Anti-caste Memes as Cultural Archives of Resistance

By

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Abstract

In this article, we make a case for looking at memes as potential digital cultural heritage artefacts to counter hegemonic narratives around the caste system in India. We reflect on this potentiality of memes by evaluating how three anti-caste Facebook meme pages responded to protests against the Indian Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens (CAA-NRC) from December 2019 to March 2020. These pages simultaneously archived and critiqued key moments of the protests as well as the anti-caste movement through memes, playing a significant role in amplifying the voices of the Bahujans, the marginalised caste groups in India. Focusing on the protest memes created by these pages, we look at the contexts in which the protest memes could be considered carriers, preservers, and transmitters of cultural knowledge. We argue that memes could be understood as cultural heritage,not only as objects but as processes and practices that constitute the building of cultural narratives. We illustrate how the protest memes hold and demonstrate potential to become digital cultural heritage as they simultaneously provided a much-needed alternative account of the way the resistance played out on the streets as opposed to how mainstream media portrayed them and archived and highlighted key moments of the protests and the anti-caste movement.

Keywords: CAA-NRC, memes, Bahujans, anti-caste resistance, social media, digital cultural heritage
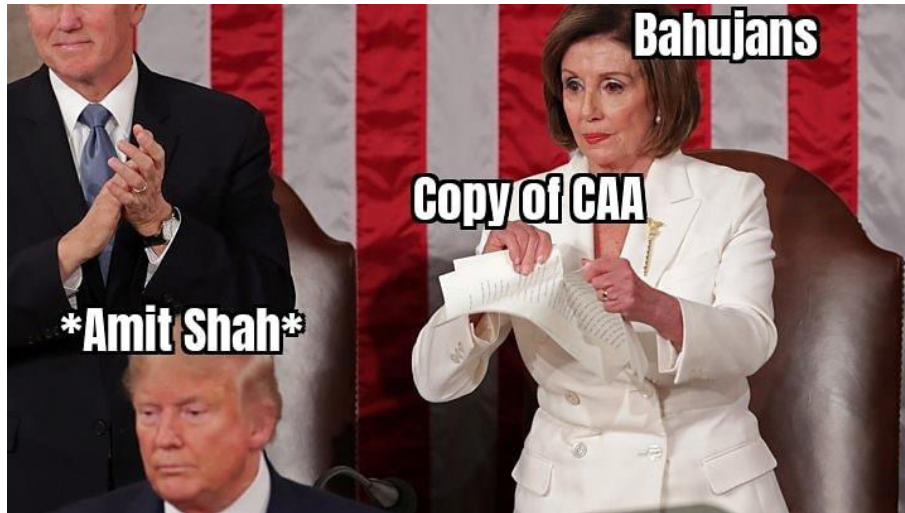
Introduction

Figure 1: Revolutionary Memes for Bahujan Teens (RMBT) posted this meme on 6th February 2020.

On February 6, 2020, the Facebook meme page Revolutionary Memes for Bahujan Teens (RMBT) posted the above meme during the nationwide protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and abrupt proposal to implement the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in India in December 2019. The template for the meme is that of Nancy Pelosi tearing her copy of Donald Trump's speech given at the State of the Union in February 2020. Moments after the clip was shared digitally, "#NancyTheRipper" started trending on Twitter and the above image became an "instant meme" (Hoffman 2020). In the meme created by RMBT, Trump symbolises Amit Shah, the Minister of Home Affairs whereas Pelosi symbolises the Bahujans. The meme effectively indicates how the Bahujans[1] protested against the government's decision of passing the CAA-NRC. RMBT is among a group of Facebook pages such as Classroom Memes Starring Savarna Teens (CMSST)[2] and Badass Bahujan Memes (BBM) that were created around the same time in early 2019 to specifically critique the dominant narratives around the Indian caste system within mainstream public discourse, including Indian television, digital media and electoral politics represented within them. These pages simultaneously archived and critiqued key moments of the protests as well as the anti-caste movement through memes, playing a significant role in amplifying the voices of the Bahujans. Focussing on the protest memes created by these pages between December 2019 to February 2020, we look at the contexts in which the protest memes are considered carriers, preservers and transmitters of cultural knowledge. Following Ayala's (2020) postulation that memes become

cultural heritage when looked at as not static but dynamic digital processes, we argue that memes in this context could be cultural heritage if they are considered not as objects but processes and practices that constitute the building of cultural narratives. We demonstrate that the protest memes potentially become digital cultural heritage as they simultaneously a) provided a much-needed alternative account of the way the protests played out on the streets as opposed to how mainstream media portrayed them and, b) archived key moments that played out during the protests. In short, memes serve as historical cultural archives that have the potential to become a part of the (digital) cultural heritage of the Bahujans.

Understanding Cultural Heritage

Commonly cultural heritage is understood mainly as constituted by tangible items such as sculptures and monuments. UNESCO defines cultural heritage as "our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations" (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2008). Additionally, it also recognises the intangible aspects of cultural heritage defining it as the "wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is relevant for minority groups and for mainstream social groups within a State" ("What is intangible cultural heritage?"). UNESCO has also recognised digital culture as something that is worth preserving. As early as 2003, it released a Charter on the preservation of digital culture where digital content, particularly that which was 'born digital', was recommended to be preserved as a priority. The Charter notes, in its scope, that "[d]igital materials include texts, databases, still and moving images, audio, graphics, software and web pages, among a wide and *growing range of formats*. They are frequently ephemeral, and require purposeful production, maintenance and management to be retained" (UNESCO 2004, Emphasis added).

Consequently, keeping in mind the way institutions themselves recognise digital cultural heritage, we argue that memes could be considered as a form of intangible heritage as they are passed on not for their value as objects but as cultural narratives. They are created by and specific to the values imbibed within certain communities, in this case the Bahujans. Even as we make the case for memes to be potential cultural heritage, it is important to note that not all memes count as part of digital cultural heritage. Pages such as RMBT, CMSST and BBM are significant in themselves because they serve as important counter narratives to the hypervisible accounts of the dominant Hindutva narratives.

Beginning to understand memes as potential cultural heritage is interesting because it allows us different perspectives of understanding memes. Memes, as digitally born objects, also work as a "(post)modern form of folklore" through

which "shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as photoshopped images or urban legends" (Shifman 2014: 15; Bronner 2009). They are a digital form of folklore also in that they can survive through a "combination of successful transmission and cultural relevance" (McNeill 2009: 85). As Paul and Dowling note in the context of the YouTube channel Dalit Camera, digital spaces provide an alternative to the rapid "Murdochisation" of "India's mainstream media associated with rampant corporate corruption" particularly for the marginalised social groups (Paul and Dowling 2018: 2). The memes also serve as alternative journalistic accounts of the protests as they amplify calls to gather, create and share content pertaining to the anti-CAA-NRC protests. In this sense, as we shall see, the pages also serve as crucial actors that both chronicle and archive simultaneously, effectively "accumulat[ing] as cultural heritage and material for the writing of history" (Bødker 2017:57).

Situating Caste in Digital Spaces

Created in 2019, incidentally, just before the Lok Sabha elections in the country, with the coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) being re-elected under the leadership of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the pages employ memes to critique the rampant Brahminism as it manifests in both online and offline spaces.[3] These pages were created on Facebook[4] and since then have expanded to Twitter and Instagram as well. They use stock meme templates circulating on the internet (such as the one with Pelosi above) as well as create their own templates. The analysis of the memes includes excerpts from in-depth email interviews conducted with the admins of the pages to contextualise their own intent behind sharing the memes. These emails were the only form of interviews conducted with them between February and March 2020. Reading the interviews in conjunction with the memes is important because reading satire without examining the ideological backing of the creators of such content remains a "hollowed punctuation" (Yengde 2019: 18). The anonymity afforded to them by the digital space is crucial here as that is what allows them to flourish relatively unscathed amidst other more proliferating anonymous pages that create and share content that encourages casteism. The motivations for creating these pages overlap in terms of how all the admins sought to counter the casteist content proliferating on the internet and employed memes as a response.

Both CMSST and RMBT are run single-handedly by individuals (both identifying as male, middle-class, OBC and Bahujan respectively), BBM is run by two people belonging from the Scheduled Caste (SC), one person from the Scheduled Tribe (ST), one from the Other Backward Classes (OBC), all middle-class and male identifying. "Dalit-Bahujan" was coined by Kancha Ilaiah

to encompass not just the Dalits but all victims of exploitation and poverty (Valmiki 2003: xxxi). The word was first used by Kanshi Ram, founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984, to include Scheduled Castes[5], Scheduled Tribes[6] and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).[7] Some anti-caste activists today prefer to identify as Bahujan rather than DB or DBA, because, as RMBT shared in their interview with us: "The word [Bahujan] encompasses SCs/STs (Dalits), OBCs and agricultural communities [majority of the population] of the country, excluding Brahmin-Savarnas). In this context, I find words like 'Dalit-Bahujan' or 'DBA' redundant. The larger set of 'Bahujans' includes subsets of 'Dalits' and 'Adivasis'" (personal email interview, February 2020).

The meme pages under study, we argue, are both creating as well as becoming part of an archive of the Indian anti-caste movement as they consistently foreground and commemorate important leaders of the movement. Additionally, they clearly understand the current "trends" within digital spaces and allude to them in the memes they create which makes them more popular with the digital audiences.

Figure 2: Cover image of BBM, posted on 14 May 2019 with the accompanying text: "Credit for this fantastic artwork goes to Chirag Gade. (We just added text to it)." The image features Dr. Ambedkar and Jotirao Phule, two pioneers of the anti-caste movement.

Figure 2, the cover image of BBM, is a conversation between Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jotirao Phule.[8] At the outset, by placing the two important figures of the anti-caste movement together within the same timeline (they never cross paths in their lifetime, Ambedkar was born a year after Phule's death), establishes the intertextuality of the memes (here of two different historical time periods). In this case, the intertextuality renders the meme humorous as one places the use

of millennial language, with words such as "lit", also reinforcing these objects as a form of communication for the millennials (Knobel & Lankshear 2005: 6; Shifman 2014; Mick-Evans 2019; McNeill 2009). As RMBT notes, "Memes are changing the way we interact with each other, especially my generation that is born in the 90s ... For Millennials, memes are becoming the first source of information. Many times, they get to know about an incident when they see memes on that issue " (personal email interview, February 2020). Importantly, the conversation between Phule and Ambedkar highlights the purpose of memes as being "lit" and "sensible" at the same time. Using this meme as their cover image, BBM is essentially communicating that they produce these memes necessarily to engage in political critique that is culturally relevant, which may or may not be humorous. For BBM, "memes" are an evergreen source of micro-commentary on issues with ideological contours" (personal email interview, March 2020). Humour embedded in these memes drives home the contemporary relevance of the historical figures of the anti-caste movement to their audience.

As we shall see, the pages create memes strategically using several templates from international (primarily American) popular culture to superimpose their own narratives onto it such as Spiderman, or Batman and Robin, or even the Joker.[9]

In the text accompanying the image, BBM specifically acknowledges the labour of the artist in creating the image to which they added text. This is important to consider because of the history of unpaid, unacknowledged labour that the Bahujans have had to engage in for centuries. Speaking of the process of creating memes as a collaborative process, RMBT says that "those who contribute (to the page) want to remain anonymous for obvious reasons and prefer not to have credit for the memes that we are posting on the page." Continuing the issue of unpaid digital labour feeding into the history of unacknowledged labour in the past, the pages described that they prioritise furthering the anti-caste ideology and mobilising Bahujans over monetary benefits. CMSST admin's response sums up the motivation of all the three pages: "What keeps me going is some sense of community service—it is my addition to the Bahujan discourse. I get no money from it & I have to budget time for it… in a sense that does add to my labor being unpaid, but look what we are up against?"

"What we are up against" points to the dominance of upper caste perspectives in academic as well as activist spaces fighting for social justice. As Radhika Gajjala notes, the digital presence of Dalit voices is not what is new, but their visibility to the "*savarna* gaze" is (Gajjala 2019: 8). The online space, especially social media with its ability to "overcome social and cultural boundaries", is not exempt from caste consciousness (Harad 2018). As a study by Equality Labs has revealed, 13% of posts out of all Facebook posts are casteist. While Facebook hosts other hate content that is Islamophobic (37%), sexist (13%), relating to violence (11%) etc.,

the anti-caste content becomes especially problematic because Facebook has included "caste" in protected classes while describing hate speech (CounterView 2019). The casteist posts included "caste-based slurs, derogatory references to caste-based occupations such as manual scavenging, anti-Ambedkar posts (such as photoshopping Ambedkar's face onto memes as an echo of real-world vandalism), and anti-inter-caste love unions posts" (CounterView 2019).

The launch of exclusively anti-caste digital projects stands testament to this fact and attempt to change it. Websites and blogs such as Round Table India, Velivada, Savari, the Dalit History Month project, and Dalit Camera among others, have been working to foreground Bahujan sociocultural perspectives.[10] Content produced in these spaces challenges *what* history is, *how* it is written and *who* is "allowed" to write it. These meme pages follow suit as they too challenge what counts as humour and digital heritage and what it means to engage in the process of archiving as well as becoming part of an archive itself.

Hinduism versus Hindutva

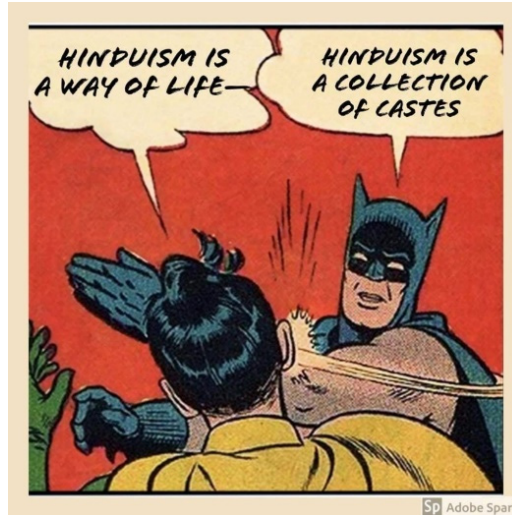Figure 3: BBM posted this meme on 17th January 2020.

Figure 4: RMBT posted this meme on 6th January 2020.

One of the major contentions of the anti-caste thinkers is that the distinction between Hindutva and Hinduism is a false one. Hindutva is commonly understood as a political ideology predating political parties such as the BJP and its affiliate organisations (the Sangh Parivar) that believes in creating a Hindu Rashtra or nation where everyone practices one form of "Hinduness" whereas Hinduism is a religion (Sharma 2020). Figure 3 posted by BBM is an example of the critique of the false distinction between Hindutva and Hinduism by Bahujans. It shows two identical Spider-Men pointing at each other, with text "Hinduism" and "Hindutva" written on either side implying the oppressive nature of both. While it is part of a general critique of Hindutva, the meme itself was in response to a tweet by a "savarna-liberal".[11] On 8th January 2020, amidst the anti-CAA-NRC protests, the satirical page Official Peeing Human, shared a post comparing Hinduism and Hindutva on Twitter with the caption, "Hindutva is the biggest enemy of Hinduism." The admin who identifies as Hindu himself, later, on the same day, shared another post with the caption, "I am from a peaceful secular Hindu family, and I hate Hindutva. This battle against the BJP-RSS terror can only be won if all the good Hindus differentiate themselves from Hindutva. RT if you agree. #HindusAgainstHindutva" (PeeingHuman 2020). The post spearheaded a critical analysis by the meme pages of the "savarna-liberal" (such as PeeingHuman's) response to CAA-NRC.

The distinction made by PeeingHuman between Hinduism and Hindutva—where he indicates the ideology of Hindutva as the sole reason of the anti-secular and anti-democratic CAA-NRC exercise—marks a response against CAA-NRC unique to upper-caste individuals espousing liberal views. This distinction points

to a need to separate the "good Hindu" from the "other" polarising "evil" one. Prominent Hindu scholars and journalists also make this distinction between "good Hinduism" and "bad Hindutva" which comes from a need to solidify their version of Hinduism as different from the one that is aimed at polarising the country. (Banerjee 2017; A. Sharma 2020).

In Figure 4, RMBT uses the "Batman slapping Robin" meme to critique the distinction made between Hinduism and Hindutva. In the image, Robin's statement about Hinduism being "a way of life" is a reference to a 1995 Supreme Court ruling that declared that if a candidate were to use the term "Hindutva" in their election campaign, it would not be considered a "corrupt practice" according to Section 123(3A) in The Representation of People Act (1951) (Tarkunde 1996). The election campaigning which would be questionable because of Hindutva's religious nature would therefore continue to be adopted. The Supreme Court reasoned that the words "Hindutva" and "Hinduism" indicate a "way of life" of Indian people (Tarkunde 1996). The action of slapping Robin by Batman is to point out the fallacy in his statement.

As Aditya Nigam (2019) notes, the ubiquity of caste is prominent in its absence. The distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva discounts the close links between the two as rooted in the maintenance of the caste system. The "internet Hindus" who not only support but also propagate the Hindutva ideology within the digital spaces (Mohan 2015; Udupa 2015) and the Marxist Indian scholars who vehemently reject it, have one thing in common: their upper-caste identities. Aditya Nigam (2019) notes that even among the Marxist scholarship in India that deeply studies the nature of Hindutva, there is hardly any attention paid to the ubiquity of caste. This is a deep-rooted problem originating in the fashioning of the "modern Indian." That is, in order for the formation of the modern Indian self to be completed successfully, caste had to not merely be "proscribed" or "repressed from public discourse, in any obvious sense, rather, it was built into the formation of the self, seen as something that this 'modern Indian' had already left behind in some remote past" (Nigam 2019: 122).

The memes, within one frame, clearly articulate the implications of such distinctions around Hindu nationalism—conflation of the Hindu identity with Indian identity, and PeeingHuman's caste privilege in mobilising "good Hindus" against the "enemy" that he refers Hindutva as. In claiming his Hindu identity, an upper-caste man PeeingHuman, does not challenge the caste system that is inherent to Hinduism even as he attempts to challenge Hindu nationalism. PeeingHuman's partial critique of Hindu nationalism—devoid of an analysis of caste, maintains the foundation of Hindu nationalism and his own complicity in maintaining Hindutva even in challenging it.

Critiquing Media Representations

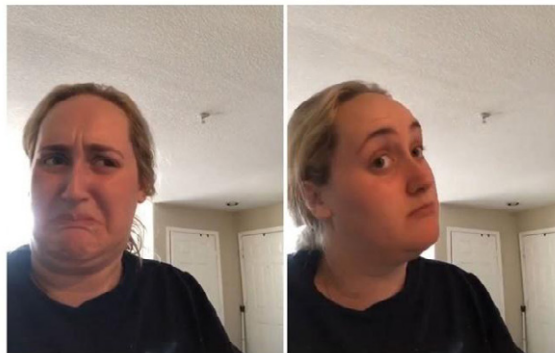Figure 5: BBM's Facebook post 16th January 2020

Figure 6: RMBT posted this meme on 17th January 2020

Scholars have noted how with the BJP under PM Narendra Modi's leadership, many major news channels "became open Modi partisans", as he "exploited their business

logic" (S. Sinha 2017: 4165). The present administration, perceived as being less tolerant of criticism, has shrunken spaces of dissent considerably, as scholars have pointed out, largely seeing it as a "'convergence' of interests between business and the…government" (Sonwalkar 2017: 535), as well as "other nonpartisan and extrapartisan political goals" such as "the quest for social mobility and caste power" (Chakravarty and Roy 2015: 317). This favouring of sensationalism and propaganda has been popularly termed as the "lapdog media" model which "backs the agenda of the socio-political elite and perpetuates exploitation and social inequalities" (Sharma 2018; Pande 2020; Mukhopadhyay 2021).

In Figure 5, along with pointing out the partisanship of the channels, the meme pages dig deeper to call out the caste-affiliated loyalties that lie at the heart of their support, or lack of caste-based critique to the Brahminism advocated by the BJP. The Joker among the Angels template is used to point out that there is a significant difference in the way some of the news channels are perceived. That is, while the Joker may be the odd one out, read deeper, they all still hold something in common: in this case, not questioning the caste-based politics fundamental to BJP. Of the six news media channels named, five are TV news channels and one is print (The Hindu).[12] Among them, NDTV is the only one known for actively criticising the BJP government and its policies. The Joker represented here is an intertextual reference to the film directed by Todd Phillips (2019). Based on the antagonist of the Batman series, the film explores the Joker detailing his own backstory, putting into context his propensity to commit heinous crimes. It has variously dealt with issues of mental illness, poverty and the economic gap between the rich and the poor, seemingly providing an explanation to the Joker's descent into nihilism and murder. However, the film seems to be careful not to condone his behaviour while it gets the audience to empathise to some extent. Correlating this, the meme equates the Joker to NDTV, making a statement that the reputation that NDTV has built for itself as being an anti-establishment and honest, fact-finding news channel is a façade. As the layers are peeled off, one cannot absolve this channel either from perpetuating the same ideas about caste that it seems to be speaking against. The meme highlights that most news media including print and television are similar in terms of caste composition as well as the way they represent and report caste atrocities in the country (Subramanian 2019).

In Figure 6, the debate about the mainstream Indian media is unpacked through their (lack of) news coverage of the anti-CAA protests student politicians like Kanhaiya Kumar are celebrated for their participation in the protests whereas anti-caste leaders like Chandrashekhar Azad are either ignored or vilified. [13] The meme points out that this bias is primarily due to the Bhumihar (upper castes who claim Brahmin status in the northern state of Bihar) status of Kumar's caste identity. Both Kumar and Azad are influential young political leaders who have emerged

during Modi's tenure. Kumar became popular especially after his arrest in 2016 by the Delhi police on charges of sedition for organising an event protesting the judicial killing of Kashmiri separatists Afzal Guru and Maqbool Bhat. As founder of the Bhim Army and more recently the Azad Samaj Party, Chandrashekhar Azad has been seen as a "Dalit icon" especially after he put up a board in his native village extolling his caste identity: "The Great Chamar of Dhadkauli Welcome You" in 2015, leading to protests by upper caste leaders (Rashid 2017). However, during the anti-CAA-NRC protests his stature as the "flamboyant" Dalit leader with "swag" was built (Kabir 2019). While digital news media channels noted this, television vilified or invisibilised his presence in the protests while focussing on Kanhaiya Kumar. This kind of caste biased media representation is not new. As Unnamati Syama Sundar notes in his book on Ambedkar cartoons, "it is a fact that along with Gandhi, Ambedkar was truly a mass leader of his time"; however, political cartoons of the time did not feature Ambedkar in them despite his mass appeal, except in derogatory terms (Sundar 2019: 33-34).

Conspicuous Marginalisations: Visibilising Erasures through Archiving

These erasures and marginalisations are made conspicuous in these memes as the intent of the makers is made explicit. In the previously analysed memes, we have seen how dominant ideological perspectives are challenged by marginalised groups. In the next few sections, we shall see more clearly how history is in effect being rewritten, with important symbols and historical moments being reclaimed to challenge the caste bias prevalent within dominant Indian historical narratives.

As Ayala argues, the definition of UNESCO still prevents the inclusion of memes as cultural heritage because it sees digital heritage as "static" in that it is timeless, consisting of "objects that can be inventoried " (Ayala, 2020). That is, physical cultural heritage (such as monuments and even music) that is later digitised. On the other hand, memes cannot be considered as one artefact that remains unchanged but as something that changes with time, context and author because they are native to the digital space. Most importantly, "digital heritage cannot include only the official and institutional discourse of what is considered a valuable Internet meme, but it must also take into consideration that memes are continually re-signified as representative signs of multiple communities' (virtual or not) identities, communities that will dispute their ownership" (Ayala 2020).
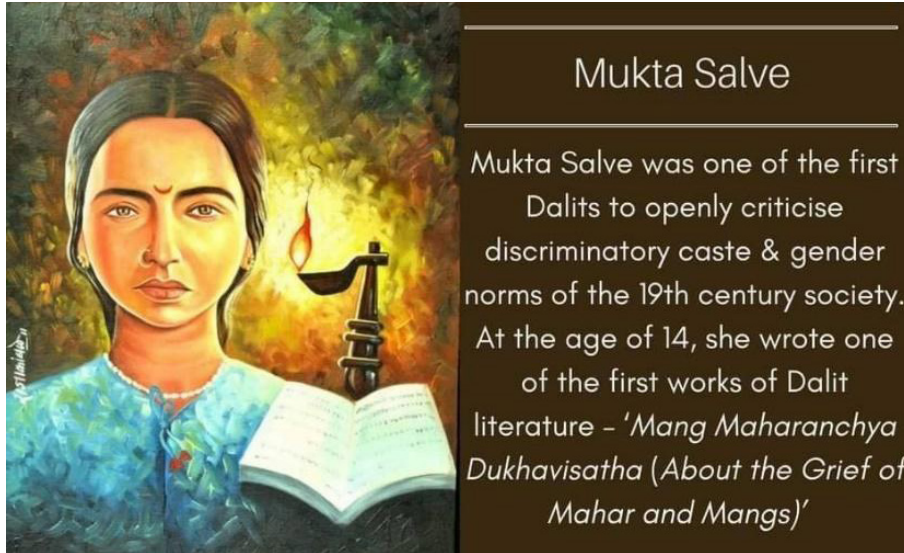
Figure 7: 5 January 2020, Facebook post by RMBT with the accompanying text: *"Today is 177th birth anniversary of Mukta Salve. Check comment to read her article "About the grief of Mahar and Mangs". "Her essay on "Dharma" (Religion) was read in a gathering of about 3000 people in presence of Major Candy. Some thoughts in her essay are worth remembering even now, after a century and a half, as she raised the question capable of shattering whole of Brahminism. If we are not authorized to read the scriptures created by Brahmins, she asked, how do the Brahmins belong to our religion?"*

Figure 8: This meme was posted on 25 December,2019 on CMSST. The book featured is Manusmriti, (Laws of Manu) considered to be the "authoritative" text on caste and Hinduism in India. A shoe is placed on top of it with the lines: "Ambedkarite resistance framed in one single picture! Jai Bhim!! PS: any 'liberal' savarnas planning to say "ya manusmriti should be rejected, but putting shoe on book is disrespectful" --- you are Brahmanism personified. Please get a critical education."

Like the BBM cover image, many of the memes posted by the pages are commemorative of important anti-caste leaders. RMBT shares "content that pierces through Brahmanical propaganda" by making "people aware of idols who fought for their rights...document struggles of Bahujan students, activists etc by highlighting the atrocities committed by the Brahmanical system...leverage their popularity to share articles/lengthy posts on little-known Bahujan idols like Nangeli, Fatima Sheikh, Annabhau Sathe, Tarabai Shinde etc" (personal email interview, February 2020).

Figure 7 features Mukta Salve, another important figure of the anti-caste movement, further building on the digital repository of their anti-caste heritage for other Bahujans. That memes such as Figures 7 and 8 are not humorous in themselves indicate the keen understanding that these makers have of the purpose of their pages. For instance, RMBT believes that while they are not doing "even a 1000th of the work that Savitribai [Phule], Jyotiba [Phule], Babasaheb [Ambedkar],

Periyar[14], Kanshiram did. The only thing that inspires to keep going is ideology. The ideology that believes every human being has a right to live a respectful life. The ideology that refuses to accept the dominance of one particular caste/class" (personal email interview, February 2020).

Figure 8 is a screenshot of a tweet by another anti-caste page, Ambedkar's Caravan, pointing to the intertextuality here not just between meme pages but between social media platforms as well. The meme celebrates a specific day in history that is not part of "mainstream" and "official" records of history textbooks that form the dominant Indian historical narrative. On 20th March 1927, a satyagraha (a form of nonviolent protest) was led by Ambedkar in Mahad, a town in Maharashtra, to protest against the disallowance of Untouchables from drawing water from public wells and other sources of water (20th March in Dalit History n.d.). Dominant caste Hindus quelled the protest, and they had to retreat. However, on December 25, 1927, Ambedkar, along with some of his fellow Untouchables, and a few caste Hindus from the town who were their allies, burnt the *Manusmriti* in a pyre as a symbolic protest and culmination of the Mahad Satyagraha.

"Putting shoe on book is disrespectful" refers to the common belief among dominant caste Hindus that stepping on any form of paper, particularly books, is disrespectful because it represents Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, according to popular Hindu mythology. CMSST reads and rejects such an understanding of disrespect as laden with caste connotations. That is, knowledge within popular Hindu mythology is always associated with the upper caste, particularly Brahmin and Kshatriya varnas. Most popular mythological texts including the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* celebrate upper-caste valour as the ideal that everyone must aspire to.[15] Along with these Hindu epics, "ancient Hindu kingdoms, popular translations of Vedic scripts, pre-independence politics, and communal tensions in the postcolonial decades…" are regularly evoked and archived by the "Internet Hindus" as "indubitable data sets" in an attempt to "correct the present with an accurate account of the past" wherein Hindutva history is made official (Udupa 2015). The anti-caste Bahujan memes pages fill in the "archival silences" present in these popular as well as "definitive" official histories (Murray 2017: 103).

Like BBM which is "working to create a content pool to refer to for the Bahujans," (personal email interview, February 2020) for CMSST, the role of their meme page lies in "preparing ground" for a Dalit-Bahujan "Renaissance" in India à la the Black Civil Rights movement around '60s-70s, paving way for "our Martin Luther King and Malcolm X" (personal email interview, March 2020). Citing examples of websites like Roundtable India, students' unions such as Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association (BAPSA) at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) as also the Azad Samaj Party[16], CMSST sees the contributions made by the Bahujan meme pages including theirs as worthy of being mentioned

as a "small footnote" in the "Bahujan Cultural Renaissance" that they anticipate (personal email interview, March 2020).

Figure 9: Cover image of CMSST's Facebook page, posted on 6th May 2019. The image depicts three protagonists of a Hindi film Mohabbatein (Chopra 2000) wearing caste markers, janeu and tilak [17] while holding each other's hands.

Figure 9 is the cover image of CMSST. It depicts a still from the Hindi film *Mohabbatein* (Chopra 2000), that traces the life trajectory of three male students in an all-boys college, Gurukul. The image has no text; it is edited to depict the three protagonists wearing caste markers of *janeu* and *tilak*. The meme doesn't have a descriptive text in the caption, implying that it is aimed at those familiar with the culture of Hindi films and casteism within the Indian educational system.

The context of the image is that Gurukul is a savarna-dominated space (even in its name) that discounts a critical understanding of caste. The college is dominated by upper caste students and headed by an upper caste principal. That the Indian educational system does not challenge caste privilege, and instead breeds caste-based discrimination is also significant in contextualizing the image as well as CMSST's motivation to begin their meme page. Dalit scholars have detailed how casteism takes on the dichotomous form of "theoretical brahmins, empirical shudras" in the discipline of social sciences in India, that is, to say how the Indian academia is dominated by the upper castes (Guru and Sarukkai 2012). As Guru (2012) observes, for ages the "theoretical Brahmins" have remained gatekeepers of all epistemological questions while the "empirical Shudras" have been forced to remain in the more immediate temporal spaces because they have not been able to afford the luxury or allowed the freedom of "reflectivity" that would enable them to "do theory" (pp. 9-29). Guru also notes, through examples, the number of times savarna "theoretical Brahmins" have benefitted out of the (often theoretical) labour of the Dalits and have left their contribution unacknowledged. This article highlights the ways in which this divide between the "empirical" and "theoretical" is subverted and questioned by the meme-makers.

Kancha Ilaiah (1996) talks about feeling alienated from his school textbooks because the stories and the language of the textbooks were centric and limited to upper-caste experiences. Ilaiah writes, "Right from early school up to college, our Telugu textbooks were packed with these Hindu stories. For Brahmin-Baniya students these were their childhood stories, very familiar not only in the story form but in the form of the Gods that they worshipped."

The prevalence of casteism in university spaces that as Guru writes should be "egalitarian structures that should encourage students to speak in a universal language that concerns the well-being of humanity" (Guru 2016), has led to the deaths of Dalit and Adivasi scholars like Rohith Vemula, Dr. Payal Tadvi, and many others (Scroll Staff 2019)[18].

The image correlates with the name of the page: Classroom Memes Starring Savarna Teens, pointing to how educational spaces are marked by caste. CMSST admin who is "surrounded by an almost Savarna-exclusive environment from students, researchers, faculty and administration" themselves encounter "a lot of casual casteism by seemingly progressive-critical folks" (personal email interview, March 2020). The cover image and name of the page are therefore informed by their everyday experiences.

Ayala (2020) argues that cultural heritage cannot be imagined in a "univocal way," "leaving out the experiences and uses that the users themselves give it, users who are the ones who will, in the end, assert heritage its value according to their personal narrative" (Ayala 2020). This helps us in 1) seeing cultural heritage in general and digital cultural heritage in particular as a process, rather than an individual object that needs to be preserved for posterity; 2) accounting for non-institutionalised ways of preservation of personal histories by individuals and communities independently through means and forms of expression that are conducive for them to use.

Conclusion

In this article, we demonstrated that digital memes could also be considered as part of digital cultural heritage in the context of challenging caste biases within dominant Indian cultural and historical narratives. One of our goals in this article was to explain how a digital cultural archive is generated not just through the digitisation of physical objects already considered as cultural heritage but also born-digital objects such as memes that often escape notice because of their ephemeral nature. Rather, the ephemerality of memes is crucial in seeing them as specific, immediate responses during cultural and political conflicts. During the time of the anti-CAA-NRC protests, these memes, created by a few anti-caste meme pages, worked to build solidarity against authoritarianism as they not

only raised clarion calls but also built anti caste narratives, countering dominant representations of the protests in the media. In using memes to rewrite or parallelly create alternative perspectives of history and the contemporary times, these pages challenge the dominant narratives of history and historiography itself.

These pages consciously create memes that use both local as well as the more "mainstream" set of stock images as meme templates to appeal to a specific demographic of the young Indian millennial with some amount of social and cultural capital as evidenced by the intertextual references to both Hindi films as well as Hollywood and streaming platforms such as Netflix. In this context, the "memetic" rather than the "viral" characteristic is at play (Shifman 2014). That is, their ability to mutate in users' hands and take on and communicate multiple meanings as they spread among different users is more important than the volume of people that the memes reach at one point. One, because the pages that create them are relatively new and their reach is still limited compared to the existing savarna narratives predominant not just in the meme context but largely in the digital space as well. Two, their primary aim is to first make visible the Bahujan narratives within the community as well as establish themselves as significant voices of the community. These pages are using a blend of locally derived templates in the form of stills from popular regional language films and superhero characters.

There are technical challenges and questions to be probed before making a case for including memes as digital cultural heritage. As Peter Lyman observes, digital cultural artifacts are, first of all, difficult to define because they are "shaped by experimentation and practice" (1998). Next, questions of what constitutes a digital archive, who preserves it, and who decides what is authentic and worth preservation, become important. As Sahana Udupa notes, online archiving as history making looks at archives as "active political 'practice' to reconfigure contentious memory making as claims to power" (2015: 213). On the one hand, the "internet Hindus" are actively "gathering texts, commentaries, and arguments that portray the fecund repertoire of Hinduism as the civilizational essence of India, and insert them aggressively into online media through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and hundreds of websites" (2015: 213), on the other, there are the seemingly liberal Hindus who may question the Hindutva dominance but fail to critique the foundations of caste hierarchy within it. In claiming one's Hindu identity the underlying mythological and political narratives that maintain this Hindu dominance remain unquestioned.

Online archiving "creates 'truth effects' contending with the status of the state and organized religious institutions as sanctioned authorities to preside over knowledge." RMBT, BBM and CMSST are communities constituting the "participatory cultures" of memes, where the users become both consumers and

creators sharing these units of cultural information with each other as they partake in shared meaning-making and symbolism. At the same time that they counter dominant cultural narratives, they also build their own, in the process creating a dynamic cultural archive. We saw how through their cover images they're defining themselves, critiquing CAA-NRC from the lens of caste and broadly the Brahmanical politics of the BJP government, as well as exposing the caste bias within news media channels themselves—even the seemingly "anti-establishment" or "progressive" news channels. In the backdrop of the CAA-NRC protests, the meme pages also commemorate important moments within the anti-caste movement like the *Manusmriti Dahan Divas* and also anti-caste leaders such as Mukta Salve.

Through the article, we exhibited the "subversive potential of anti-caste archives" (Murray 2017) especially on social media platforms like Facebook, which "prioritize relationships with other individuals on the basis of class/caste markers such as neighbourhoods lived in, schools and universities attended, and professional affiliations " (Murray 2017). The anti-caste archiving becomes even more important as it challenges the "Hindu national realism which is shaped by its historical opposition to secular realism" consistently employed by the Internet Hindus by blending mythology with historical facts to paint a Hindutva history of India (Udupa 2015).

Therefore, as Ayala suggests, we posit that there is a need to rethink the definitions of "cultural heritage" and subsequently, what constitutes digital cultural heritage. "Official" and "materialistic" definitions of what constitutes cultural heritage, as given by UNESCO are insufficient. In fact, political parties are actively hiring people to act as trolls, ensuring a singular narrative circulates the digital spaces, creating a semblance of the "true" narrative, or the "real" history of India's greatness (Chaturvedi, 2020). Local histories and myths are reinterpreted to communal and casteist ends resulting in an imposition of popular culture not from above (Narayan, 2006). The saffronisation of Indian history which has been underway since the formation of the RSS and the rest of the Sangh Parivar post-independence is now hypervisible.[19] Therefore, efforts of such pages even though small and significant still have to grapple with the power struggles between multiple factions of the Hinduism vs. Hindutva debate. Therefore, for these memes to be recognised as important means of transmitting and creating cultural heritage, they need to first deconstruct and successfully dismantle these dominant narratives, which will in turn lead to institutional spaces recognising these struggles and include them as part of more than mere tokenism.

Cultural heritage needs to be looked at as "praxis" and culture as always in a state of "becoming" as a result of communities (both analogue and digital) actively trying to create and contest meanings associated with them through artefacts such as memes (Ayala 2020). Pages like BBM, CMSST and RMBT are "constructing

an alternative history of India" (Nayar 2011: 2) that is situated as the "history of discrimination" (Nayar 2011: 4). This is echoed by CMSST who feel that "a larger movement will emerge in the future where we'll question the Indian republic - legislature to judiciary to cultural and civic-social life, and really, really question/critique caste as a variable in all that" (personal email interview, March 2020). The larger systemic structures that maintain caste are still very much in place in India today and so any kind of anti-caste struggles even using humour continue to remain in closed, smaller and seemingly safer spaces that struggle to remain alive through multiple strategies of anonymisation such as use of pseudonyms, or through remaining a private closed groups on Facebook within the broader ecosystem of meme pages and dominant Hindu caste narratives.

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[1] Referring to oppressed castes in India, literally translating to "many people" or "majority" effectively reclaiming the understanding of the oppressed castes as the minority.

[2] The page CMSST is now called Buffalo Intellectual, run primarily on Instagram by the same adminis-trator. The admin, in a Facebook chat with one of the researchers, mentioned that they "found a different editorial voice", hence the change in name. We have retained their interview and memes for this study.

[3] Badass Bahujan Memes (BBM) was created on 17 April 2019; Revolutionary memes for Bahujan teens on 29 April 2019; CMSST on 6th May 2019.

[4] We will be analysing memes from the Facebook pages only because, one, these pages were first created on Facebook, and second, Facebook, by giving equal space to captions and images, provides a steady ground for understanding the context in which the memes are created.

[5] The Scheduled Caste (SC) identity is a "bureaucratic necessity for Dalits when they apply for reserved po-sitions, which are often derided by anti-Dalits as quotas, and for other government benefits" As noted by Arun Prabhakar Mukherjee (Valmiki 2003: xxx). The category was introduced in the Government of India Act (1935) where a schedule was introduced into the Constitution of India that included these castes. The introduction of this category was part of affirmative action measures undertaken by Ambedkar to ensure that Dalits would get equal opportunities. This is the current, officially recognised term to refer to Dalits after the term Depressed Classes which was introduced by the British in 1916.

[6] An official, bureaucratic term, as mentioned in the Indian constitution to refer to the adivasis or native indigenous tribes in various parts of the country.

[7] Another bureaucratic term to include all socially and educationally backward castes of India. This classifi-cation also includes disadvantaged people from other religions than Hindus.

[8] Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, also known as Babasaheb, is considered the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. He was a jurist and social reformer who campaigned against practices of caste discrimi-nation in India. He is responsible for the implementation of several anti-caste policies such as the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Jotirao Phule was one of the earliest anti-caste social reformers of India from the 19th century.

[9] Incidentally, we have used superhero template memes for analysis here. However, the meme pages do not necessarily use only superhero templates to make their points, but a wide range of local popular cultural ones too. Additionally, the use of certain meme templates also depends on the current "trends" of popular series and films especially on over-the-top (OTT) platforms and are used by many communities of meme makers to suit their own purposes.

[10] Roundtable India is a platform that aggregates information from mainstream media as well as highlights the Dalit-Bahujan perspective on various issues (About Roundtable). "Velivada" in Telugu means "Dalit Ghetto"; the website was created for Bahujan expression, in the aftermath of the suicide of the Dalit Ph.D. scholar Rohith Vemula in 2016. Savari is a website by Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi women talking about

their lives, experiences and society, with the aim of continuing the "traditions of the anti-caste struggles of their ancestors" from different parts of South Asia.(We Are) Modelled on the Black History month, Dalit History Month is a project undertaken every year by the incubator Project Mukti observed every April as a way to grow the documentation of Dalit history, art, and culture ("Dalit History Month: Imagining New Futures by Harnessing the Past"). Dalit Camera is a YouTube channel that documents "perspectives on/ voices of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans and Minorities" (About).

[11] The reference to "savarna-liberal" is often repeated in these memes and indicates as an upper caste Hindu, even though one may reject religion or other oppressive social structures owing to education they have received, the inherent casteism in them manifests in different ways, not all of which can be seen explicitly as practising untouchability against someone else. In his book, Annihilation of Caste, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, too, makes a case against moderate Hindus and argues that to "believe in the Hindu shastras and to simultaneously think of oneself as liberal or moderate is a contradiction in terms" (Ambedkar 2014: 37)

[12] Zee News and Aaj Tak are Hindi channels while the others are in English (NDTV is available in both English and Hindi).

[13] Kanhaiya Kumar is the former president of Jawaharlal Nehru University's Student Union (JNUSU)), and recently also stood for state elections in Bihar. Azad is the co-founder and president of Bhim Army, a Dalit rights organisation

[14] Known as the Father of the Dravidian Movement, Periyar or E.V. Ramasamy was a social activist and politician prominent in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. He started the self-respect movement against Brahminism and gender inequality in the state.

[15] For instance, in the epic Mahabharata, the character Ekalavya was asked to cut off his thumb because he dared to compete with the Kshatriya prince Arjuna in archery simply because he was a Shudra. Such stories have been relegated to obscurity, never being seen as a caste atrocity in the multiple retellings of the epic. Ekalavya's talent is erased because Arjuna had to be set as an example for the best archer in the world.

[16] The party was launched on 15th March 2020 by Dalit leader Chandrashekhar Azad.

[17] Both Janeu and tilak are caste markers. Tilak is applied on the forehead. Janeu is considered a sacred thread worn by Brahmin males after a caste ritual called "upanayana."

[18] Rohith Vemula, a Dalit scholar, pursuing his PhD from University of Hyderabad died of suicide in January 2016. Rohith had been suspended along with four others after a complaint by the local unit of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the BJP. His fellowship was suspended for raising concerns under the banner of the Ambedkar Students Association" (ASA). He along with the four students set up a tent after they were removed from their hostel rooms. Days later, Rohith died of suicide. Dr. Payal Tadvi was an MD student at a Medical College in Mumbai, who died of suicide because of the caste-based discrimination she experienced by her senior colleagues. These are among the many instances of institutionalised caste-based deaths in India.

[19] One of the ways in which this has been done is through the multiple projects to rename cities previously named after Mughal rulers for instance (Allahabad became Prayagraj) and to build statues of historical figures whom the Sangh Parivar considered as important to the "glorious Hindu past" such as that of the Statue of Unity in Gujarat of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel or even of Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj to be completed in Mumbai. See Ahmad (2018).