 elections oversaw the largest participation in terms of the political parties contesting the polls.



Source : <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/INDIA-ELECTION/POLITICAL-PARTIES/dwpkzrymrv/>

With 744 political parties contesting the Elections 2024 in India, the country oversaw the largest number of political parties being represented in any elections in a democracy at least in the last 28 years. Scholars have pointed out various reasons for the constant rise in the number of political parties and political candidates in India. Some of the notable reasons are the need of the electorate to be represented by their leader, fragmentation of the socialist bloc in the country, loosening of the Congress stronghold in Indian politics, and enhanced strength of the regional parties' need for the assertion of the political identity and claims in Indian politics by diverse groups. Caste, sub-caste, region, and language remain critical factors in Indian politics, especially in terms of the selection of the political candidates to be fielded in the elections. There were about 8360 candidates in the elections with the break-up showing that 3920 were independent candidates and 4440 candidates representing various political parties.

Internet Memes : A Critical Introduction

“In an era of blurring boundaries between interpersonal and mass, professional and amateur, bottom-up and top-down communications. In a time marked by a convergence of media platforms, when content flows swiftly from one medium to another, memes have become more relevant than ever to communication scholarship”

Shifman, 2013

Drawing from the concept of Biology, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has defined memes as cultural ideas, artifacts, or digital cultural content that spreads rapidly and whose replication and imitation are both easy and rapid in terms of adoption by the users in cyberspace. The term Internet memes is usually defined as the juxtaposition of images, sounds, audio-video, and videos as jokes, rumors, or satire and is digitally spread amongst the users of the Internet or Digital media (Shifman, 2013). Some websites allow users to create, remix produce, or upload memes that are popular in the Digital world and such memes have the potential of virality. Some of the meme-creation or remix websites with templates of popular memes are Know Your Meme, 4Chan, Imgflip, Kapwing, and Canva. Such a website provides the templates of the popular memes or taglines or characters used in the memes which can be replicated or remixed with one's text or funny content and could be spread over the internet. Big corporations and brands are increasingly using meme marketing to target young audiences especially those targetting Gen Z such as Netflix. Memes are increasingly becoming a subject of interdisciplinary studies as they have both technological and socio-cultural significance in contemporary academic discourse and are an emerging area of study for scholars belonging to communication, political science, media studies, culture studies, sociology, computer science, information science, social psychology among others.

While some academic scholars consider internet memes as an important aspect of Digital media, many scholars have questioned the applicability of digital content within the discipline of digital culture (Burman, 2012; Rose, 1998). Even scholars like Jenkins (2009) who have been an active proponent of the 'spreadable media' have challenged the direct comparisons or borrowing of the concepts from biology to the academic discourses on digital culture, digital production, and transmission of ideas. Some scholars believe that Internet memes transform citizens into passive recipients rather than active agents or co-creators in the production of cultural digital content in cyberspace. This is a counter-claim to the class of scholars who have long considered memes as creative expressions and means of political engagement by

the citizens highlighting the users' agency and autonomy to challenge the mainstream narratives and discourses set forth by the political parties, prominent ideologies, and legacy media.

Shifman (2013) defines Internet memes with the following characteristics :

- Internet memes are a group or collection of images and texts that with commonality in terms of content used, templates, or themes undertaken
- They are created with an awareness of each other.
- They are created, circulated, imitated, replicated reproduced, and transformed by Internet users, and most of the time a large number of users.

Memes and Digital Politics

“While some political memes are framed in a humorous manner, others are deadly serious. But regardless of their emotional keying, political memes are about making a point-participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there.”

Shifman, 2013

According to Howley (2016), memes are inspired by the tabloid style of news writing and presentation having bold and sensational headlines, standardized fonts, the juxtaposition of images and text in a funny or satirical tone, and showcasing delightful imagery and creativity in the placement of different elements along with intertextual dexterity. Memes are typically used to create a humorous situation or are aimed at making you laugh and it also provides an opportunity for dissident opinions or counterarguments along with the articulation of cultural anxieties. As articulated by Jenkins (2009) regarding the political potential of the memes, he said “the ability of average citizens to express our ideas, circulate them before a larger public, and pool information with each other in the hopes of transforming our society.”

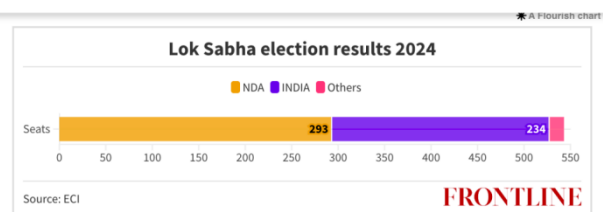
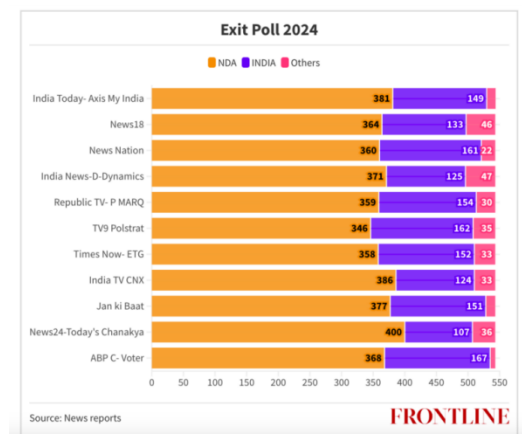
Memes being circulated in the election phase have become a worldwide phenomenon for the propagation of ideology and countering the narratives and discourses of the opposition parties including the targeting of the political leaders in both professional and personal lives.

In a recent online article titled “Memes, Politics And The R.K. Laxmans of Today” (<https://www.ndtv.com/opinion/memes-politics-and-the-r-k-laxmans-of-todays-india-5311468>) by an Indian Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) Derek O'Brien just before the start of the election phase in 2024 explained how memes are becoming a popular tool for election campaign and its role in setting political narratives in contemporary times and shaping the public opinion. He asserted that India has the largest users of Instagram globally and eight out of ten youth in the country are actively using the platform. He believed India's 2024 election season would be infused with new age messaging which is a blend of dance, music, and popular pop culture references to attract the voters especially the youth as leveraged by the political parties in India. He elaborates that memes have become a powerful medium for the marginalized or vulnerable sections of society to assert their identities in the digital medium and provides examples of expressing dissent through memes in the article. He believes that memes have in some cases, overpowered the legacy media (television, newspapers) in setting the narratives through varied examples and most of the examples were against the ruling government at the center. He took examples of the memes regarding the handling of the

unemployment prevalent in the country especially amongst the youth and the response of the central government leading to the trending of the hashtags like #NationalEmploymentDay for a few hours on social networking sites. He considers that 'digital manipulation' in the form of memes is a powerful communication means for expression. He even compared the meme makers of contemporary India with the legendary Indian cartoonist R K Laxman renowned for holding the governments accountable through his sharp-witted cartoons in India's leading newspaper 'The Times of India'.

Analyzing India's 2024 Election Results Day Memescape : Main Themes and Trends

India's election results day in 2024 i.e. 4th June 2024 became more dramatic due to the inaccurate results predicted by the Exit Polls aired by the various Television News Channels in collaboration with research agencies. Most Exit polls showed that the ruling alliance i.e. National Democratic Alliance would achieve more than 350 seats surpassing the minimum simple majority number and discrediting the opposition alliance i.e. India Alliance led by the Congress for their dismal performance. It was predicted that the Narendra Modi-led coalition would return to power with a resounding victory and outperform its previous performances in 2014 and 2019 and BJP alone would attain the seats required for the majority i.e. 272+ seats. However, the exit polls were proved incorrect as the vote count began on 4th June 2024 leading to a wave of memes being circulated on the internet on varied themes. There was a close contest between the two alliances and both had the chance to form a government with the support of certain regional parties. The Election results day became more animated and suspenseful when the owner of a poll prediction agency began to cry profusely on live television when asked tough questions by the senior journalists and news anchors regarding the poll predictions being largely inaccurate.



Source : <https://frontline.thehindu.com/news/exit-polls-were-wrong-lok-sabha-election-2024-bjp-narendra-modi-amit-shah-coalition-bjp-led-alliance-rahul-gandhi/article68262575.ece>

Main Themes :

Following are the broad themes on which the memes were made and circulated on the Election Results Day in 2024. Many media houses called it a 'meme tsunami' on the internet as increasingly memes were being circulated as the election results unfolded throughout the day.

1. Nitish Kumar Memes: Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and leader of the Janta Dal United (JDU) emerged as a key stakeholder in the election with 12 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar and his support to the alliances could make or break the government at the centre in India. His constant change of political allegiances in Bihar and in politics at the national level made him the clear target of the memes on the election results day. Even his party banners were used with satirical captions in the memes which ironically said 'Nitish Sabke Hain' whose metaphorical meaning would mean that Nitish is with every political party if it serves his political interest and gives him a strategic advantage. Nitish Kumar had recently switched from the India bloc to the NDA Alliance and was known for settling the contradictions and contestations amongst the various political parties in the India alliance. For a more nuanced understanding, it also reflects the frustration and helplessness of the Indian electorate with the politics and politicians where ideology and people's welfare are ranked far below political gains and strategic advantages. It also reflects upon the country's defection laws based on political convenience.



2. Stock Market memes: As the vote counting progressed on the results day showing a clear and tough competition between the NDA and India alliance, there was a visible and massive decline in both the National Stock Exchange and the Bombay Stock Exchange. Internet users in India began to share memes and jokes related to the stock markets, investor portfolios, and reactions of the financial markets to the poll results. They were either centered around mocking their portfolios or those investors who had invested in the financial markets just before the election results to have windfall gains. Many had expected the financial markets to showcase massive gains as they expected the BJP to return to power with a thumping majority.



3. Political Uncles and Fathers Watching Election Results: There were numerous hilarious memes showcasing the deep political interest of the fathers or uncles in India's middle-class set-up on the election results day followed by the political discussion. Such a phenomenon was mocked by Gen Z and Millennials on the counting day of the result. The complex political results and uncertainty over the formation of the government as none of the national political party getting a clear majority to form the government also led to the emergence of such memes.



4. Ayodhya Memes: BJP had expected to win the Ayodhya which is part of the Faizabad constituency in Uttar Pradesh after the consecration of the Ram Mandir temple in January 2024 in a huge event with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the helm of the affairs. However,

the loss of the seat to the Samajwadi Party (A regional party of Uttar Pradesh) led to a blame game between the followers of the BJP and those who voted for other parties with hashtags like #DhokaDiya. The followers of the BJP felt it as a betrayal and personal loss which coupled with the anger over the reduction in the BJP's seats in Lok Sabha seats from Uttar Pradesh. BJP had won 71 seats in Lok Sabha in the 2014 elections in Uttar Pradesh whereas it garnered support at 62 seats in the state. BJP's seats were reduced to 33 seats in Uttar Pradesh in 2024.



5. GST Memes: As the election results were unfolding it was evident that BJP would not achieve the tally of 400 as proclaimed by the party during their election campaign. Many internet users found a hilarious reason for the reduction of the seats of the ruling party. The memes found a funny reason to justify the BJP's reduction in the Lok Sabha seats i.e. the imposition of Goods and Services Tax (GST) - a new public tax introduced by the ruling party in the Modi government's first tenure (2014-2019).



6. Other themes: The other themes which were thoroughly utilized for the Election Results Day 2024 were related to Ms. Smriti Irani who lost the elections from Amethi Lok Sabha constituency against the Congress leader Kishori Lal Sharma. She had earlier defeated Mr. Rahul Gandhi from the same constituency in the 2019 elections. Many had attacked her behavior during the election campaign in the constituency. Another theme that was explored was the jailed AAP leader Mr. Arvind Kejriwal's aspirations and desires from the results of the elections in 2024.

Web Series Dialogues, Bollywood and Popular TV Characters dominating India's Memescape on Election Results Day in 2024

The web series 'Panchayat' dominated the meme template on the election results day. Many of the popular dialogues and visuals from the web series featured in the memes such as the '1-1 cup chai aur bola jaye' 'Milega naa sachiv ji' 'Dekh rahe ho Binod' 'Bas andar se mann achcha nahin lag raha hain' among others. Some of the popular templates and dialogues from the Bollywood or Hindi Film Industry were used to describe situations such as Shahrukh Khan's dialogue 'Palat' urging Nitish Kumar to abandon the NDA and side with the India bloc from the movie Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. Other meme templates were drawn from comedy films like Hera Pheri and its sequel, Welcome and Golmaal. Instances and scenes were taken from films like Gangs of Wasseypur as well to describe precarious situations for the elections by the memesters.

Some of the important and popular television characters like Taarak Mehta from the Indian sitcom Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah were leveraged to create funny memes on the election results day in 2024. Popular scenes and frames from the popular Television opera 'Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi' were used to describe the defeat of the former cabinet minister Ms. Smriti Irani from the Amethi constituency in Uttar Pradesh. A popular tagline amongst Gen Z in India is 'Moye Moye' used to describe a 'nightmare' or 'loneliness' was leveraged to create satirical memes on the election results day against the claims of the different political parties which proved to be incorrect against the people's verdict.

Conclusion

The discursive paper reflects upon the role of memes in India's political landscape especially on the election results day in India in 2024. Memes have been leveraged for socio-political commentary, satire, humor, dissent, and cultural expression by internet users, especially among Gen Z and Millennials. It also reveals the popular themes that were viral on the election results day in 2024 such as the Nitish Kumar memes, GST memes, Ayodhya verdict-related memes, and Political uncles to create engaging and relatable content on the election results day. It also showcases the interplay between digital politics and visual communication in contemporary times. Some of the scenes and templates from Hindi movies like Hera Pheri, Gangs of Wasseypur, and the Golmaal series were extensively used to create creative audio-visual content. The research showcases the critical role of memes in contemporary political communication as they are increasingly becoming a powerful tool for participation and engagement especially amongst youth. The role of memes in creating public sentiment and shaping public opinion needs to be further investigated.

References

1. Burman, J. T. (2012). The misunderstanding of memes: Biography of an unscientific object, 1976–1999. *Perspectives on Science*, 20(1), 75–104
2. Dean, J. (2019). Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics. *Political Studies Review*, 17(3), 255-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929918807483>
3. Glick Schiller, N. (1997). Cultural politics and the politics of culture. *Identities*, 4(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/yyyy>
4. Howley, K. (2016). 'I have a drone': Internet memes and the politics of culture. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 7(2), 155–175. https://doi.org/10.1386/iscc.7.2.155_1
5. Howley, K. (Ed.). (2013). *Media interventions*. Peter Lang.
6. Hopkins, N. (2013, January 7). US drone attacks “counter-productive”, former Obama security adviser claims. *The Guardian*. Retrieved

- from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/07/obama-adviser-criticises-drone-policy>
7. Jenkins, H. (2009, February). If it doesn't spread, it's dead (Part one): Media viruses and memes. Henry Jenkins Blog. Retrieved from http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html
 8. Jenkins, H. (2009). Why Mitt Romney won't debate a snowman. In J. Gray, J. P. Jones, & E. Thompson (Eds.), *Satire TV: Politics and comedy in the post-network era* (pp. 187–209). NYU Press.
 9. Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Media consumers in a digital age*. New York University Press.
 10. Rose, N. (1998). Controversies in meme theory. *Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission*, 2(1). Retrieved from http://cfpm.org/jomemit/1998/vol2/rose_n.html
 11. Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in digital culture*. MIT Press.
 12. <https://mybs.in/2dWYbx6>
 13. <https://www.india.gov.in/spotlight/general-election-results-2024>
 14. <https://www.ndtv.com/opinion/memes-politics-and-the-r-k-laxmans-of-todays-india-5311468>
 15. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/exit-polls-accuracy-challenges-election-predictions-voter-behaviour-election-commission/article68881522.ece>
 16. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/news/exit-polls-were-wrong-lok-sabha-election-2024-bjp-narendra-modi-amit-shah-coalition-bjp-led-alliance-rahul-gandhi/article68262575.ece>
 17. <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/INDIA-ELECTION/POLITICAL-PARTIES/dwpmkzrymrvn/>