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Memes as Contemporary Visual Culture: An Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective

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Abstract

Research on Internet memes continues to be largely rooted in Euro-American theories of digital culture and semiotics, while the existing body of Indian meme research remains largely empirical and descriptive, focusing on political satire and “results” of memes without a grounded interpretive theory of the ways in which Indians interpret memes. This paper fills that gap by suggesting rasa theory and its related concept of the sahrdaya (literally, one who has heart), described in Bharata Muni's Natyashastra as the central theory for analyzing meme reception and virality in India. Meme theory (Shifman, 2014), the theory of visual culture studies (Mirzoeff, 2009) and the theory of semiotics (Barthes, 1972) have also been taken in as complementary but secondary tools. The Panchatantra and the folk visual tradition of Patachitra are presented as conceptual parallels that illustrate the same logic of prepared, participatory reception, rather than as historical predecessors of the meme. The framework is then elaborated on the concept of brand identity arguing that a brand meme works only if the consumer is similarly prepared for it, which is backed by a brand narrative theory (Escalas, 2004; Kapferer, 2008) and empirical Indian study on meme marketing (Sharma, 2018). The paper ends by reflecting on the limits of this contribution and suggests directions for future research.

Keywords: Memes, Visual Culture, Indian Knowledge Systems, Indian Aesthetics, Rasa

Introduction

Every day, an Indian smartphone screen is packed with memes - a Bollywood still with a diatribe about inflation, a cricketer's 'look' reworked to poke fun at a political announcement and a brand's Instagram post taking a dig at a trendsetter template. These compact forms of humour, satire, and commentary have become important ways for Indians to navigate news, politics, and consumer culture online. Meme scholarship has evolved in the Euro-American academic context, and it can be traced back to Dawkins'



(2006) biological metaphor of the meme as a self-replicating unit of culture, and the redefinition of the internet meme as a cluster of digital objects sharing content, form, and stance that are created and circulated by multiple participants, with reciprocal awareness. (Shifman, 2014) The research on memes in India has increased significantly, albeit on a narrower empirical trajectory, for example, in the fields of studying political satire (Kulkarni, 2017; Kweera, 2025) and the study of marketing outcomes (Sharma, 2018), without providing a theoretically grounded explanation of why Indian audiences interpret, enjoy, and reshare memes in particular ways.

This is the gap this paper addresses. Instead of importing western meme theory without making any adaptations or assuming that Indian meme culture is a localised version of a global template, it suggests rasa theory - in particular the concept of the *sahṛdaya*, the aesthetically formed spectator from Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* - as a more theoretically accurate, and India-based, description of how the meme has a meaning that is completed by an audience. Rasa theory and the concept of the *sahṛdaya* constitute the paper's primary analytical framework while other analytical work, such as meme theory, visual culture studies and semiotics are still useful, and are kept as supporting theories. The fable structure of the *Panchatantra* and the folk art of *Patachitra* are then introduced as conceptual parallels, rather than as historical ancestors of the digital meme, a distinction carefully drawn by the paper since the parallels can easily be interpreted as continuity.

It suggests that a brand meme is only successful if it aligns with a reader-consumer who is ready to read and enjoy what the brand is saying.

Meme Theory: Foundations and a Conceptual Gap

In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins first used the word meme, which refers to an idea, tune or piece of behavior that is passed from person to person like a gene is passed on in a population (Dawkins, 2006). Shifman's influential redefinition (2014) shifted the focus of meme scholarship from the meme as one viral object to the meme as a cluster of items that share a content, form, and attitude, and that are created, circulated, imitated, and transformed by multiple users.

Studies of memes in India have increased in quantity and scope, albeit with a more limited and empirical approach. One specific strand has explored the role of memes in the marketing of Indian brands, aiming to understand the reaction of Facebook user in India in response to brands on their meme feed via netnographic techniques (Sharma, 2018). This literature is empirically rich, but primarily descriptive; it demonstrates that Indian memes work, and sometimes how, but does not inquire into how viewers are able to complete the meaning of a meme in the first place, a question that is taken up by rasa theory, with the vocabulary that this paper develops as its lens.



Visual Culture and Semiotics as Complementary Lenses

Before going to rasa theory, two other frameworks are useful, but here are used as auxiliary rather than core ones. Mirzoeff (2009) sees the study of visual culture not as an academic field, but as a way of comprehending the organisation of the everyday through images, suggesting that visual media have become a central feature of the understanding and communication of contemporary life. Barthes's (1972) semiotic description of myth introduces a second dimension; the image has a literal denotation and a second order of connotation that can come to appear natural. A still of an actor's expression conveys only a face, but when used repeatedly with a caption, a connotative meaning also emerges which can be quickly identified by competent viewers.

This is a helpful, but general statement. The Indian aesthetic theory, discussed in the next section, describes this requirement more precisely, not only that a code is required, but also the kind of spectator who can hold it; for this reason, rasa theory cannot be limited to the theory of semiotics or of visual culture, but is used as the paper's main lens.

Rasa Theory and the Sahṛdaya: The Primary Lens

One of the most systematically developed Indian theories of aesthetic experience is rasa theory that is linked with the *Natyashastra* (Bharata Muni, 1996), an ancient Sanskrit treatise on dramaturgy. According to rasa theory, a dramatic or artistic work aims to create a certain kind of feeling, or *rasa*, in the spectator's mind. Importantly, *rasa* is not only in the work itself; it can be experienced only if the work is presented to one who is properly attuned to it through a process of cultivation, namely, a *sahṛdaya*, literally one who has heart, a person with cultivated sensibility who can recognise and relish the emotional and cultural cues within the work. The audience, then, is an active part in the construction of meaning, and without this spectator the standard of an artful performance will do nothing to produce *rasa*.

This concept parallels the way memes work online. The meme is not a fixed, meaning-entire entity; instead, its humor or critique only comes into play when it comes into contact with an audience with the cultural, political, and linguistic literacy to extract the multiple layers of the references, the equivalent of the *sahṛdaya* in the digital space. If the audience is not familiar with a Bollywood quote, or a cricket moment, it doesn't make any sense to them. Rasa theory provides a more specific mechanism underpinning Shifman's (2014) notion of a meme: the stance is never received as content, but as stance, by a *sahṛdaya*-like viewer who is already primed to appreciate it. If a meme is read that way, it is not just the algorithm of a platform that gets it to go viral in India, but also the aesthetic sensibility that already exists in the eyes of those who view the meme and whose reference points it completes.

It also redefines the participative and remixing nature of the meme and what Shifman (2014) considers to be at the core of the definition of the meme. Both Rasa and meme theory place the spectator as a



participant who completes the work; the meme theory goes beyond that, making the audience a producer as well as a receiver. Both rasa theory and meme culture re-frame what is meant to be relished as co-authorship, but they are both built upon the same premise: meaning is not inherent in the artefact, but completed and, in the case of a digital artefact, extended, with an engaged, prepared audience.

The Panchatantra and Patachitra as Conceptual Parallels

It is essential to be clear about the things that these comparisons do not assert. They do not claim that the internet meme originated in the Panchatantra or Patachitra scroll painting, or that either tradition foreshadowed digital media. Instead, both are discussed here as conceptual equivalents: as both examples of the principle already stated above, 'a small cultural artefact needs an attentive, competent audience to make sense of it. This is done to prevent overstepping the mark and ascribing a direct line of descent that is not supported by the evidence. The Panchatantra is a compilation of five Sanskrit niti-shastra tales, each of which is shorter, with lessons on proper behaviour, diplomacy and government summarised in succinct, memorable episodes set on animals that form the core of the tales and are interwoven within a frame-story structure (Olivelle, 1997). Like the audience of a story in Panchatantra, a meme's viewer will need to identify the various stock roles in the story before it can be understood by the watcher: the smart jackal, the stupid crocodile, etc. The recognisability of the character is not different from the meaning of the story; it is a condition for the story's meaning to be fulfilled by the listener, just as the stock template of a meme is only a means of expressing the attitude of a meme that the viewer understands. A similar parallel can be drawn from the scroll painting and singing of Bengal, done with the help of an itinerant painter-performer known as 'patua' and a long scroll of painted panel, which stretched by panel is depicted while the story is sung by the patua. This tradition relies on a live, socially-embedded audience: Without the sung narration of the Patua, the motifs of a scroll, for instance, the didactic yama pattis that show punishments in the afterlife, are hard to understand without the context of the performance, that is, without the patua's story being told to an audience. Chakraborty (2023) also highlights the difference between loka (the folk/folkish domain) and shastra (elite/elite-knowledge domain), and how shastra makes its way into the popular, low barrier visual domain of loka, where it is carried and disseminated amongst the masses, much like a meme. Chakraborty (2023) also records Patachitra's own recent passage into the digital realm, where the scroll no longer accompanies live performance, and is instead increasingly presented as an image instead of a sung narrative, highlighting its tradition of relying on the presence of a prepared, present audience, where without that something is lost. They illustrate how the need to have the audience prepared for the performance is repeated in seemingly unconnected Indian cultural genres, thus providing some justification for the use of rasa and the sahrdaya as a possible tool for the analysis of Indian meme reception, in general.



Rasa, Sahṛdaya, and Brand Identity: Extending the Framework

The paper's most important original contribution is its attempt to extend the rasa/sahṛdaya framework to the domain of brand identity, which is a crucial part in the way memes circulate in India, but has been tackled in the main by quantitative outcomes rather than also by interpretive theory. This is a structure that is similar to the sahrdaya relationship in rasa theory, in which the work of art relies on a receiver who has the capacity to complete it. If applied to memes this means that a brand meme is a compressed story that will only create a self-brand connection if the viewer already has the cultural reference that the meme appeals to - which is not a property of the image itself, but rather a sahrdaya-like condition of preparedness. This kind of phenomenon can be observed in the empirical studies of Indian meme marketing. In Sharma's (2018) netnographic study of the Facebook Indian audience, the researcher used the concept of the internet meme to explore the potential of using such memes to engage Indian users, concluding that humour is not universal and that brands can engage Indian audiences if the memes are linked to an existing cultural vocabulary shared by the audience. This is not just a marketing best practice, but an example of the same rasa mechanism - an Indian brand meme elicits a positive brand association only if it is presented to the consumers with the proper or adequate preparation, with the ability to recognize and enjoy it in a sahrdaya manner. The reframing provides an explanatory framework for the Indian findings of meme-marketing that thus far have been lacking.

Discussion: Sharpening the Contribution

The argument presented here claims a specific and limited point: one that can be stated explicitly. It's not as if the internet meme had been invented by the most ancient storytellers like the Panchatantra or the Patachitra, or as if the classical thinkers of India predicted digital media; The technology through which memes circulate is a product of contemporary digital culture - networked platforms, algorithmic circulation, and instantaneous reach - and can be well described by existing meme theory (Dawkins, 2006; Shifman, 2014). The premise is narrower: the concept of sahrdaya, which is part of rasa theory, is the most precise available term for a mechanism which is gestured at by meme theory (stance), visual culture theory (the image-event), and semiotics (connotation); that a compact cultural artefact does not have any meaning until it is inserted into an audience able to add to its meaning. It is illustrated in older Indian media, in the Panchatantra and the Patachitra, and in brand identity literature it is in operation in the commercial sphere, but no evidence is provided in any of them of historical descent.

The sharp framing is important because of two things. First, the mechanism of reception proposed here is not simply a translation of Western meme theory; it is grounded in Indian aesthetics and offers an alternative conceptual basis for understanding meme reception. Second, it provides Indian meme-marketing research, which has been strong on outcomes and weak on explanation, with a specific and



testable explanative claim; that the success of a meme and/or a brand-meme in India should correlate with the extent to which audience members already share the reference points a meme needs.

The framework also has clear boundaries, which should not be blurred. Rasa theory was created for formal performance, and trained aesthetic judgement, while meme culture is anonymous, and not always characterized by the formal refinement as classical theory would consider an accomplished piece of art; the use of the sahrdaya concept with an anonymous audience of memes stretches a term that was designed for a different kind of spectatorship. In addition, the moral-instructive message of the Panchatantra and the religious and communal function of the Patachitra are different in tone from many contemporary memes, which are satirical, ephemeral and nihilistic. These aren't incidental side notes, but rather legitimate tensions that signal important avenues for future research, like studies on the connection between self-reported cultural familiarity with memes and actual engagement with them as the model suggests.

Conclusion

This paper has contended that rasa theory, and more specifically the notion of the sahrdaya, provides a precise, India-based primary lens for understanding the reception of memes in India - a lens that is currently lacking from an empirically rich and thin Indian body of meme scholarship. Meme theory, visual culture studies, semiotics, and rasa theory collectively point toward the importance of the viewer in completing a meme's meaning. They were not conceptualized as historical predecessors of the meme, but rather as conceptual parallels that illustrate the same mechanism in older Indian media, and the framework was extended, as this paper's central original contribution, to brand identity, providing the existing Indian meme-marketing findings (Sharma, 2018) with an explanatory grounding they have so far lacked, by connecting them to established brand narrative theory (Escalas, 2004; Kapferer, 2008). The boundaries of the framework, its basis in formal aesthetic judgement, rather than decentralised digital circulation, are very real and should inform, not deter, empirical audience-reception research that the argument of this paper now enables one to design.

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