

Content, Purpose and Meaning: An analysis of Prime Minister's Task Related Memes During COVID19 Lockdown in India

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Abstract

When the whole world was fighting against the Pandemic Corona Virus, a few groups of people were on their own way of creating the Image Memes and posted through social media about the people response towards the announcement of PM's message to the citizens during the crisis time in Chennai, India. Since Chennai the Capital of memes, were flooded with their own creative works through social media platforms, this research analyzed the Purpose, content and meaning of memes related to PM's Address and task related memes during the COVID19 lockdown period during April 2020. The samples were taken purposively from the Instagram page of Chennai Memes. This study concluded that interpretation of meaning is difficult without either the image or the text and asserted that the meme creators mirrored the perception, emotions and feelings of people or society in an informative, sensible and entertaining way.

Keywords: Memes, Chennai, Corona, Lockdown, COVID19, PM, Task, Instagram, Social Media, India.

I. INTRODUCTION

While Internet Memes that was commonly applied to describe the transmission of items such as jokes, rumours, videos and websites from one person to other via the internet by the netizens in vernacular discourse, it was described as a small units of culture that was spreaded from one person to another by the way of copying or imitation (Shifman, 2014). The term 'meme' that was coined by Richard Dawkins in the year 1976, became popular after its entry in Social media. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were used to spread this to netizens, since the social media can be conveniently accessed through the Smart phones with the internet that was provided by the Mobile service providers. In India, particularly in Chennai the capital of Tamil Nadu that was noted to be the Capital of memes (Mruthula, 2017) began to post memes predominantly during the Natural Calamities Chennai Flood, Wardha Cyclone, during the death of the earlier Chief Ministers of Tamil nadu Dr. J. Jayalalitha and Dr. Karunanidhi, during the protest in Jallikattu and it extended to COVID19 Lockdown periods also. Nowadays meme creations were at the highest peak in trolling the common man to politicians and it increased during the COVID 19 lockdown period in India.

II. COVID19 AND LOCKDOWN IN INDIA

The COVID19 officially named by UN agency for the deadly virus from China (Thuburn, 2020) that originated during December 2019 had took the lives of more than 4,000 in India during May 2020 (*covid19india.org*, n.d.) and more than 1.65 lakhs all over the world as on 20 May, 2020 (Desk, 2020) as it is an infectious disease that made infected people to experience respiratory illness from mild to moderate that can be recovered without special treatment except for the older people, children and the people with underlying medical problems. This spread of COVID19 occurs primarily through the discharge from nose or through the droplets of saliva while the infected person sneezes or coughs (*who.int*, 2020).

While the Corona Virus Spread was reported on 30th January 2020 in India, PM Narendra Modi appeared on the Mainstream media and addressed the nation at different times. His initial presence was on March 19, 2020 to announce about the Janata Curfew that should be followed by the nation on March 22, 2020 from 7AM -9PM and asked the citizens of India to clap and clang utensils for 5 minutes in their balconies to thank the frontline COVID19 warriors on the curfew day. The next presence on March 24, 2020 was to announce about the nationwide lockdown for three weeks that would end on April 14. 'Light a lamp' announcement was given by PM, Narendra Modi's video address to the nation through twitter account on April 3rd by 9AM urged people to light lamps or candles for 9 minutes on April 5, 2020 at 9PM by switching off all the lights of their houses to show the unity of nation towards COVID19 crisis time. The extension of the first phase of lockdown was announced by PM for 19 more days till May 3. While the third phase of lockdown was extended till 17 May 2020, the PM Address to nation before the end of the third phase was about the Fourth phase of lockdown, the Rs. 20 lakh crore worth economic package and the stress was on the need of India to become 'self-reliant'. (Manral, 2020).

When the People of Indian nation were anxiously looking forward for some positive message from the Prime Minister (PM) of India every time during lockdown address, the message of PM did not soothe the citizens, instead it granted some kind of discomfort as the address was not positive and not about the normal livelihood of the people. This panic and grievances/emotions of the people were captured by the meme creators and was allowed to roam inside the social media walls by the creators of memes. This study analyzes the content, its purpose and the meaning behind the PM Address and the task oriented memes.

Objectives of the research:

1. To analyze the purpose of memes during the COVID19 lockdown created by Chennai Memes
2. To analyze the content of PM Address encapsulated by the Meme creators of Chennai memes.
3. To analyze the meaning behind the PM's task oriented meme in relation with text and the image.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

While there were many articles available on memes, the research papers related to Covid19 is under process now. An article by Asianage on 19 March 2020, "Help these researchers with corona memes" stated that a team of researchers have opened a portal to collect memes in English, Dutch, Russian, Korean, Polish and Mandarin to find out the role of humor in a crisis. The portal collects information regarding the country it gets circulated, its context, and the medium where it was found to analyze how people communicate with public issues and would also analyze how people use humor in different culture in different styles and identifies whether the memes targets are different. The time of the result output was not revealed by the researchers Boukes and his colleagues.(Help these researchers with corona memes: A study is on to find out the role of humour in a crisis, n.d.). A news article by *Hindustan times* explains "Humour can relieve stress and although many may not like the idea of making fun during tough times like world under the COVID-19 attack, millions of people have flooded social media platforms with funny memes, jokes, videos, GIFs and what not to lessen the panic of the pandemic."(Indian Asian News Service, 2020).

Rana(2020) article on the *Firstpost* stated that Our lives at home, Stay at home, Mask, Politicians, Nature is healing were the main themes of Coronavirus memes during the crisis period from different social media platforms (Rana, 2020). As all are together had come away thinking things will get better the author stated that not a single meme explicitly says about that.

When talking about the three identifiable characteristics of memes: 1) Memes existence on the internet was "equally accessible to most." 2) The content with in the space of meme structure either imitates or satirizes current world events. 3) "The content of meme can exploit its existing parts and make contextually relevant commentary." Furthermore, the authors concluded that since more time had been spent with the social media the consumption of memes had increased that possibly leads to faster death of memes (Khandelwal and Sharma, 2020).

A Study on the Discourse analysis of memes stated that behind every meme there were meanings behind it. Memes were not only used for humour purpose but also for other purpose.(Zubaidah and Ardelia, 2018). In the other study of memes using Semiotics, the author found that "People create the memes not only for the entertainment but also use these memes as a tool to figure out the social phenomenon and to express one's own or society's feelings or emotions in an entertainment way (Kavitha, 2018)."

IV. Research Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature and purposive sampling was adopted. It tries to explore the upcoming trend of memes with the already existing role of memes. The samples were collected specifically related to PM Address and task assigned by him during the three phases of lockdown from the Social media agency – Chennai Memes. It is an agency having accounts in all social media platforms that had 1 million followers in Instagram page during April 2020 whose website shares news articles and use social media platforms to communicate visuals through the features available in the platforms via Photo Memes and videos contents to share knowledge and entertain people 24/7. To understand how memes were encapsulated by the meme creators, its purpose and the meaning behind the memes this study uses Pragmatic approach for analysis.

Discourse analysis is both the theory and a method to analyze written, spoken or visual description. The Critical discourse analysis (CDA) not only discuss about the structure of the sentence but also about the meaning beyond, behind or above the sentence. As per the principles stated by Deborah Schriffrin(1994) that was mentioned in the article "A Discourse analysis of memes," Pragmatic approach was used in this study. It deals with the invisible meaning of words. According to the authors Zubaidah & Ardelia(2018) "Pragmatic study is a study of meaning in context." When mentioning about the Griffiths perception about Pragmatics the author stated that "Pragmatics is concerned with the use of tools in meaningful communication. It is about the interaction of semantic knowledge of the world, with our knowledge of the world taking in to account the contexts of use.(Zubaidah and Ardelia, 2018).

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 PM Address memes



Fig. 1 Nationwide Lockdown Fig. 2. PM Address Comment Fig3. Lockdown 4

When PM Modi of India addressed the citizens about the lockdown in different Phases these meme creators disseminated the main message in the meme format. All the three memes Fig.1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3 has the images of the Prime Minister address to the nation. Fig 1 image of PM was a like addressing the nation and the other two memes have the image of the PM with his raised hands showing his Palm inward as like signing to Wait. These Breaking news related memes conveys the meaning directly as such while a shot from the PM address with the stance like 'PM announced Nation wise lockdown for 21days starting from Midnight today', 'PM Modi to address the nation today at 8PM, what do you think will be announcement? Comment below!' and 'Lock down will have new rules and regulations, which will be announced before May18th'. These memes informed, announced and asked the opinion of the viewers through their comments as like how news informs the happenings of the world. It seems to be a new trend in meme creation.



Fig. 4 Lighting lamp vs Corona. Fig. 5 PM Announcement Panic. Fig.6 Reaction of PM Speech

There are also other memes related to PM’s message with two images, where the reader has to link both the images and interpret the meaning. Fig.4 has two images: one is the image of PM address that shot while it broke as breaking news in the news channel *Puthiya thalaimurai* and the other is comedians reel image or film stock. There are two mentions in that reel image: two comedians of Tamil Industry is mentioned with asterisks(*) one person as ‘We’ and other as ‘Corona’ where the meaning can be interpreted by combining text and image as like how we have to drive away corona when PM asked the nation to switch off the lights on April 5, 2020 . Here the stance is what it was broadcasted by the news media. The news shot is combined with the comedians in film shot so as to make viewers to enjoy the content as well as to make sense with the content.

Fig.5 memes also has two images: one is the Shot of PM when addressed the nation and the other the film stock shot, where a person sitting and standing and seems to be panic, when other people in the background were sitting. The meaning can be interpreted by combining the two images with the help of the Stance. “Modi Ji to make announcement today at 8PM” and “Pochu.. Pochu... enna solla poraru’nu theriliye” (vernacular language) loosely translated as “Don’t know what he is going to say now?” Without the help of stance and the relativity between the images, it is difficult to understand the meaning behind it. It conveys how citizens are under panic when they hear the news that PM is going to address the nation. There is also a slight humour added since it is added with the film stock. But it is difficult to get that humour sense for the one who views it as it needs the knowledge of the film. This meme is also created to make sense of the real world happening in an entertaining way.

Upon the two images in the fig.4, Fig.5 there arouses a slight humor along with the real and reel images to make sense with the emotions of the people. The fig.6 with two film stock images shows that people are unhappy with the message addressed by the PM. The first image is compared to the address of the PM and the second image portrays the reaction of the listeners. The stance says “This is how it feels” and “Listening to Modiji’s 8PM speech.” The text alone is not enough here to understand the meaning and the context. It needs the support of image to understand what feeling it surges. The image that showed here needs to be understood in a way that how lower class people with the sign of crying faces are unhappy about the announcement. Here the memes carried the real message in an entertaining way.

5.2 Task related memes

5.2.1 Clapping hands task memes (COVID19)



Fig.7 & Fig.8 Clapping hands task memes

The above memes describes the contrary outcome of the PM’s request towards clapping hands task that was meant to salute the frontline warriors of COVID19. The first meme exhibited above had three images.

In Fig 7 the First top image had the Famous Comedian of Kollywood Industry whose expression is like he is shocked when seeing something. The person was mentioned by (*)symbol as MODI. The second part of the image shows that people crowded on the roads with Indian Flag. The third section of image signifies that the Comedian who is in the top image was scolding the three people over there. The three images had been unified with the text “Modi after seeing vadakkans celebrating openly on the road by 5PM today.” The interpreted meaning beyond this meme is that the PM Modi was shocked to see the response of the Vadakkans (North Indians) when they crowded on the roads to clap their hands to salute the essential services. This incident that happened in the real world was matched up with the incident in a movie ‘Friends’ when comedian Vadivelu’s used this third statement like Salli Salli ah Norikitingale da..(broken in to pieces ah dude) as his fellow workers did absolutely opposite of what he had ordered to. When PM asked the citizens of India to clap their hands, the people of North India had interpreted his message in a different way and crowded in the street without maintaining social distance here last stance it was mentioned as “Sali Sali Ah Norikitingale da”(Vernacular Language) translated loosely as “thrashed phlegm Phlegm ah.” This real

incident was captured by the mainstream also. The meme makers with close observation about the surrounding happenings had given this message in a meme format. This memes carried the PM's emotional state in an entertaining and sensible way.

The next meme Fig.8 had two images above and below. The top image represents that the people crowded in the Apartment space to clap their hands. The bottom image where a lean man with wide open mouth was laughing at something was mentioned with (*) as corona Virus that seems to be very happy to see the people crowded on that place. The theme of the image is that Corona Virus which is a spreadable pandemic was very happy seeing people crowded without maintaining any social distance while there was no medicine to treat that spreadable virus. The stance in the meme was given as like Corona itself was telling that "Naan Sollala Avanungale Varuvanunga nu" loosely translated as "I told you know? They will come on their own?". The second meme in the clapping hands task memes carried the emotional state of Corona Virus. Both the memes encapsulated the content in an entertaining way and can interpret the meaning only when it is unified with the context.

5.2.2 Lighting task memes



The response of Prime Minister's (PM) task to show the unity of the nation during the crisis time had been captured by the meme creators here. Rajikanth Famous hero of Kollywood industry was mentioned as Thalaivar here the text or the stance used interchangeably as "Thalaivar outside his house holding a candle." The picture (Fig.9) of him with a candle on his hand in his house describes how a popular celebrity stood for the nation's unity upon the announcement of the Prime Minister in the traditional wear (waisty and shirt). The news usually carries these kind of messages, and the different views and perceptions of celebrities towards the message. Here Meme also imitated and carried that message to the netizens in the Instagram page. There may be reason behind focusing the celebrity here as his political scenario is skeptical in Tamil Nadu. This memes directly informed the viewers the fact using the image and the text. Here the message is direct as like in news.

The other memes like Fig.10 that says "when you see people bursting crackers and Rockets" can be understood only with the combination of Comedian Vadivelu's shocking expression like how people reacted when they saw people bursting crackers and rockets and celebrating like Deepavali. This memes explores the perception of people with the image and the text. The next meme Fig.11 from the mind voice of corona talking to itself like "These people are firing crackers as like Deepavali today while they were told to hold the lamp," explains the context and the person in the image marked as corona with the sign(*) and text combination. This meme explores the perception of Corona. As we all know corona won't think like this, to give viewers a sense and entertainment this memes was created.

Fig.12. Meme talks about the unity of the people as like a person is convincing the other in the second image and a lady outside a shop is lighting a lamp in the first image is combined with the stance "Unity of the country is shown in a single picture" and "This is India." When PM addressed the citizens to switch off their lights and light diya or lamp or flash lights for 9 minutes by 9PM during the lockdown, citizens of India did it. This memes explains how people did it to show unity. This memes showed the people's support or their unity towards the task to fight against corona virus.

Fig.13 Memes explains how the person was sitting and holding the traditional lamp-Kuthuvillaku on the top of his hut with the stance "Ellarum Veeukulla Vechappo oruthanmattum veetu kooramela kuthuvilakku vechan" (vernacular language) loosely translated as "when everybody lights the lamp inside the house one person alone had kept the lamp on the top of the hut" interprets the meaning in a humorous way when it is combined together with the image. This meme mirror the attitude of people in an humorous way.

Fig.14 explains with the stance "Vadakkans on April 5, 9PM, Vadakkans After 9.09PM, "Ji Neenga sonna maariye enga veeta koluthitom" loosely translated as Ji..we fired our house as you said." The image of firing the hut in one image and a person sitting inside the house in the second image trolls the attitude of the North Indians (Vadakkans) and their understanding and interpretation of PM Message.

Fig.15 explains how people take this lighting task message as a chance to go and roam out during the lockdown period. This is explained through the image of comedians by mentioning the persons activities through (*) mark. It is like police beating the people those who were out of house to buy candle with the stance like a conversation "Police: Why all of them are going out in

groups. Where are you people going? Public: going to buy candle sir.” The first image mentioned the person as police who in reality is comedian of kollywood industry. The second image on top right mentioned as public represents a group of four people in the traditional wear replying the police. Without the third image that one person is raising the hand to beat other four holding something in his hand has to be mapped as like the police is beating the people who is roaming outside for some reason. This meme mirrored the reality as people roam here and there during the lockdown period as the government also insisted not to go out and imposed many restrictions to maintain social distance to break the chain of spread.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis it is identified that at first, memes were used to inform, announce and to gather the opinion of the viewers through comment boxes and imitate the real news as like in TV Medium in image format. Not only that along with the information, it makes sense to the viewers in an entertaining and humorous way. Secondly, Memes were not only used to make fun of, or for entertainment purpose but also created by the meme creator to mirror the society's feelings, emotions, and perceptions in an entertaining way. Thirdly, most memes are made with combination of text and images where either without image or text the meaning cannot be interpreted by the readers of memes. Meaning has to be interpreted by combining the Image(real/reel) and text as in advertisements as stated by Abdul Aziz Turhan Kariko(Kariko, n.d.) Hence to create a meme about the feelings or emotions or perception of the people or society or to imitate the real news the meme creators should keep on watch dogging the current happenings of the society. Since the samples of study are limited to a particular social media agency Instagram page, the results may be varied if applied in general. Since this research was done during the lockdown period due to Corona Spread in the month of June, the future researchers can take this research further to the next level by analyzing the memes circulated during the unlock periods.

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Memes source:

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 Fig.2: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAFFI88H6z-/>
 Fig. 3: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAF6n2CH5CD/>
 Fig.4: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-hp5W1HL-d/>
 Fig.5: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAFIT8oHtHe/>
 Fig.6: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAF5CHMndDJ/>
 Fig.7: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-C3rHoHaf/>
 Fig. 8: https://www.instagram.com/p/B-C_GfTn9ex/

- Fig.9: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-mv4OGHtf2/>
Fig.10: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-mtq8Nnas/>
Fig.11: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-mugNwHdI8/>
Fig.12: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-nOTvLnU2D/>
Fig.13: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-ncAo9HbLz/>
Fig.14: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-i13dmHwch/>
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