

When The Laughter Stops

“Our world will not die as the result of the bomb, as the papers say, it will die of laughter, of banality, or making a joke of everything, and a lousy joke at that.”

-Carlos Ruiz Zafón

Kamlesh is a thirteen-year-old ragpicker in Delhi. In October, a clip from a documentary featuring him went viral on the internet. In it, Kamlesh talks about his drug habits, telling the interviewer about how he spends almost three-quarters of the money he earns as a ragpicker on “solution”, the thinner that is inhaled for a high.

Such a clip, featuring a thirteen-year-old so dependent on drugs that he vomits blood if he goes a few days without them, might have been expected to elicit shock or sympathy. Instead, audiences found the breezy tone, voice modulations, and enunciations of the inebriated kid amusing. Soon, Kamlesh had become the new internet sensation, with remixed songs and memes.

Meme culture is, at its best, an incredible phenomenon. It is unlike any other form of communication in the way it is able to mobilize the internet community to take up a new format and to move on to the next one after exhausting the potential of the current phase. Being user-generated and free, both of cost and from any establishment-control, it is entirely dictated by public responses. When sourced from the right places, memes can be an incredible tool for social bonding and to generally feel better.

However, viral content of the sort that was centred on Kamlesh raises questions about what effects the internet in general, and meme culture specifically, could be having on us. For

every wholesome and positive meme, one can find ten times as many that trivialize depression, suicide, social isolation, and various prejudices. The internet is dangerously close to making these issues cool and happening.



Memes often mask deeper issues

The freedom of speech would not truly be a freedom if it was restricted by people taking offence. This should not blind us to the fact that humour is a powerful tool for disguising actual prejudice. Socially unacceptable behaviour can easily get a free pass when it is veiled in humour. Content could, as it is in most cases, be harmless fun intended at eliciting laughs. Yet, it normalizes the concepts it jokes about, such as sexual assault, depression, and racism. Dark humour is not an entirely new form of comedy, but the sheer volume of it, the constant consumption because of its presence in the most popular social media networks, and the fact that it is now the dominant form of humour makes it a very real threat.



One of the many posts blatantly shaming people for physical appearance

On several occasions, the internet community has displayed a shocking [lack of sensitivity and concern](#) for fellow human beings. Ordinary people can quickly turn into the new internet fad, like how Kamlesh was reduced to a joke. In 2015, the mother of two-year-old Mariah Anderson was horrified when she learnt that while her baby, afflicted with Two Chromosome Affliction Syndrome, had been struggling for life, the internet was busy making fun of her appearance.



Mariah's grandmother, Linda Pringle, said the bullies should know that their jokes are hurtful rather than funny. "This is an actual human being, this is a child, this is a baby," she told.

The science fiction television series Black Mirror, that envisions the dark side of technology in its episodes, presents one story that is particularly chilling solely for the reason that it is not some future dystopia, but something that could very easily happen today. In this episode, a comedian controlling a cartoon character hijacks the elections through disruptive and crass humour, making intelligent and serious discussion impossible. Cynical as the episode might be, we can already see this happening on some scale. The jokes are becoming more important and prominent than the actual issues on hand.

The effective regulation or censorship of the internet is a near-impossibility. More importantly, the internet is the largest forum for free speech and should not be subjected to such restrictions. The line beyond which something is too sensitive or offensive is not an absolute one. The power to draw this line is too great and dangerous a power to hand over to an individual, institute, or government. The solution to the situation lies with the individual. If we keep going the way we are, we might not like what's left of us when the laughter stops.

