

## The Satirical Meme Revolution: The Launching of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) in India

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### Abstract

This article analyses the emergence and political significance of meme-driven satirical movements, particularly the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), in the context of the post-2026 Indian elections. The study outlines the reach of digital satire and examines its capacity to influence young adults' political engagement, the structural dynamics of meme dissemination, and the implications for democratic participation. It pursues two principal objectives: (1) to examine the role of memes as a distinct political language directed at young voters, and (2) to assess the effects of meme culture on political polarisation, candidate credibility, and policy discourse. These objectives are addressed through an analysis of the cockroach meme within the Indian political landscape.

**Keywords:** Memes; Memetic Propaganda; Deepfakes; Digital polarisation; The “Insta-Mandate”; Generation Z Politics; India

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## Introduction

Research on Indian digital campaigning demonstrates that memes function as an accessible political language for younger voters. Scholars argue that meme culture simplifies ideological messages into relatable humour that circulates rapidly through Instagram, WhatsApp, and X. Political parties such as the BJP and Congress increasingly employ meme pages to influence first-time voters during election periods. Studies indicate that meme-based communication fosters participatory political engagement by prompting users to remix, share, and reinterpret content (Baulch et al., 2024). However, researchers caution that humour can trivialise policy discussions and encourage emotional rather than rational political participation. Overall, meme culture has become central to contemporary youth-oriented political communication in India.

Two cockroach movements—the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) and the Indian National Congress–Cockroach—surfaced in the wake of the 2026 electoral results (Mishra, 2026). Both were metaphorically engaged in the symbolic removal of the debris that had accumulated in Indian cities: the brochures, fliers, posters, and banners of candidates from the recent elections, some victorious, some defeated, and some who had forfeited their deposits.

The first entity, the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) (Figure 1), is a satirical, meme-centric digital campaign launched by a former Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) media worker now a mass communication student based in Boston. Inspired young people donned cockroach costumes and launched clean-up drives in Indian cities. The second movement, championed by Rahul Gandhi and the Congress—a formidable opposition party—was seen as in odds with the Boston-based meme (Figure 2). Within two weeks of its inception in May 2026, the CJP amassed 22 million Instagram followers, surpassing the digital presence of established parties and igniting fervent debate about the future of political engagement; the Indian National Congress–Cockroach initiative followed shortly afterwards (Business Today, 2026a; CNN, 2026; Tribune Web Desk, 2026). The 2026 Indian state elections marked a pivotal moment in the nation’s political arena: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dominated West Bengal and Assam, while the Congress and regional parties faltered in response (India TV News, 2026). A novel form of protest emerged—characterised not by street riots or party rallies, but by memes, viral humour, and young people donning cockroach costumes to clean up in the aftermath of the elections (Al Jazeera, 2026).



Figure 1: Illustration of memetic propaganda, generated by the author using AI



**Figure 2: Indian Youth Cockroaches, generated by the author using AI**

### Theoretical Perspectives

This article argues that meme culture exceeds transient internet phenomena and establishes a new political lexicon—one that may encourage informed participation and challenge traditional party frameworks (Muya & Onyinge, 2026). Recent research suggests that memes function as a crucial political vernacular for India’s youth, distilling complex ideological concepts into easily digestible humour that circulates rapidly on platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and X

Despite the limitations of social-media activism, WhatsApp networks and Generation Z engagement provide both context and purpose, serving as alternatives to institutional authority and policy reform (Baulch et al., 2024). In India, political parties—particularly the BJP and the Congress—strategically create meme pages to influence and engage first-time voters during pivotal elections. Memes promote participatory engagement: users’ remix, share, and reinterpret political content, fostering a sense of grassroots spontaneity, even as parties professionalise meme production through “meme factories” (Baulch et al., 2024). Such humour may, however, undermine the gravity of

policy debate and foster emotional rather than rational involvement (Maheshwari et al., 2025).

### The WhatsApp Meme Framework

WhatsApp is central to meme distribution. Its encrypted messaging enables both official campaign teams and informal supporters to circulate viral content discreetly—the good, the bad, and the ugly—much of which requires constant factchecking. Scholarly research identifies WhatsApp as the principal medium for political memes during electoral periods, especially within familial, regional, and communal groups.

This decentralised structure facilitates rapid dissemination but obstructs fact-checking and accountability, thereby amplifying the dangers of doctored images and misinformation. Political memes on WhatsApp frequently blend satire, nationalism, and speculation, shaping voter perceptions in ways that are at once participatory and profoundly harmful (Maheshwari et al., 2025). Studies on political memes in Indian elections highlight satire as a major campaign strategy. Meme creators frequently ridicule political opponents using exaggerated images, sarcasm, and references to

popular culture. Researchers argue that humour enables campaigns to communicate criticism in ways that appear entertaining rather than overtly aggressive (Maheshwari et al., 2025).

### **The Vernacularisation of Political Culture**

Researchers examining Indian election memes emphasize the importance of vernacular culture in political campaigning. Political meme creators frequently incorporate Bollywood dialogues, regional dialects, folk humour, and local symbolism to increase emotional resonance with audiences. Indian meme producers often draw on vernacular dialects, Bollywood allusions, and cultural iconography to heighten resonance. This deliberate localisation lends memes cultural legitimacy, connecting traditional folk humour with contemporary political critique. Their efficacy is tied to their capacity to mirror linguistic identities and regional grievances, so they frequently function as instruments of cultural affiliation and political influence. The result is a meme culture markedly different from Western advertising approaches, one that incorporates local narratives and online engagement.

### **A Case Study of the Two Cockroaches**

The Cockroach Janta Party originated on Instagram, purportedly from a single individual's inventiveness, and swiftly attracted tens of millions of followers. Its manifesto was unequivocally satirical: membership required one to be "unemployed, lazy, chronically online, and capable of ranting professionally" (CNN, 2026). The joke is not entirely a joke: roughly 40% of Indian graduates under 25 are, in fact, unemployed. Offline, the meme materialised when youth volunteers in cockroach costumes carried out clean-up drives in towns from Kolkata to Bhopal, symbolically clearing both literal and political detritus left behind by established parties (Sykes et al., 2026). It remains uncertain whether India's alienated youth find anything truly impossible to ignore.

### **Polarisation and Digital Critique**

Political satire has become a predominant rhetorical form in Indian electoral campaigns. Creators deploy hyperbole, irony, and popular

culture to mock their adversaries, rendering critique entertaining rather than aggressive (Maheshwari et al., 2025). This heightens audience engagement, since humorous content is shared more widely than conventional campaign material.

Experts caution, however, that there is a darker side: satirical memes can intensify political animosity and division, normalising online harassment and narrowing the space for constructive discourse. Meme campaigns frequently reduce politics to "us" versus "them", encouraging confirmation bias and privileging emotional reaction over rational deliberation (Maheshwari et al., 2025).

### **AI, Deepfakes, and the Ethics of Memetic Propaganda**

The advent of AI and deepfakes has accelerated meme-centric campaigning. Institutions and individuals can now use AI-generated memes and synthetic media to substantially influence voter attitudes, particularly during election periods (Sahoo, 2026). Deepfake videos and algorithmically generated memes blur the boundaries between entertainment, propaganda, and deception. Such content often outpaces fact-checkers, shaping public opinion before corrections can be issued. Researchers warn that these developments pose substantial ethical risks to electoral integrity and erode trust in the political process.

### **Meme Production Requires Capital**

The transition from grassroots initiative to professional enterprise requires substantial funding. In the wake of COVID-19, conspiracy theories proliferated; initially they were treated with contempt, yet there is now an unabashed insistence in some quarters that the pandemic was created and released by the wealthy and a so-called "deep state". On this view, a class of dictators, presidents, and the financiers behind them obstruct ordinary people from living in peace and resent the manner in which nations chart their own course. Wealthy donors, the argument continues, deliberately undermine functioning democracies—by funding disruptive systemic change or by disparaging civilisational

traditions. Whatever the merits of such claims, Indian political parties are now assembling “meme factories”—teams of digital strategists, influencers, and volunteers who plan meme campaigns as meticulously as advertising agencies, marking a shift away from memes as spontaneous grassroots action. Allegations persist that, in the developing world, opinion cannot be shaped and the youth cannot be mobilised at speed without inflows of foreign capital.

These operations tailor content to specific demographic and regional audiences, enhancing party visibility and agenda control. Baulch et al. (2024) argue that the professionalisation of meme creation may compromise authenticity and heighten the risk of manipulation, transforming digital interaction from genuine civic discourse into orchestrated propaganda.

### **Memes and Gender Representation**

Recent studies reveal that gender prejudice is pervasive in Indian political memes. Female politicians are frequently subjected to sexist humour, body-shaming, and caricature, thereby reinforcing patriarchal attitudes (Muya & Onyinge, 2026). At the same time, feminist meme-makers use humour to challenge misogyny and to promote women’s political participation.

Memes thus operate as contested terrain, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging gendered political norms. Scholars advocate stronger digital literacy and legal frameworks to mitigate harmful gendered communication online (Farías et al., 2026).

### **The “Insta-Mandate”: Superficial Engagement**

Through platforms such as Instagram, the political indoctrination of young adults has become increasingly significant (Alafnan, 2025) suggest that Generation Z’s perceptions of parties and candidates are shaped by viral comedy, meme videos, and short, pointed reels. Political organisations exploit the intersection of politics and digital celebrity by producing content that mirrors influencers’ cultures.

Although an “Insta-mandate” makes parties appear more modern and approachable, researchers warn that it encourages superficial engagement, privileging popularity and entertainment at the expense of serious policy and democratic discourse.

### **Democracy and the Ambivalent Nature of Engagement**

Scholars disagree markedly about the significance of memes for democratic processes. Some observe that memes can democratise political communication by lowering barriers to entry and enabling people to participate in novel, accessible ways (Siddique et al., 2026). Yet this same accessibility accelerates the spread of harassment and misinformation, which in turn undermines reasoned civic engagement.

Political memes therefore seem to function simultaneously as vehicles of democratic expression and of digital manipulation. Their net effect depends on the wider context of institutional trust, media literacy, and regulatory action.

### **The Cockroach Janta Party and the Aftermath of the 2026 Elections**

The Cockroach Janta Party was established on 16 May 2026, twelve days after the results of the most significant state elections in recent Indian history were announced on 4 May (Al Jazeera, 2026). As CNN reported, “the Janta party was launched just weeks after Modi’s BJP achieved a significant victory in the eastern state of West Bengal, extending its influence beyond its conventional strongholds” (CNN, 2026).

This timing is highly significant, yet it has been largely overlooked amid the excitement surrounding the CJP’s follower counts. The cockroach did not shape the outcome in West Bengal or Assam. The CJP is not a retrospective electoral force in either state; it is, at most, a post-electoral expression of the youth discontent that those elections failed to channel. Were one to entertain the hypothetical possibility of the CJP becoming a legitimate electoral entity—specifically, its capacity to influence the forthcoming elections in Bihar or, ultimately, contests at the national level—the

question would remain entirely unsettled and, in its present form, improbable.

The CJP's potential influence is nonetheless undeniable. Within days, offline demonstrations and clean-up efforts emerged in West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh, with volunteers in cockroach costumes—at once absurd and poignant. Such resonance, however, may not translate into votes. The BJP's victory in Bengal stemmed from an intensive five-year grassroots campaign, a contentious revision of the electoral rolls that opposition parties disputed, and a polarising strategy that capitalised on the Trinamool Congress's (TMC) governance failures (Al Jazeera, 2026). No quantity of inventive cockroach memes could have altered those structural realities in the weeks before polling day.

In Assam, the picture is unambiguous. Himanta Biswa Sarma's BJP has rendered the Congress electorally inconsequential, as evidenced by the defeat of Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi by Mr Hiten Goswami in Jorhat by nearly 23,000 votes (Kumari, 2026). The opposition's predicament is therefore one of organisational collapse rather than a deficit of online ridicule. Despite its broad appeal, the CJP speaks primarily to urban, digitally literate teenagers. The decisive constituencies in Assam lie within the strongholds of indigenous communities in Upper Assam, where smartphone penetration and Instagram followings are not the primary political currencies. The cockroach appears ill-equipped to comprehend Assamese politics. India displays an unusually high tolerance for the coexistence of chaos and continuity (Pulla, 2026a, b). Political identity there is dynamic and context-dependent rather than fixed and ideological: the person who shares a cockroach meme today may cast a pragmatic vote tomorrow for whichever candidate seems most credible on local development. This is not cynicism but the survival calculus of a society in which politics frequently fails to honour its commitments. The CJP has not yet offered an alternative calculus; until it does, it will remain a diagnostic instrument rather than a political one.

Krishna Kumar Kaimal (2026) noted that by presenting a misleading narrative that Indian Gen Z is detached from global technological trends, the creators of the CJP are endeavouring to construct a tragedy of their own design.

### Conclusion

The selective engagement of India's Generation Z—intense meme consumption coupled with pragmatic, issue-oriented voting—exposes the limitations of digital activism as a vehicle for structural transformation (Tribune Web Desk, 2026). That the Indian National Congress sought to capitalise on the moment the CJP had captured suggests that established parties may treat youth dissatisfaction as a means of electoral advantage rather than as an indictment of their own shortcomings.

The satirical meme phenomenon in India is at once a symptom and a warning. It captures a generation's exasperation with political inertia, institutional marginalisation, and the hollow rhetoric of traditional parties. Yet, unless it is anchored in organisational strength and structural reform, meme-driven activism functions merely as a diagnostic instrument rather than a catalyst for change.

The case of the CJP shows that the cockroach meme can outlast the news cycle, defining a moment even as it struggles to convert cultural momentum into electoral success. The challenge for India's political establishment is to regard youth participation not merely as an opportunity but as a precondition for democratic renewal and systemic accountability. The Congress parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor has suggested that the rise of the Cockroach Janta Party should serve as a lesson for the opposition (Business Today, 2026b; Tribune Web Desk, 2026).

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