

READING SELECTIVE MEMES IN THE CONTEXT OF DARJEELING : A SOCIO- POLITICAL INQUIRY.

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ABSTRACT

Treatment of memes as a cultural commodity has largely become an established convention today. This paper makes a case study of Memes as an observant of cultural codes in the context of Darjeeling. Particularly, it focuses on the image-based memes and explain the ontology of memes as pervasive and circulatory in a digital space. Qualitative research techniques is used in this paper to examine the meanings of different memes taken under study. Situating Darjeeling as a contested space, a demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland guides as an axiological tool to map socio-political and economic undercurrents of the place. Different types of memes analyzed here points at the anxieties of living in the hills in post-agitation times. To be specific, this paper delineates the periodic framework from 1988 to present times as an aftermath of Gorkhaland movement to be read as the period marking the acceptance of semi-autonomus councils in the likes of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) and Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA). This paper explores selective memes to establish its context within the socio-political terrain of Darjeeling hills by utilizing theoretical framework established by media scholar Patrick Davison .

Key Words : Darjeeling Memes, Gorkhaland , New Media , Internet

1. INTRODUCTION

The affordances of Internet today have given rise to new digital cultures .The change in ways in which people participate online is the culmination of social networking sites where people largely interact and negotiate their individual identities . This points to the dynamism of digital landscapes as a harbinger of new social relations . Henry Jenkins who coined the term “Participatory Culture”, accounted for the rise of new consumers who are also the producers of daily media contents . He argues that the systems and patterns of our negotiations with the media that we consume have largely changed as we find our “desires , fantasies , interests , ideas flowing across media channels”.(Jenkins 2006, 17) Owing to which there is the emergence of trend in which individuals are capable of crafting and creating his image in his own likes in a mediatized environment .The agencies to articulate one’s ‘selves’ by clicking pictures of oneself or sharing memes or recording a video and forwarding to a group also explains the social logic of participation. (Shifman, 2014 page 33). Going by this logic, I situate my research in the case of Darjeeling and look at the political

landscapes of the place by analyzing Memes to provide a distinct glimpse of the sub-cultural themes inherent in them. In order to provide a context for my research I provide a section for Gorkhaland movement and its redux and failure as an underpinned political event which largely informs the developments in the region in the later years. Undertaking a small-scale study of selective memes , this research is guided by the theoretical framework (Manifestation, Behavior and Ideal) espoused by Patrick Davison (2012) . The rationale behind choosing this framework is that this framework could well accommodate smaller sample of data and allow for a case-by-case analysis and avoid making a humongous generalization about the data.

1. DEFINING MEMES

Memes are contemporary forms of communication which largely imports the socio-cultural realities online .In general understandings , memes remain a playful source of entertainment . It shares a casual and funny references to popular culture in ways that the circulation of memes in the age of Internet has made it a common vocabulary for the internet users. The word “Meme” was first used by Biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 Book “The Selfish Gene”. He used the word meme to draw a genetic analogy and defined it as a single cultural unit which is able to replicate itself from one person to another owing largely to its characters of longevity , fecundity and cope fidelity (Dawkins , 1976 cited in Shifman, 2014 page 18) . The consensus remained that the memes were an idea having genetic equivalence in Dawkin’s schema of things .He went on to define it as a cultural unit of information stored in brain which goes on to spread from one brain to another. Catchphrases, Melodies , Clothing fashions and concept of God were some of the examples of memes in Dawkin’s notion of Memes. Interestingly, Susan Blackmore provides a much more reformed notions of memes in her book “The Meme Machine”. In her schema of things , Blackmore likens a meme to “memetic information stored in in any of its many forms; including ideas, the brain structures that instantiate those ideas, the behaviors these brain structures produce, and their versions in books, recipes, maps and written music”(Blackmore, 1999 page 66).But she makes a critical and important case of condition that to be considered a meme these given information needs to get copied by way of imitation. A more contemporary definition of memes which are pervasive in online digital spaces and understood in the parlance of digital media is given by Media scholar, Limor Shifman where she defines Memes as a group of items with similar characteristics that are largely imitated, shared and circulated in congruence of each other’s awareness online.(Shifman 2014 , 39-41) Although memes are simple digital artefacts which is easy to create and share in the Internet but as a communication genre, represents “complex system of social motivations and cultural activity” (Wiggins 2019 ,40) . Memes as such permits its diffusion and circulation easily because it is apparently mundane and trivial, interlaced with jokes and humor elements. Memes have become an easily accessible material online with websites such as Memebase.cheezburger.com knowyourmeme.com, 9gag, 4chan, Tumblr etc. and shared widely in social networking sites such as Facebook , WhatsApp , X (formerly Twitter) , Instagram . Also, with the easy availability of simple image or video editing software the task of generating creative images and video memes has gained currency. Meme Generator¹ for example is a free online image maker that allows one to choose a popular meme template such as Drake Hotline

¹ <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>

Bling , Two Buttons ,Distracted Boyfriend, Women yelling at Cat etc., and add customizable texts and images to create a meme. Though some memes are simple to read most others are ‘intertextual’ in nature which means that memes to a large extent are largely a multiple projection of overlapping texts and visual/audial references . For instance, overlaying hip-hop lyrics to a classic art or movies (see, Milner 2016, 11-42) constitute a memetic format (largely known as Image-macros) which requires digital literacy or minimal acquaintance with the themes and cross-references made thereof. Popular cultures such as Films, music , videogames , sports, news , politics or fashion often finds their creative and humoristic expressions in memes in ways that intake of such popular items is testament of its potential to augment participatory culture.

2. Digital Landscapes Of Darjeeling hills

The recent surge in the rise of social media use has generated multiple socio-economic transformations. Internet users are found to engage, negotiate, and interact with new media extensively. The reconstruction and negotiation of meanings and practices of Democracy and Citizenship within virtual spaces points at the discursive power of new media . Darjeeling hills offer us with a peculiar case of emerging online publics in the last decade. Sharma (2022, page 366) points out that in early as 2010, a bilingual Facebook page by the name of **Darjeeling Times** with 2.2 lakh followers had been launched followed by many community- anchored pages in 2011 such as “**Gorkha Voice** (2011), **Gorkha Dhwani** (The Voice of the Gorkha, 2011) and the more straightforward **Hamro Gorkhaland** (Our Gorkhaland, 2012). This was followed by the launch of **The Darjeeling Chronicle** (DC) and **Veer Gorkha** (Brave Gorkha) in 2013”. In his article, Sharma navigates the rise of new media as a tool to inform public with the unbiased news as citizen- generated content in the wake of heavy media censorship around 2017 Gorkhaland agitation. He theorizes virtual spaces as an emerging site of negotiating ideals of belongingness and identity .Despite the imposition of ban on internet facilities by the State order on June 8, the publics continued with the discursive act of reporting and negotiating with the price of censorship. Hundred days later on 25 September 2017, the ban was lifted. The advent of Facebook pages such as With You Darjeeling , Chautari 24, North Bengal Today , North Bengal Express etc., filled the vacuum left by the absence of mainstream media². To put it otherwise, the rise of online activism against state repression has been a remarkable underlining feature of Darjeeling’s digital history . Since then, Darjeeling has seen an increased use of social media . Local news channels along with its digital outlets have mushroomed in the last decades . Popular local (Nepali- language) television channels such as Kalimpong TV(KTV), Himali Channel and Darjeeling TV have integrated themselves into digital platforms which is then largely viewed and shared across social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook. Then it becomes easy for local political leaders to use these online platforms to advance their reach for gaining visibility and currency and at the same time internet denizens also participate online to make sense of the events . Meme creation and sharing as such becomes a meaning-making practices to register their collective or individual participation.

² “How Media Beat the Shutdown in Darjeeling” <https://cis-india.org/internet-governance/blog/how-media-beat-the-shutdown-in-darjeeling> Accessed on 11 October 2024.

3. DRIVERS OF MEME VIRALITY AND LOGIC OF PARTICIPATION

The ontology of meme as viral digital objects is established by the fact that they thrive in a circulatory setting. Memes undergoes rigorous process of imitation, remixing and replication and as a result appears in a completely new versions than the original which distinguishes it from Viral . Viral are something that is singular content item which is shared in large numbers but retains its originality (for example a popular music video , ‘Kolaveri Di’) while internet memes are conditioned by remixes and imitations generating multiple derivations from its former original self (chapter 5, Shifman 2014).

Chen Ling et al.,(2021) carries research on the drivers of meme virality and to do so analyzes multiple viral and non- viral memes posted in 4chan , politically incorrect board (/pol/). The signifier of virality as posited by the authors works on analyzing three dimensions of visual images as memes– composition , subject and Intended Audience. The resulting thesis was that the scales of images , its size, color, font, texture increases interest and shareability . Also, the subject of the images takes a central stage especially if it is projected in a central frame using close-up shot . Both cultural- specific and global human memes as two types of memes also accounts for the indicators of virality in which the later gains its receptibility more . In another study ,on analyzing the diffusion of memes on Angela Merkel, the former Chancellor of German, Michael Johann et al.,(2019) comes up with riveting observation that the ability of Merkel memes to diffuse into a large scale were explained by conceptual analysis in various levels of study- Memetic ,Individual, Temporal and Social Network level. The findings of the research established the role of image editing and strong social network groups of influential individuals , Journalists and Media groups in meme diffusion. Also, coherent characters embedded in memes by use of exclamatory sentence helped to eliciting emotional arousal directly which acted as the drivers of meme diffusion. For Shifman (2014, chapter 6) it is the six Ps - Positivity, Provocation of high-arousal emotions, Participation, Packaging, Prestige, and Positioning that caters to the virality of contents .In her qualitative analysis of the visual contents taken from You tube , the samples taken under study had one or any of the above attributes contributing to the widespread sharing of videos which made it go viral .In analyzing the photos having viral attributes or possessing memetic potential , the author recognize chiefly two important aspects – image juxtaposition and frozen motion. In her treatment of 30 sampled You tube videos a focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness, and whimsical content remained the observable attributes which possessed high memetic potential and the ability to diffuse. To understand logic of participation , Shifman(2014 , 32-34) gives social , cultural/aesthetic and economy- driven logics. By social logic she argues that individuals construct their unique selves to identify within a digital community. Cultural or aesthetic logic is affirmed by situating the ontology of meme as culturally conceived discourses . By Economy -driven logic she argus that a memetic video which has gained derivations from a simple You tube video allows for more attention and strengthens the participatory potencies at the same time drawing more attention to initial memetic video.

4. CONTEXTUALIZING GORKHALAND MOVEMENT AND ITS AFTERMATH

Situated at an elevation of about 7,000 feet above sea level , Darjeeling is one of the districts in the northern part of West Bengal. Historically established as the summer resort for the vacation-

loving Britishers, the present times of Darjeeling is the imageries of colonial legacy with serious socio-political ramifications. Reading in the post-colonial era, the eruption of series of violent and peaceful subnational agitations in the year 1986-1988, 2007-2013, and in 2017, problematizes the space as deeply conflictual and tensed which requires us to look it from beyond the 'tourist gaze' as argued by Rune Bennike (2018). The ethnic demands for a homeland within Indian union as an assertion of subnational aspirations delineates the politics of recognition of minority identities within a nation-state. These conscious political aspirations of national belonging provide an ideological base as a sustainable project for the co-existence of subnationalism as pan-Indian ideal. (Sanjib Barua 1997, 498 cited in M. Weiner 2013 page 216). Growing problems of the hills such as mass-level corruption, sagging tourist revenue, economic marginalization, external infiltration of people, dying tea industry, rise in drug addiction among youths and environmental degradation had become severe. (Ganguly, 2005). The mobilization of the people for this realization of national goal was carried by Subash Ghising in the early 1980s although demand for an autonomy status had already been made in the early colonial era of 20th century (Subba, 1992 page 76). He formed his party Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in 1980 but nearing the year 1987 when the agitation had taken its fiery shape with losses of human lives numbering more than 1200, the movement could not sustain its pace and vigor and at last contrary to his steadfast determination of nothing less than a homeland, Ghising accepted deals of a semi-autonomous status called Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988 under Jyoti Basu's CPIM government and remained its chairman from 1988 to 2008. The violence that was witnessed in the wake of the 1986 agitation definitely presented a "nightmarish memories of raids, rapes and beheaded bodies still haunting many residents of Darjeeling"³. The incidents of violence reached to such an extent that everyday lives were marred with chaos and disorder. Marking a departure from the earlier research on 1986 agitation, Dipti Tamang (2020) explores the intersectionality between gender and violence to provide a nuanced account of the agitation where she documents personal losses of women who were at the receiving end of violence (Rapes, Tortures), where militarization of the spaces had become a routinized reality. With the crucial question on political aspirations of the hills still unfulfilled, the Gorkhaland agitation of 1986 ended in a tripartite talk in New Delhi but soon enough there were waves of political discontent prevailing in the hills. Consequently, the machinations of dethroning Ghising were staged on 10 February 2001 near Kurseong.⁴ Following an attempt of assassination which Ghising survived, a man named Chattrey Subba⁵ was allegedly implicated for an crime of launching an attempt to kill the former leader Ghising and was sentenced to jail until his release on September 10, 2011. The dissatisfaction with the Ghising's administration had become more and more apparent and in the midst of all, the burning plea of a separate homeland remained unsatiated and cancelled. Hence, the only spark

³ "How Politics Subsumed The Popular Sentiment For Gorkhaland| The Caravan"

<https://caravanmagazine.in/perspectives/gorkhaland-politics-subsumed-popular-sentiment>, (Accessed on 20 September, 2024)

⁴ "Ambushed Ghising Hit On Head – Telegraph India" <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/ambushed-ghising-hit-on-head/cid/935934> (Accessed on 20 September, 2024)

⁵ Chattrey Subba had been an active member of GNLF but broke away with the party due to his ideological differences within the party in the midst of ongoing agitation in 1986s and operated a radical wing, GVC (Gorkha Volunteer Cell) which departed from the compromising tactical moves of Ghising and functioned as a military arm to provide counter-resistance to State/central forces.

needed was provided when Bimal Gurung⁶, a peasant from Tea Garden who worked as a party member in GNLF launched his own party, Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJM) on 7 October 2007 after severing his political ties with Ghising. Campaigning on the emotional narrative of homeless Gorkha and identity crisis like his predecessor Ghising, Bimal Gurung was able to rekindle the old hope of Gorkhaland when in 2007 a young contestant from Darjeeling named, Prashant Tamang made it to the finale of a popular Indian reality singing show called Indian Idol season 3 in Sony Tv. The massive petitions for votes were made from the beginning rounds of the show and to that effect Prashant won the winner title in 2007. The fanning of collective anger of the Gorkha community was made when post-show, a Radio Mirchi RJ made a racist remark upon the win of Prashant and expressed concern as to who would guard houses if a winner is made out of Security Guard⁷ and this worked as a provocation for the collective cry of Gorkha identity once stiffened in 1980s. The GJM rallied around the towns to lend him 'unequivocal' support for the homeland demand without any compromise. The pooling of mass support to Gurung and his party as a purifier of political dirt that had gathered in the semi-autocratic rule of Ghising, the resurrection of Gorkhaland *andolaan* once again brought the hill come to a standstill. After ousting Ghising out of power and registering an explicit involvement in the public murder of Madan Tamang, a sharp-political intellect and outspoken critic of GJM on May 2010 and his withdrawal from the statehood demand with the acceptance of so called interim-setup called Gorkhaland Territorial Administration which was instituted to replace DGHC in 2011 provided a yet another anecdote of the betrayal and deception of people's demand of homeland which Gurung had promised to achieve as early as 10 March 2010 failing of which he would commit a suicide. (Weiner 2018, 122)

The theatre of politics with its conventional plot remained intact in the hills and it seemed that people were watching the same episode over and over again which had same surprise endings. In 2013 with the creation of the state of Telangana from the state of Andhra Pradesh, Gurung buckled up once again for yet another agitation to press State for the demand of homeland and in his place elected Binoy Tamang, a GJM party member as the Chief executive of the GTA who meanwhile had been under arrest only to make his return as the GTA Chief Executive in December of that same year. Bandhs and disruption of normal life which had become a regular feature of the hills

⁶ Bimal Gurung, colloquially addressed as 'Daju' or Big Brother, became the first executive member of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration after he dropped the demand of Gorkhaland (which he claimed he did not) in 2011. In the wake of 2017 Agitation, 11 people were killed by the police forces and Gurung became a fugitive with several seditious charges labeled by the state dangling under his head. His party, GJM split into two camps – GJM 1 under Bimal Gurung faction and GJM 2 under Binoy Tamang faction. He largely boycotted 2021 GTA elections as unconstitutional and urged for the dissolution of GTA for the grater goal of Gorkhaland. In 2020 After his years of hiding, he appeared before the public to a surprising climax as he joined TMC breaking his ties with NDA- BJP. In the recent Lok Sabha elections held on 26 April, 2024 he lent his support for a BJP candidate, Raju Bista who went on to become Member of Parliament from Darjeeling constituency for a consecutive two terms in 2019 and 2024.

⁷ "A Radio Riot – Times Of India" <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/a-radio-riot/articleshow/2435843.cms> (Article accessed on 24 September 2024)

was seen again.⁸ Cut to 2017, the hills boiled once again after the notice of compulsory inclusion of Bengali Language in the hill's schools resulting in the longest ever bandhs of 104 days with most leaders shut in jails or facing seditious charges. Significantly, the latest policy schemes "tribal boards" instituted by chief Minister Mamata Banerjee were looked upon as an exclusionary project to divide communities and rule out any prospects of Gorkhaland. The aftermath of 2017 agitation saw old wine packaged in a new bottle and this came up with the re-election of Binoy Tamang as GTA chairman by Chief minister, Mamata Banerjee. Thus, the unfulfilled political aspirations of Gorkhas are undermined by the political nexus that exists between state and regional leaders to an extent that Darjeeling presents an eroding culture of political trust marred by betrayal and deception. On 9 September, 2021 Anit Thapa who was once a Gurung's aide and party president of the second faction of GJM formed his own party Bhartiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (Indian Gorkha Democratic Front) with a slogan of *Naya Soonch Naya vichar* (lit. New Thoughts New Ideas). In a new GTA election held on 26 June 2022, Thapa was successful in winning 26 seats out of 45 thus becoming a new Chief Executive. This marked a transition from GTA to GTA 2.0 or locally termed as GTA 2.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a theoretical framework, this paper uses analytical framework espoused by Patrick Davison (2012) which makes three distinct components of memes as a model of its study such as –

- 1) Manifestation
- 2) Behavior
- 3) Ideal

Davison defines Manifestation of a meme as the "observable, external phenomena. It is the set of objects created by the meme, the records of its existence (page 123)". Whereas, Behavior implies the change that is achieved by implying actions in memes (achieved through Photoshopping, or other editing software) and Ideal of a meme refers to the "concepts or ideas conveyed". Using these three categories to study memes, this paper draws the theoretical relevance in analyzing specific memes in the context of Darjeeling and see to that effect the bunch of memes which becomes socially and politically relevant in our discussion. Although, the incorporation of memes (all Image-macros) to this study generates a likable tendency for a similarity in its design, the content analysis of these memes helps to bring up the hidden or invisible nuances in these memetic formats.

6. METHODOLOGY

The data obtained are collected from Facebook and Instagram pages through simple random sampling method. The data were accessed as it was public in nature and a simple keyword and hashtags searches such as "Darjeeling Memes" in Google / Facebook/ Instagram search bar led

⁸ "Bimal Gurung resigns From GTA To Press For Gorkhaland – The Economic Times"
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bimal-gurung-resigns-from-gta-to-press-for-gorkhaland/articleshow/21491459.cms?from=mdr>. (Article accessed on 22 September 2024)

us to some active and inactive meme pages . To obtain my data despite unorganized search algorithm working to generate a bunch of data I followed the links to find some pages and posts . I then performed a snow-ball sampling to further the search and came across meme posts and pages that actually had some relevant storage of memes. A total number of 80 items were collected and the data obtained were further annotated manually to establish its relevance and eliminate the ones which were duplicate and irrelevant to our study .The data are then qualitatively analyzed by performing qualitative content analysis . These memes were posted between the year 2020 or earlier to most recent 2024 although one cannot be certain about the exact original time of posting due to the multiple sites of sharing the same content without accreditation given the lack of ownership logo to some memes considered in this paper.

7. DARJEELING IMAGINED AS MEMES

Denisova(2021, 53) argues that “the memes have this capacity of connecting global discourses with the local agenda” . Local or sub-cultural agendas appears as a strong signifier in online memetic culture today. At the same time, the alterations and re-adaptations of global memes is also indicative of the interconnectedness of the digital networks which has been able to cross beyond the confines of a territorial border. This meeting of global and local is best understood as “Glocalization” (a term coined by Roland Robertson, Shifman, 2014, 159) Though there has been many enriching research performed on the political memes and its functions in a democracy at the national level, Indian experience at the micro level is still being explored and this presents a burgeoning field for political research. For instance, Singha(2021) in her chapter, analyzes the role of memes in Assam case by analyzing the circulation of a peasant leader, Akhil Gogoi ‘s memes. The study of political terrains of states like Assam which is far distanced from mainland India geographically presents itself as a spatially distinct terrain which is embedded within tensed socio-political setup. The study of this nature also encourages us to see the existing lacunae, as new forms of digital tools of expressions such as memes have already started making inroads . In the context of Darjeeling there are limited studies which gives us cultural- specific elemental analysis of Memes . For instance, Pradhan(2022) analyzes K- pop memes circulating in the context of Darjeeling as the non-verbal communication where homophobia , sexism, transphobia prejudice and discrimination gets highlighted. The circulation of these memes legitimizes and establishes the existing notions of gender within male-female dichotomy .At the same time , the entry of soft masculinity in the form of Korean- pop subverts the gender knowledge which are largely performative. Locating Darjeeling as a contested space, I contextualize the political memes by content analyzing sets of memes and treat them largely as a cultural commodity to gain an insight into the underlining political culture of the hills .With the subsequent failure of leadership apparatus and culture of violence pervasively defining the political terrains of Darjeeling, the malleability of hill leaders to strike an easy negotiations with Communist party in 1988 and Trinamool Congress in 2011 till date has greatly eroded trust of the locals. As shown in the Figure-1a, this is a meme template borrowed from the Ramanand Sagar’s popular television series “Ramayana” from the 1990s era. It features a still from the serial in which Bali , an arrogant monkey king of Jarasandha is infuriated at the audacity of his brother ,Sugreev for facing him without a trace of shame even after illegitimately claiming a throne to Jarasandha without his

knowledge. Bali then gives an open challenge to engage in a duel with him. The innocent Sugreev's pleas of reconciliation are met with denial and his attempt at explaining his part is also impaired completely. Consequently, the two engages in a decisive duel and Sugreev is assisted by Lord Ram. At the end, Bali is killed by the arrow of Ram. In the meme the imitation of a rage of Bali expressed in the dialogue is achieved and directed towards the politicians of Darjeeling hills who keeps making false promises on the pretext of development during vote season. The top text written in a Devanagari script to be legibly understood as Nepali, translates to English as "When a leader asks for a Panchayat vote without fulfilling the promise made in the GTA vote". The bottom text in Hindi or punchline text is evidently the text expressing an anger. (So you are here again, what shamelessness). The point for brooding appears after a constitution of GTA could not solve economic problems of the hills and functioned only as a 'begging bowl' for the leaders that parties like BGPM came with yet another manifesto- full of promises.⁹ GTA chairman, Anit Thapa allying with TMC also easily won the Panchayat polls which was held after a big gap of 23 years recently in 2023.



(Figure -1a)

(Figure .1b, original video from You Tube¹⁰)

Meme in Figure 2 is an example of troll memes. Trolls are implicit images which are abusive, provocative or menacing. These type of memes employs an offensive, witty or satirical text to criticize an individual or a group. In this case, the three-layered image meme features the faces of Darjeeling politicians namely, Bimal Gurung, Anit Thapa and Binay Tamang. The text is referenced from a popular Hindi film dialogue of Deewar (1975) enacted by Amitabh Bachchan and Shashi Kapoor – Amitabh Bachchan: "Aaj mere paas building hai, property hai, bank balance hai, gaadi hai... kya hai tumhare pass?" Shashi Kapoor: "Mere paas maa hai." In the first panel of the speech bubble, this iconic retro Bollywood line is modified and imitated to ridicule their former boss, Bimal Gurung by the then GJM 2 leaders, namely Binoy Tamang and Anit Thapa – "Mere pass paisa hai, gta hai mere pass contractors hai aur me saman baat raha hu"-Today I have cash, I have GTA, I have contractors and I am giving away freebies. "Tere pass kya hai?"-Tell

⁹ "BGPM Releases Election Manifesto, Promise To Raise Gorkhaland Issue"

<https://www.sikkimexpress.com/news-details/bgpm-releases-election-manifesto-promise-to-raise-gorkhaland-issue> (Article accessed on 22 September, 2024).

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-UZAePp5W0&t=1s>

me what do you have(lit. In the second panel). To which Gurung answers – “mere pass Janta hai” – I have my public (lit. In the last panel). Bimal Gurung thus featuring in the third panel is established as an honest leader whose faith in public is unwavering although he is a topical troll in this case scenario as well. The meme here in question is suggestive of a pervasive culture of bashing one’s political rivals in Indian democracy as elsewhere . The hill political leaders are often found to engage in crying foul of their opponents during public speeches in a show of strength and masculinity .It is noteworthy that the leaders from second factions of GJM were accused of committing a fraudulence which revealed later the recovery of huge amount of cash unusually from inside the water syntax in a controversial turn of events. Distributing freebies such as buffet sets and chairs to appeal voters for the ensuing GTA election in 2022 was also evident . This captures the culture of political patronage as a rallying point for the leaders to influence their vote base and establishes the supremacy of muscle-politics won around the affordances and privileges of political power which become operative and visible during elections .



(Figure- 2)

Another meme in figure-3 is also another troll meme referenced from a Hindi comedy/ action movie Golmaal 3 (2010) which mocks at the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for not heeding with the popular demand of Gorkhaland and instead stressing on permanent political solution(PPS) which is criticized as opaque and untenable. The bottom text “*Main nahi bataunga*” (lit. I won’t tell) is spoken by the buffoonish character in the movie , *Puppy Bhai* played by a popular comic actor Johnny Lever who absentmindedly mixes things up to an extent that he can easily confuse people and events to the amusement of the audience .The trope used in this meme is to establish similarity in the political intentions of Bharatiya Janata Party who remains flighty in times of serious negotiations by not being able to recognize the political aspirations or spell out clearly the fundamentals of political solution for Darjeeling and consideration of the homeland demand of Gorkhaland .



(Figure – 3)

Meme in Figure 4, employs similar manifestation and behaviour of trolling a leader. The central subject in the composition of meme is the picture of a half-metalled road which jocularly ends in the middle of the path. This meme applies a common format of top-bottom textual overlapping in an image written in romanized Hindi. The top-text reads as current GTA chairman, Anit Thapa urging people to walk a distance of this length at first. The bottom text decrees that a further road construction would follow if people have derive satisfaction with the road made. It mocks at the poor conditions of road facilities in Darjeeling where corrupt local leaders and contractors secretly enters into a nexus to engage in corruption. Chettri (2021) argues cases like this as an ingredient of criminalized politics where rowdies or musleman emerge to work in tandem with party orders in a desperate situations of joblessness.



(Figure -4)

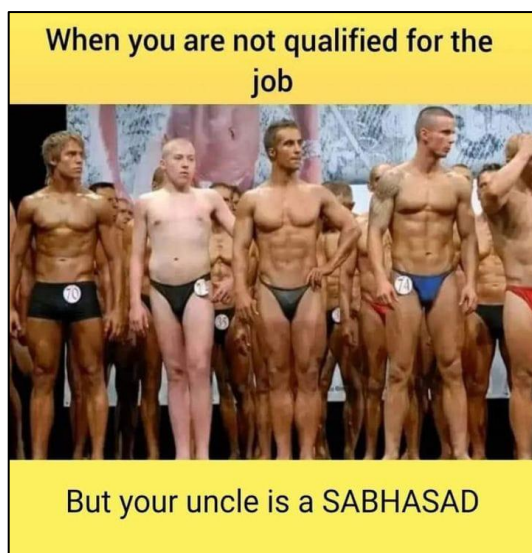
This particular meme in figure- 5 is an illustration of Gorkhaland imbroglio. The meme is composed of three vertical panels with different captions as lines spoken by the characters. In its original context, the casting is an advertisement for Policy Bazar which is India's largest online insurance platform from which this still has been taken. Featuring in the ad, Indian movie star, Akshay Kumar delivers a message as Yamaraj , the God of death in Hindu mythology to initiate a term insurance as soon as possible to avoid financial emergency. The imitation in the meme is achieved with a reproduction of completely new dialogue that changes the plot of the story. In the first panel, Yama asks for the last wish – *Koi aakhiri khwahish* (any last wish you got?) . The dying man in the central panel replies with an overwhelming emotion that he wants to see Gorkhaland happen a reality and the third panel follows a funny action of snatching a hair of a dying man with the text that enforces a Hindi slang to insult the man for coming up with such a foolish yet clever proposition which can never happen . Clever in some sense that he wants to avoid death. The admission of this impossibility mirrors the popular sentiment that Gorkhaland remain and would remain an elusive dream even after elapses of centuries . Quirkily observed , the captions conveys that the fulfillment of this dream is an equation to the achievement of immortality. It therefore , satirizes the politics of bargaining with the State and the derailment of political goal implying nothing more than a lack of political incompetence and the State's non-compliance with the statehood demand.



(Figure -5)

The meme in figure 6 applies a commonly used meme template to elicit humor and satire. The top-text and the bottom text is written in English debarring the word SABHASAD which is burrowed from the lexicons of Indian polity meaning a Coucillor .Sabhasad in distinct Darjeeling sense refers to Elected Coucillor of Gorkhaland Territorial administration. The meme presented here features an image of body-builders lining up in a body-building competition. An anomaly or oddity is established by the presence of a scrawny white guy whose physical attribute is in itself a mockery

to the codes and values of competition. The contextualisation of the image is mediated by drawing up a symbolic connotation to inform the role of political patronage as an established political culture in Darjeeling . The legitimization of social and political privilege works as a function of nepotism . It highlights the proliferation of extra-legal routes and unchecked political networks working under the radar of surveillance to benefit the relatives and blood kinships without any hassles and merit. The pervasiveness in the use of personal political ties and links to avail social or political security benefits is also emblematic of poor economic prospect realised in the inefficient allocation of funds by the State . This also explains the hierarchy of power relations operating to criminalize politics in the region.



(Figure -6)

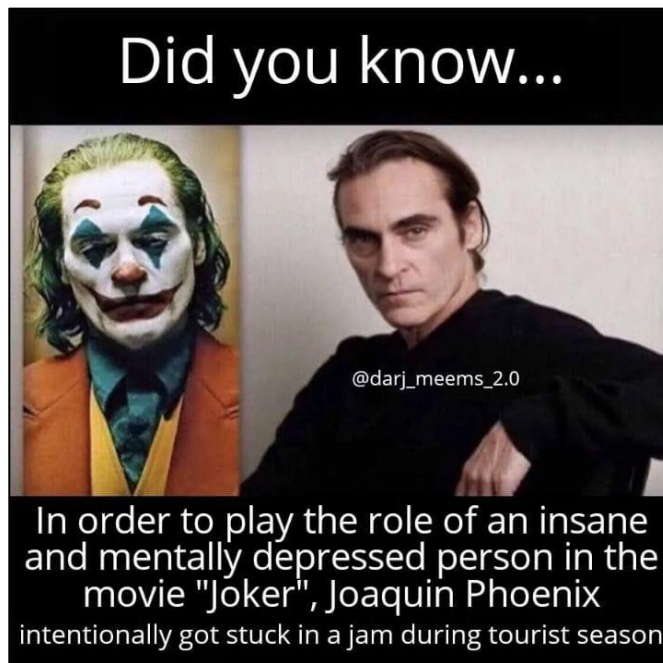
Geographically speaking, Darjeeling is a fragile region. The region has been wrestling with perennial issues of landslides since a very long time. The hills are also seismically sensitive and records an unusual number of earthquakes. The congestion of public spaces due to continuous expanding of the town explains the urban reality of the town along with the daily nuances of water crisis, traffic jam (memefied in figure 8) among others. Anthropologist, Sarah Besky(2017) puts forward a fine argument that consideration on the issue of place and Belonging must meet with the duality of struggle – one *for* the land and other *with* the land. Burrowing a concept of “Shadow place”¹¹ put forward by Australian Philosopher and eco-feminist Val Plumwood, Besky makes an argument that Darjeeling is a bearer of edge effects where towns and shadow spaces , tea monoculture and forest presents a complex dynamic of struggles in which environment justice also becomes an equally important claims of belonging. These ecological issue feature in the daily lives of the hill people . Meme in Figure 7 is a pictorial example of ecological disaster propelled by high intensity of rainfall during monsoons becoming a real nuance in a Kurseong town of Darjeeling. In the picture, tourists is seen enjoying a wild game of rafting. It would seem that the road flooded with water in the heavy rain auger well with the adventurous sports like rafting. Hence an advertisements of sorts is called upon although everyone knows that the road is for daily

¹¹ “These places are materially and imaginatively oriented to the sustenance and the enjoyment of others. Shadow places are marred by intensive economic extraction, degradation, and displacement.”(Besky 2017, 19)

commotion of vehicles and peoples. This unchecked flow of rainwater in public roads calls for the institution of an effective management apparatus whose jurisprudence by and large falls within the hand of municipal authorities in the town. The meme however employing an humorous stance supplies a visual argument for the proper management of drains and unchecked water outlets in the light of deteriorating infrastructural structure of the town. In figure 8, the image of a fictive psycho character in a Oscar winning movie Joker(2019) played by Joaquin Phoenix is contrasted with the real actor and the text at the bottom emphasises a fake scenario that a mentally depressed character of a Joker was modeled after experiencing(intentionally) traffic doldrums in the cramped and crooked roads of Darjeeling hills during tourist season.



(Figure-7)



(Figure -8)

8. DISCUSSIONS

After considering and analysing the memes above, we make a discussion of compositional element which guides this research for the above discussed memes in this section. Specifically, the manifestation in the memes discussed above takes a critical note of the socio-political and also ecological situations in Darjeeling hills. This is largely achieved by the utility of humor and satire. Although, the image of leaders featured in the memes are subjected to trolls and criticism in a conventional sense of articulating political standards and views held which is then easily circulated through these memes to understand certain political views about the ruling machinery in the region. The seemingly banal characteristic of memes which constitute its outer appearance or manifestations is achieved by photoshopping and image editing softwares. For instance, considering the meme in figure 1, 2, 3 and 4 the material used in bringing about a change in behavioural component in memes can be alluded to the addition of funny texts and dialogues which is mostly referenced from the popular culture for instance, popular movies, or Hindi Television serial dialogues and Mythology. When we look at this particular behaviour in the context of Darjeeling, this in some sense, establishes (although cannot be generalised) the prominence of Hindi language in the region which although is situated in its own unique lingual setting. The compressed narrative that is tied to these memes forms the ideal which delegitimizes the leaders through humouristic elements (behaviour). The undelining political culture of violence shaping the discourse on the Gorkhaland agitation is also a reminder of an otherwise foul political gambling of attaining power and position. The manifestation in memes as seen in figure 2 corroborates to this political tradition of engaging in personal rivalries and systemic corruption while enjoying the perks of being the official members in the Gorkhaland Territorial administration (GTA). The ideals of memes, therefore in most of the memes considered above looks askance at the erosion of public trust in the stakeholders as learnt in the recent and past historical lessons. It also conveys a narrative of political instability and fiasco of Gorkhaland Movement which is negotiated and settled with the ratification of a council called GTA at the turn of every agitation accompanied by its own predicaments of violence and violation of constitutional rights. Lastly, the insufficiency of the regional autonomy and a fragmented governance which has conditioned ecological disbalance in the Darjeeling Himalayas as demonstrated by the memes in figure 7 (flood menace) and figure 8 (congestibility of spaces) accounts for the environmental justice in the region as achieved in the ideals of the memes considered.

CONCLUSION

Memes offer a visual argument to ascertain its participation in the discourse of political developments. The advancement of criticism of the dominant system is carried by the potencies of the meme to generate humor beyond which it resembles a voice of the opposition. (Wiggins 2021, 75). This makes memes both a polarizing agent as well as democratizing agent. Different types of memes available in the Internet subscribing to some ideology either provide a narrative of the government or counter it by advancing the collective and shared understanding of woeful socio-political system. The agendas of meme makers become a way to bring in unpopular issues often ignored by dominant media and thus to become a narrative in the popular media houses. Acting as the potential vehicle for political dissent, these memes are an instrument of resistance against

hegemonic rule. It extensively uses political humor and satire to critique the dominant system but also has the potential to act as a propaganda tool to reinforce ideologies, identities and stereotypes. The recurrent themes taken under study after analyzing were the political culture embedded within the inglorious history of violence and conflicts in the agitation period. The Manifestation, Behaviour and Ideals in memes considered above helps us to read and undertake a thorough investigation so to observe underlining socio – political and also environmental issues prevailing in these memetic sets. It remains a significant carrier of a political narrative within its own sub-cultural ecology. However, some memes would necessitate cultural literacy from the part of the viewer as well. This would mean one has to become digitally literate in order to comprehend these online items. Hence, even in the decades of growing internet usage around the globe, there still exist a considerable amount of “digital gap” in demographics such as India whose rural population are still figuring out these “digital myths” (Wiggins’s terminology, 2021) Despite that, Darjeeling stands at a critical crossroads where new media is taking precedence over old ones offering an invitation to future research.

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