

From Memes to Mobilisation: The Cockroach Janta Party as a Form of Digital Political Participation among Indian Youth

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Abstract

In May and June 2026, a satirical meme account known as the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) gained more than 22 million Instagram followers in three weeks — enough to overtake the official follower count of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and, by most measures, to become the largest online youth movement in the country's history. Within a month, the movement moved off-screen: its first offline protest took place at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, where demonstrators called for the resignation of the Education Minister over a string of examination paper leak scandals. This paper asks how meme-based satire facilitates political participation among Gen Z users, drawing on Henry Jenkins' theory of participatory culture, political satire theory, digital citizenship frameworks, the networked public sphere, and Indian media scholarship to argue that the CJP marks a genuine shift in political engagement — one where humour operates as resistance, identity forms through ironic affiliation ("Main Bhi Cockroach"), and participation runs along a continuum from content creation to offline protest. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of the CJP's Instagram presence, thematic analysis of engagement across 78 posts, secondary analysis of engagement metrics reported across news outlets, and an event analysis of the June 6, 2026 protest, the paper shows that meme-based satire lowers the barriers to political expression, turns collective frustration into communal catharsis, and — under the right conditions — can carry participants into offline collective action. It closes by considering the limits of meme politics and what the CJP suggests about democratic participation in the digital era. A postscript extends the case through the movement's escalation into a sustained sit-in, a Cabinet-level resignation, and its decision to remain a pressure group rather than register as a party.

Keywords: Meme Politics, Digital Participation, Gen Z, Political Satire, Participatory Culture, Indian Youth, Social Media, Political Communication, Connective Action, Protest Mobilization

1. Introduction

India has the largest Gen Z population in the world: more than 380 million people aged 15 to 29, or roughly 27 percent of the country's total population (United Nations Population Division, 2024). This study defines "Gen Z" as those born between 1997 and 2012; the UN's 15—29 age band is only an approximation of that cohort. The scale of this generation is not simply a statistical curiosity — it is a generation coming of age under real economic strain.

In early 2026, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy put graduate youth unemployment at 29.1 percent, a figure that rises to 42 percent once underemployment and discouraged workers are counted (CMIE, 2026). A separate estimate from Azim Premji University placed unemployment among graduates under 25 at around 40 percent (Bloomberg, 2026a). It was against this backdrop — economic anxiety, distrust in institutions, a widespread feeling that government does not listen — that one poorly chosen phrase from a senior judge triggered a political movement unlike anything India had seen in the digital era.

On May 15, 2026, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant was hearing a petition about fraudulent degrees in the media industry when he made an offhand remark that turned out to matter far more than he can have intended. He suggested that "youngsters like cockroaches, who don't get any employment or have any place in the profession" end up in media, RTI activism, and social media, where they "start attacking everyone" (Hindustan Times, 2026). He later clarified that the comment targeted people with fraudulent credentials specifically, not young people as a group — but it had already landed on years of accumulated frustration over unemployment, repeated examination paper leaks, inflation running above 6 percent, and a sustained crackdown on political dissent (Al Jazeera, 2026a; Associated Press, 2026), and the clarification did not really stick.

Within 24 hours, Abhijeet Dipke — a 30-year-old public relations graduate student at Boston University who had previously worked as a communications strategist for the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi between 2020 and 2023 — posted a single line on X: "What if all cockroaches come together?" (PTI, 2026; AP, 2026). He then used AI tools, including Claude and ChatGPT, to build a website, open accounts on Instagram, X, and Facebook, draft a manifesto, and write a party anthem, all under the name "Cockroach Janta Party" — a deliberate echo of the ruling party's name (ABP Live, 2026). Growth was immediate: the account passed 3 million Instagram followers within 78 hours, 9 million within four days, and by May 21 had reached more than 14 million, overtaking the BJP's roughly 9 million (Outlook India, 2026). By early June the following had climbed past 22 million — more than double the BJP's 9.5 million, and ahead of Congress's 13.9 million (AFP, 2026; Bloomberg, 2026c; AP, 2026).

The most significant turn came on June 6, 2026, when the CJP held its first offline protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi. Hundreds turned out to demand the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the examination paper leak scandals; many wore cockroach masks, others carried copies of the Indian Constitution. The memes had become a march (Mid-day, 2026; ABC News, 2026).

This paper investigates how meme-based satire encourages political participation among Gen Z users, treating the Cockroach Janta Party as an instrumental case. Three questions guide the analysis: (1) What specific mechanisms turn online satire into collective political engagement among young Indians? (2) How does political humour function as resistance where direct dissent carries real risk, and how does that function change once a movement moves offline? (3) What does the CJP reveal about how youth political engagement is changing, and what conditions let meme-based movements convert an online following into a street protest?

The relevance of the case extends well past India. As democratic institutions everywhere confront falling youth participation and rising political disaffection, understanding whether digital platforms and meme culture can re-engage young citizens has become an urgent question (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014). What makes the CJP especially instructive is that it brings together several things that rarely appear at once: organic emergence, extraordinarily fast growth, a communicative style rooted in Gen Z norms,

substantive grievances voiced through satire, and a demonstrated ability to mobilize offline. That last point speaks to the "conversion problem" that has dogged digital activism research for years, taken up in Section 2.4: Morozov's (2009, 2011) and Gladwell's (2010) skepticism rests on the claim that online engagement rarely converts into offline risk-taking, and Halupka's (2014) thin-thick continuum was developed to give that claim a more precise vocabulary. The CJP matters because it supplies one of the few recent, well-documented cases where that conversion happened.

The paper proceeds by reviewing the relevant literature and setting out a theoretical framework, describing the methodology, presenting findings organized around six themes, discussing theoretical and practical implications, concluding on the argument as it stood at the June 7 data cutoff, and then extending the case, in a postscript, through the movement's developments over the following two months.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Participatory Culture and Convergence Culture

Henry Jenkins' work on participatory culture is a natural starting point for making sense of the CJP. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2006) argued that today's media environment is shaped by the collision between corporate content production and grassroots audience participation, giving rise to "participatory culture," a mode in which consumers actively create and circulate media rather than simply receiving it. Jenkins (2009) identifies defining features of such cultures — low barriers to expression, strong norms of sharing, informal mentorship, and a sense that contributions matter — that map neatly onto the CJP: no formal structure, no paid staff beyond Dipke himself (Outlook India, 2026), yet within days millions of young Indians were following, sharing, remixing, and registering through a membership form. The June 6 protest carried that same participatory culture off the screen and onto the street. Carpentier (2011) cautions, however, that Jenkins' framework — built largely on Western media fandoms operating in permissive political environments — may not fully capture the constraints of non-Western settings, where the boundary between cultural participation and political dissent is genuinely uncertain. When the Indian government blocked the CJP's X account and sent police to surveil Dipke's family home (Mid-day, 2026), what had looked like harmless meme-sharing revealed its political weight — a risk Jenkins' original framework was never designed to address.

2.2 Indian Media and Political Communication Scholarship

The Indian setting calls for frameworks attentive to the specific structural conditions of Indian democracy. Rajagopal (2001) showed how broadcast media turned Hindu nationalism from a fringe movement into a dominant political force, demonstrating that Indian media actively constitutes political publics rather than merely transmitting messages. Punathambekar (2013) extended this to digital platforms, showing how online spaces open new forms of political belonging while also reproducing existing hierarchies of caste, class, and language.

Scholarship on satire and digital dissent in India speaks most directly to the CJP. Saikia (2020), studying the comedy collective All India Bakchod, found that satirical content opened space for political commentary among urban youth otherwise disengaged from institutional politics, though it remained, at bottom, entertainment. Kaur (2019), examining memetic responses to the Citizenship Amendment Act protests, describes memes as a form of symbolic resistance that mobilizes community and documents dissent without the risks of street protest. The CJP pushes that argument further: it shows that memes can precede street protest rather than merely substitute for it, which complicates risk-calculation models

in digital activism scholarship. Menon (2012) has theorized how new media allows mobilization to bypass traditional party structures, especially for young people and women; the CJP fits this closely, having emerged entirely outside party channels and having explicitly turned down offers of support from established political actors.

2.3 Political Satire Theory and the Carnavalesque

Political satire occupies a distinctive place in political communication, working through "ironic subtext, humour, and mockery to expose institutional absurdities and power asymmetries" (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 7). Unlike direct protest, satire opens what Bakhtin (1984) called the "carnavalesque": a temporary space where social hierarchies invert and normal rules stop applying. Bakhtin argued that carnival laughter represents "the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the upper classes" (p. 92) and is ambivalent — mocking and celebrating at once. That ambivalence gives satire its political usefulness: participants can voice genuine criticism while retaining the deniability of "it was just a joke," an affordance that matters where sedition and anti-defamation laws attach real costs to direct dissent. Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009) and Baym (2005) extend this to digital and broadcast satire respectively, describing hybrid forms that entertain and inform at once, particularly for audiences who have moved away from traditional news.

The CJP extends this work by showing how a single satirical frame — the cockroach metaphor — can generate an entire political movement that moves from digital carnival to organized protest. But there is a tension in the "humour as cover" argument: satire's legal protection through plausible deniability also weakens political legibility, and the June 6 protest required participants to give up that protective ambiguity for visible public space carrying serious demands. The CJP's own handling of that shift suggests one answer: rather than abandoning satire, organizers layered a small number of unambiguous signals — the ultimatum's fixed deadline, the manifesto's concrete demands, Dipke's public acknowledgment that he expected to be arrested — onto a protest that otherwise kept its ironic texture intact (cockroach masks, flowers for police). Ambiguity was preserved at the level of tone but resolved at the level of demand, which looks like what let the movement cross from carnival into contestation without forfeiting satire's protective function.

2.4 Digital Citizenship and the Slacktivism Debate

Scholarship on digital citizenship splits between those who see online engagement as expanding participation and those who dismiss it as "slacktivism" — symbolic gestures that feel meaningful but achieve little. Morozov (2009, 2011) popularized the term, arguing that digital activism "feels good but achieves little" (2009, p. 1) and produces an "illusion of impact." Gladwell (2010) similarly argued that social media builds only the "weak ties" insufficient for high-risk activism. Later research complicates that binary. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) coined "connective action" to describe how digital platforms coordinate protest without traditional hierarchies, as with Occupy Wall Street and the Indignados. Halupka (2014) proposes a typology distinguishing "thin" participation (liking, sharing, following), "medium" participation (commenting, creating content, signing petitions), and "thick" participation (organizing, donating, protesting), noting that thin participation can act as a gateway into thicker forms: "the crucial question is not whether online participation is 'real' participation, but rather how it relates to other forms and what conditions facilitate movement along the thin-thick continuum" (p. 15).

The CJP's move into offline protest is empirical evidence for exactly that gateway function. Between May 16 and June 6, 2026, the movement progressed from thin participation (following, liking), through medium participation (commenting, sharing, registering), to thick participation (organizing, protesting).

This fits a broader literature that has moved past the binary slacktivism debate: Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis of 36 studies found more than 80 percent of reported coefficients between social media use and political participation positive; Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) similarly found digital media use associated with higher, not lower, offline engagement among youth; and Valenzuela, Arriagada, and Scherman (2012) found Facebook use predicted participation in Chile's 2011 student protests even after controlling for grievances and resources. This suggests the CJP's progression from thin to thick participation is an instance of a broader, if modest, pattern: social media use tends to complement rather than crowd out offline action, particularly when the platform carries mobilizing information, as with the CJP's Google Form registrations.

2.5 Connective Action, the Networked Public Sphere, and Its Pathologies

Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) concept of connective action fits the CJP's organizational model well. They distinguish collective action — organized through hierarchical institutions with formal membership — from connective action, organized through digital networks around personalized content sharing, running on "personal action frames" that need no central coordination. The CJP is close to a textbook case: no formal membership beyond a Google Form, no regional chapters, no party constitution — yet it coordinated a national protest within weeks. It also shows the limits of connective action alone: digital networks scale quickly but coordinate poorly, and organizing the June 6 protest required Dipke's physical presence in Delhi, flying in from Boston to lead it. Its emergent leadership — spokesperson Saurav Das, education policy spokesperson Ashutosh Ranka, and allied activist Sonam Wangchuk — points to a hybrid form combining connective action's scalability with the organizational durability of collective action (ABP Live, 2026; Mid-day, 2026).

This organizing model operates within what Benkler (2006) termed the "networked public sphere," a revision of Habermas's (1989) bourgeois public sphere that allows many-to-many communication and peer production without editorial control. This sphere is not without pathologies: Sunstein (2017) documents how digital platforms produce echo chambers that intensify polarization, and Zuckerman (2013) observes that participation in it is uneven and often mirrors offline inequalities. The CJP's content operates within a broadly anti-BJP, urban liberal ideological community — 43 of 56 initial posts (76.8 percent) contained explicit or implicit out-group derogation aimed at "godimedia" (BJP-aligned outlets), the judiciary, the BJP, or "the system." That pattern builds in-group solidarity but may also deepen echo chamber dynamics; the relationship is not straightforward, since polarization can lower deliberative quality even as it raises readiness to act, and the CJP's offline protest suggests shared-grievance communities can indeed produce real collective action.

2.6 Caste, Class, and the Digital Divide

A notable gap in the digital participation literature is its relative neglect of caste as an organizing variable in Indian political life. The "youth unemployment" the CJP organizes around is not uniform: Dalit and Adivasi youth face systematically higher unemployment and lower returns to education than upper-caste and OBC peers (Deshpande, 2011; Thorat & Newman, 2010). India's digital divide is substantially a caste divide — the Internet and Mobile Association of India (2025) puts internet access at 68 percent for upper-caste urban households, 41 percent for OBC households, and 23 percent for Scheduled Caste households, with rural access lower still. English proficiency, necessary to engage with the CJP's largely English-language content, is even more skewed: roughly 72 percent of English speakers in India come from upper-caste backgrounds (Venkatraman, 2017).

The cockroach metaphor likely lands differently depending on caste position. For upper-caste youth, being called a cockroach is a novel insult; for Dalit youth, animal analogies and dehumanization are structural, part of a long history of caste-based humiliation. One X user made the point directly: "Upper-caste people are shocked to be called cockroaches. Dalits have been called worse their whole lives. This movement doesn't speak for us" (X post, May 20, 2026) — a minority voice, but a useful reminder that treating "youth" as a single category can obscure very different experiences of exclusion. The CJP's participant base almost certainly skews urban, educated, and upper-caste, and Dipke's own background — a master's degree from Boston University, prior work with the Delhi government — placed him, on the evidence available during the study period, within that privileged stratum. The June 6 protest offered some evidence of broader participation (Mid-day, 2026), but systematic data on caste and class backgrounds simply do not exist — a real limitation of the present study and the wider literature on Indian digital politics.

2.7 Identity Formation and Memetic Affiliation

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers a complementary lens on how meme-based satire produces political affiliation, unfolding through social categorization (defining the self as a group member), social identification (adopting group norms), and social comparison (evaluating the in-group favorably against out-groups). The CJP's "Main Bhi Cockroach" ("I too am a cockroach") phenomenon moves through all three: categorization occurred the moment Justice Kant's remarks labeled unemployed youth as cockroaches; identification followed through memetic participation, as users took on the cockroach identity and its associated norms of resilience and irreverence; comparison happened through contrasts between the cockroach in-group and out-groups such as the judiciary, mainstream parties, and "godimedia." None of this is unique to the CJP — Milner (2016), analysing the Pepe the Frog phenomenon, found an identical identity-affirmation mechanism, and Phillips (2015) documents how ironic participation in trolling communities can slide into genuine ideological commitment. The CJP differs mainly in its explicit political orientation and its success at carrying online identity formation into offline collective action.

2.8 Synthesis: An Integrative Theoretical Framework

This paper draws these perspectives together into a single framework proposing six interlocking mechanisms through which meme-based satire drives participation. Barrier reduction, from participatory culture theory, lowers the costs of expression. Cover provision, from satire theory, reduces perceived risk through plausible deniability, at some cost to political legitimacy once a movement moves offline. Identity formation, from social identity theory, converts individual frustration into collective affiliation — the "Main Bhi Cockroach" frame turns stigma into solidarity. Network amplification, from networked public sphere theory, enables decentralized scaling, with each participant acting as a distribution node. Catharsis generation, from affect theory, supplies emotional rewards that sustain engagement and can motivate escalation to higher-risk action. Issue concretization, emerging from the CJP case itself, turns diffuse grievance into specific, actionable demands — here, Education Minister Pradhan's resignation over the exam leaks, which gave abstract frustration a concrete target and made protest coordination possible. This framework structures the empirical analysis that follows.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study uses a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine the Cockroach Janta Party as an

instance of meme-based political participation, with longitudinal follow-up through June 7, 2026. Case study methodology suits research that asks how and why, where investigators have limited control over events, and where the focus is a contemporary phenomenon embedded in its real-world context (Yin, 2018, p. 14) — criteria the CJP meets squarely. The CJP was selected as an instrumental case (Stake, 1995) on the basis of its extraordinary growth trajectory, explicit positioning as a meme-based political movement, emergence from a well-documented trigger event, national visibility, clear generational focus, and successful transition to offline protest. Comparison cases — other Indian meme accounts, and international movements such as Brazil's "Funcionários do Fantástico" and Thailand's "Bad Student" movement — were considered and set aside as differing too much in context and form; a single-case design allows greater depth for a phenomenon this recent.

3.2 Data Sources

Data were drawn from six primary sources between May 16 and June 7, 2026: an Instagram content archive of the CJP's 78 posts over the study period, each captured with its image, caption, hashtags, engagement metrics, and timestamp; membership registration data from the CJP's public Google Form (aggregate figures only, for privacy reasons); coverage from twenty Indian and international news outlets, including Hindustan Times, Al Jazeera, ABP Live, Outlook India, and Bloomberg; a sample of 750 X posts captured under the hashtags #CockroachJantaParty, #MainBhiCockroach, and #CockroachRevolution; roughly 3,000 anonymized comments from the CJP's 25 most-engaged Instagram posts, coded for theme, sentiment, and type of participation; and secondary analysis of news coverage, photographs, and video footage from the June 6 protest, covering crowd size, demographics, demands, tactics, and outcomes.

3.3 Analytical Approach

Analysis proceeded in four phases, each tied to one research question. The first, qualitative content analysis of the 78 Instagram posts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), coded deductively for satirical target, humour type, call to participation, emotional register, and visual style; two coders independently coded 20 percent of posts to establish reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$). The second, thematic analysis of comments and X posts (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identified six dominant themes inductively: identity reclamation, affective expression, collective action framing, out-group derogation, political efficacy expression, and conversion questions. The third, protest event analysis (della Porta, 2014), examined June 6 coverage for framing, participation, repression, and outcomes. The fourth compiled quantitative engagement metrics to triangulate growth patterns against key events.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The analysis deliberately sought out critical voices: roughly 8 percent of coded comments ($n \approx 240$) expressed skepticism or criticism, woven throughout the findings alongside government responses such as Minister Rijiju's accusations of Pakistani followers. The study follows established ethical guidelines for social media research (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Zimmer, 2010); all comments analysed were publicly available, identifying information was removed, and the CJP account is a public figure account whose founder has spoken extensively with journalists.

The study has several significant limitations. It relies on publicly available and media-reported figures rather than direct platform analytics; follower counts may include bot accounts, though engagement rates averaging 4.2 percent are consistent with authentic accounts, and reported figures should be read as upper-bound estimates. Its temporal scope runs only through June 7, 2026, so assessing sustained participation requires further follow-up (addressed in the postscript below). It cannot establish a causal

relationship between online engagement and protest participation; hundreds of protesters against 22 million followers implies a conversion rate around 0.001 percent, though this figure may understate the movement's actual impact. The analysis is limited to English-language content and likely misses substantial participation in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Bengali, and other Indian languages. As a single case, the findings aim at analytical generalization to theory rather than statistical generalization to populations (Yin, 2018). The lead researcher is not Indian and speaks no Indian language beyond basic Hindi phrases, which constrains interpretation despite triangulation across Indian sources. Most significantly, the study cannot directly analyse caste dynamics, arguably the single most important structural variable in Indian political sociology.

4. Findings

4.1 Identity Reclamation: From Stigma to Solidarity

The most striking finding is how the CJP turned a judicial insult into a badge of collective identity — a process this paper terms "appropriative irony": embracing the stigmatizing label not despite its negativity but because of it, turning the insult back on its source while converting shame into solidarity. Content analysis of the 78 Instagram posts found identity reclamation frames in 67 of them (85.9 percent), taking three main forms: direct reclamation (38 posts, 48.7 percent) used "cockroach" explicitly as a self-identifier ("proud cockroach," "Main Bhi Cockroach"); comparative reclamation (20 posts, 25.6 percent) set cockroach resilience against institutional fragility; and inversion reclamation (9 posts, 11.5 percent) reframed negative associations as positive. The reclamation extended well beyond the literally unemployed, functioning as a floating signifier for anyone who felt shut out of India's political and economic systems: "I've been called unemployed, lazy, a burden on society. First time someone's called me a cockroach and I felt seen" (Instagram comment, May 17, 2026). At the June 6 protest this identity took physical form as participants wore cockroach masks distributed at the venue (Mid-day, 2026); JNU Students' Union president Aditi Mishra put the resonance plainly: "[Government officials] really stomp on us and move on" (ABC News, 2026). This tracks Tajfel and Turner's (1979) three stages: categorization when Justice Kant's remarks labelled unemployed youth as cockroaches, identification as users voluntarily adopted the label, and comparison through contrasts between the cockroach in-group and out-groups such as the judiciary and "godimedia."

4.2 Humour as Political Resistance: From Cover to Commitment

The CJP's content strategy leans heavily on "absurdist humour, exaggerated political rhetoric, and Gen-Z irony" (ET Now, 2026, para. 4) — central to the movement's politics, since satire offers cover where direct criticism carries real risk. Content analysis identified three dominant humour types: absurdist humour (43 posts, 55.1 percent), such as cockroaches in lawyers' wigs crawling across the Supreme Court bench; ironic understatement (19 posts, 24.4 percent), as in "We're sure the Chief Justice meant well when he compared millions of unemployed youth to vermin" (CJP Instagram, May 17, 2026); and parodic imitation (16 posts, 20.5 percent), including a mock judicial order "sentencing" the Chief Justice to a day of job-hunting. The manifesto, posted May 16, shows how humour can carry substantive critique: under ironic headings such as "Very Serious Demands (Please Don't Arrest Us)," its demands — no post-retirement Rajya Sabha seats for Chief Justices, action against deletion of valid votes, electoral bans for defecting legislators, exam reforms, and job creation targets — are no less substantive than those of any conventional opposition party. Users routinely prefaced criticism with framing like

"Just joking but..." to preserve deniability, though this cover created real tension, as one X user put it: "The 'it's just a meme' cover protects us but also makes us less serious" (X post, May 20, 2026).

At the June 6 protest, participants set aside that ambiguity and took on visible, identifiable risk. Before returning to India, Dipke acknowledged as much: "My friends and family fear that I will be arrested directly at the airport and then sent to prison. But I hope that our country is still a democracy" (Times of India, 2026). On arrival, he carried a copy of B.R. Ambedkar's autobiography, invoking constitutional protection, while organizers asked participants to bring flowers for police and to bring their parents, keeping the movement's ironic tone even in physical protest (ABC News, 2026). Six people were detained; there were no mass arrests (Mid-day, 2026).

4.3 The Participation Continuum and Issue Concretization

The CJP lowered the barriers to political engagement dramatically: 72 of 78 Instagram posts (92.3 percent) carried some form of call to participation. Applying Halupka's (2014) typology, thin participation (following, liking) describes the great majority of the 22 million accounts; medium participation (commenting, sharing, form registration) describes a smaller subset, likely in the hundreds of thousands based on engagement rates; and thick participation (organizing, protesting) describes hundreds. The Google Form for membership registration drew over 350,000 submissions within 72 hours of launch (Outlook India, 2026) — a meaningful intermediate step that likely built the social infrastructure for the offline action that followed. Critical voices pushed back: "Hundreds out of 22 million? That's not a movement, that's a rounding error" (Instagram comment, June 6, 2026) — an unresolved question about conversion that this paper cannot fully settle.

That offline shift was made possible by issue concretization. Abstract frustration with "the system" found a concrete target when authorities cancelled India's largest medical entrance exam, taken by more than 2.27 million aspirants, after evidence surfaced that questions had circulated early (Bloomberg, 2026b), alongside a separate controversy over erroneous results for a widely used high school graduation exam. At the June 6 protest, organizers issued a clear ultimatum — seven days for Pradhan to resign or be sacked, or the movement would spread nationwide (Mid-day, 2026) — supplying a concrete timeline, target, and path of escalation. Content analysis of posts between May 25 and June 5 showed a sharp rise in attention to examination scandals: 15 of 22 posts in that window (68.2 percent) mentioned NEET, Pradhan, or exam leaks directly, compared with none of the initial 56 posts.

4.4 Distributed Organizing, State Response, and Counter-Discourse

The CJP was built by one person using AI tools in roughly 24 hours, with no formal hierarchy beyond Dipke's self-designation as "Founding President." This is "infrastructure without hierarchy": every follower becomes a node in a distributed network, a model that scaled quickly and proved resilient — when the X account was blocked, followers migrated to alternatives within hours. It also has limits: organizing the June 6 protest required leadership to develop beyond Dipke, with Saurav Das (an investigative journalist known for RTI activism) as spokesperson, Ashutosh Ranka as education policy voice, and Sonam Wangchuk lending visibility (ABP Live, 2026; Mid-day, 2026), even as Dipke's own physical presence remained essential.

The government's response has been multifaceted. When the CJP's X handle was blocked, a new account called "Cockroach is Back" quickly gained nearly 150,000 followers alongside several parody "branch" handles (AFP, 2026). Senior cabinet minister Kiren Rijiju accused the group of drawing followers from Pakistan and the "anti-India gang"; Dipke publicly shared data showing about 95 percent of Instagram followers are based in India (ARY News, 2026). Police deployed a team of ten officers at Dipke's family

home in Maharashtra (Mid-day, 2026), and Dipke reported that his family had received threats (Times of India, 2026), while Delhi Police granted permission for the Jantar Mantar protest while deploying more than 1,000 personnel and detaining six people (Mid-day, 2026). This pattern — blocking accounts, surveillance, accusations of foreign backing, but ultimately a permitted protest — describes a constrained public sphere in which the state tolerates dissent within limits it actively shapes.

The analysis deliberately sought out critical perspectives. About 8 percent of coded comments expressed skepticism, on grounds including doubts that meme engagement substitutes for genuine action, accusations that the CJP trivializes serious issues, worries about co-optation ("Watch the BJP start a 'Cockroach Cell' tomorrow"), and skepticism about the protest's impact. Government supporters dismissed the CJP as a "social-media gimmick" unlikely to translate into sustained impact (AP, 2026). These voices are included not to dismiss the CJP's significance but as a corrective to uncritical celebration: the movement's achievements are real, and so are its limits.

4.5 Limitations and Ambivalences of Meme Politics

Despite its extraordinary growth, the CJP has real limitations. The conversion rate problem is the most obvious: a gap between 22 million online followers and hundreds of offline protesters, roughly 0.001 percent. Its content is mostly in English and depends on culturally specific references that may exclude Indians without the requisite education, so its followers likely represent a skewed fraction of India's 380 million youth. Internet memes are also inherently ephemeral, and the same rapid attention cycle that drove the CJP's growth could just as easily produce an equally rapid collapse. The movement leans heavily on Dipke's personal leadership, a single point of failure with no clear succession mechanism, and its anti-establishment positioning makes it an obvious target for co-optation: Dipke's own history with the Aam Aadmi Party is an evident point of entry for an opposition party, and the government's "anti-India gang" framing functions, among other things, as a pre-emptive attempt to recast the CJP as partisan rather than independent. Most fundamentally, the movement has succeeded at articulating grievances and mobilizing protesters, but whether it can produce structural change was, at the point this study's data collection closed, entirely unknown.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications: Extending Participatory Culture and the Carnavalesque

The CJP case both enriches and complicates Jenkins' (2006, 2009) theory of participatory culture, developed mainly through Western media fandoms operating in permissive political environments. In a setting where political speech carries genuine risk, participatory culture takes on additional functions: cover-providing, framing political action as entertainment to lower perceived risk; catharsis-generating, since sharing frustration with like-minded others produces psychological benefits that may matter as much as any instrumental outcome; identity-affirming, offering a lower-risk form of affiliation where formal political identities carry real costs; and, under the right conditions, mobilization-ready, as the collective identity and efficacy that online participation builds translates into offline action. The theory needs contextualizing — its functions shift with the political environment it operates in.

The case extends Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque similarly. Bakhtin stressed that carnival was temporary and bounded, inverting hierarchy for a finite stretch before normal order returned. Digital satire raises the question of whether it can escape that temporariness: content stays accessible, communities stay connected, identities stay asserted, and the CJP's 22 million followers were not simply returning to unchanged political life once the moment passed. The June 6 protest suggests that, under the right

conditions, sustained inversion can spill over into collective action in physical public space — yet the protest kept carnivalesque elements intact (cockroach masks, flowers for police), a hybrid form that may be the CJP's most distinctive contribution to the political communication repertoire.

5.2 From Memes to Mobilization: Conditions for Conversion

The CJP's move from online engagement to offline protest speaks directly to debates about whether digital activism works. Critics have long argued that online engagement substitutes for offline action (Morozov, 2011; Gladwell, 2010), but as discussed in Section 2.4, cross-national meta-analytic evidence generally points the other way (Boulianne, 2015; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2012). The CJP case complicates the substitution claim: for most participants the real choice is not between online and offline activism but between online engagement and no political engagement at all, and the protest looked qualitatively different from traditional organizing, coordinated with no formal membership — suggesting connective action can produce collective action, at lower participation rates than traditional organizations manage, but that it can.

Several conditions seem to enable that shift: issue concretization; visible leadership prepared to accept legal risk; low-barrier intermediate pathways, such as the Google Form that drew over 350,000 registrations; perceived efficacy; state tolerance of mobilization; and peer recruitment through existing social networks. None of these conditions is unique to the CJP, and future comparative research should test this framework across other cases.

5.3 Caste, Polarization, and Practical Implications

Caste's relative absence from digital participation scholarship is a gap this paper cannot fully close, but as discussed in Sections 2.6 and 4.1, India's digital divide is substantially a caste divide, and the CJP's participant base almost certainly skewed urban, educated, and upper-caste at the point this study's data collection closed. That means the movement's claimed universality — "youth" treated as a single constituency — obscures real differences in who can access, participate in, and benefit from digital political organizing. This is not necessarily correctable through better outreach, since English-language, internet-meme literacy is not something organizers can simply switch off, but it is worth naming plainly: a movement reaching 22 million accounts while remaining largely illegible to Dalit, Adivasi, and non-English-speaking youth is not, by itself, building the cross-caste coalition its rhetoric of shared youth grievance implies.

A related concern is polarization: 76.8 percent of initial posts contained explicit out-group derogation, raising legitimate concerns about echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017). But social movements often need strong in-group/out-group differentiation to motivate collective action in the first place, and naming a common enemy — the judiciary, the BJP, "godimedia" — turns individual grievances into a collective action frame. This looks less like a flaw to be engineered away than a structural feature of movements that rely on shared antagonism to generate momentum quickly: the same framing that let the CJP scale from zero to 22 million followers in three weeks is unlikely to be separable from the coalition-building that durable political change would eventually require, a genuine trade-off between mobilizing speed and coalitional breadth.

For political organizers more broadly, the CJP offers several lessons: lowering barriers dramatically can produce massive participation, though thin participation should not be the endpoint of an organizing strategy; an authentic, peer-built voice resonates in ways established parties struggle to replicate; satire can open expression direct criticism would foreclose, provided organizers are ready to move to

committed action once mobilizing shifts offline; and diffuse grievance needs concretizing into specific, actionable demands before protest coordination becomes possible.

5.4 Democratization of Political Communication and Future Research

The CJP exemplifies a broader shift toward the democratization of political communication: where political speech once required access to broadcast media or substantial resources, today anyone with a smartphone can, in principle, reach millions. But that democratization is unevenly distributed — the CJP's 22 million followers are numerically striking but represent a fraction of India's 380 million youth, likely a skewed one, and the algorithmic infrastructure that enables viral growth also rewards emotional content and simplification, raising the harder question of whether participation enabled by commercial platforms can ever be fully democratic.

This study opens several avenues for future research: longitudinal tracking of follower retention and engagement decay; comparative case studies across countries such as Brazil, Thailand, and the Philippines to identify contextual enabling factors; vernacular meme politics in Indian languages beyond English, which may reach different caste and class constituencies; systematic testing of the conditions that convert online engagement into offline action across cases; and, most urgently, caste analysis in digital political participation using methods this study's data could not support.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how meme-based satire encourages political participation among Gen Z users, using the Cockroach Janta Party as an instrumental case, with analysis running through the movement's first offline protest on June 6, 2026. The findings show meme politics working through several interlocking mechanisms: identity reclamation turning stigmatizing labels into badges of solidarity; humour functioning as resistance that provides cover for criticism direct speech would foreclose, though that cover creates a tension with legibility once movements go offline; low barriers to participation enabling massive scaling along a continuum from thin to thick participation; issue concretization translating diffuse grievance into specific demands; distributed organizing substituting network effects for traditional infrastructure, though emergent leadership proved necessary for coordinating physical protest; and psychological rewards sustaining engagement past the initial viral moment. This successful transition to offline protest is crucial evidence that meme-based movements can overcome the conversion problem that has long troubled digital-activism research, under conditions including issue concretization, visible leadership willing to accept legal risk, low-barrier pathways, perceived efficacy, state tolerance, and peer recruitment. The conversion rate — hundreds out of 22 million followers — is low, but for a movement that did not exist three weeks earlier, even hundreds in the streets counts as a meaningful achievement.

The CJP phenomenon shows that political participation, for India's Gen Z, has been fundamentally redefined: no longer primarily about party membership, voting, or traditional protest, though these remain important, but also encompassing following, sharing, creating, identifying, belonging, and protesting — actions that might have looked trivial to earlier generations but constitute meaningful political expression in the digital age. When a Chief Justice dismissed unemployed youth as cockroaches, more than 22 million of them responded — not primarily with marches or petitions, but with memes, and then, within weeks, with protest. Whether the movement could sustain that momentum, diversify its base, and achieve structural change remained, at the point this study's data collection closed, an open question — one the postscript below takes up directly.

7. Postscript: Developments Through August 2026

Data collection for this study closed on June 7, 2026, three weeks after the CJP's first offline protest and roughly three weeks before the movement's trajectory changed considerably. What follows summarizes developments between that cutoff and early August 2026, drawing on subsequent news coverage, and revisits several of the paper's central claims in light of them.

7.1 From Sit-In to Standoff

The June 6 protest, treated in Sections 4.1 through 4.4 as the movement's first offline action, turned out to be an opening move rather than a peak. Supporters returned to occupy Jantar Mantar continuously from around June 20, and the sit-in stretched on for more than a month (NPR, 2026a), drawing in student organizations including the All India Students Federation, the All India Students Association, and the Students' Federation of India (ThePrint, 2026). On June 28, Sonam Wangchuk — introduced earlier only as an allied activist (Section 2.5) — began an indefinite hunger strike at the site (Deccan Herald, 2026). Twenty days later, with Wangchuk still fasting, Delhi Police removed him and transferred him to hospital; organizers called the move forced, while police said it followed medical advice (Al Jazeera, 2026b). Protesters reclaimed the site the following day and vowed to continue (NDTV, 2026).

The confrontation escalated on July 20, when thousands attempted a "Chalo Sansad" march toward Parliament. Delhi authorities suspended mobile internet, erected barricades, and closed nearby metro stations; riot police used batons and tear gas to disperse the crowd (NPR, 2026a), and reported nearly 180 people injured, including 118 security personnel and 60 protesters (NPR, 2026b). Subsequent investigative reporting documented pellet-gun wounds among several protesters and a journalist that day, including one who required surgery to remove pellets near his neck; police denied using pellet guns, but medical records and an internal inquiry cited in that reporting indicated otherwise (Newslandry, 2026). A senior officer was separately filmed slapping a woman protester and was withdrawn from duty, prompting a member of parliament to seek a formal complaint against him (Mint, 2026).

7.2 Negotiation and a Cabinet Resignation

The government engaged with the CJP more directly than during the period covered by the original data collection. On July 23, Union Minister Jitendra Singh Rana said the Centre had sent four proposals for talks and offered to meet at BJP president JP Nadda's office; CJP spokesperson Ashutosh Ranka countered that officials had already stalled one such meeting and insisted talks be held at Jantar Mantar or a neutral venue (The Statesman, 2026). Ranka and Das — the same emergent leaders discussed in Section 2.5 — used a subsequent round to place a single non-negotiable demand on the table: Pradhan's resignation, alongside the release of detained students and roughly ₹1 crore in compensation for families of exam-related suicide victims (The Week, 2026). Wangchuk wrote to Nadda and Singh saying he would end his fast once the government assured no action against protesters (The Hindu, 2026); two days later he ended his 26-day fast after receiving written assurances that cases would be withdrawn and discussions on leak-prevention and compensation would follow (Madhya News, 2026). Demonstrations had by now spread beyond Delhi to more than a dozen cities (NPR, 2026c). On July 25, Pradhan announced his resignation on X, citing respect for the aspirations of the country's youth (NBC News, 2026). "We have done it," Dipke told the crowd at Jantar Mantar as the news broke (NPR, 2026c). The government subsequently announced harsher penalties for exam leaks and a panel to review the examination system; analysts described the resignation as a rare concession from a government that had built its image on standing firm against public pressure (Al Jazeera, 2026c).

News of the resignation reached the thousands still occupying Jantar Mantar by late afternoon, and celebration spread across the site (CNN, 2026). At a press conference that evening, CJP spokespeople announced they were ending the protest "in good faith," citing government assurances that remaining demands would be met (Britannica, 2026). By midnight the crowds had dispersed, municipal workers had begun removing protest graffiti from nearby walls (Al Jazeera, 2026d), and journalists visiting the site the following day found the once-crowded ground empty (CNN, 2026).

7.3 A Complication for the Caste Analysis

The caste analysis in Sections 2.6 and 5.3 treated Dipke's biography — a master's degree from Boston University, prior work with the Delhi government — as evidence that he occupied a privileged position within India's largely upper-caste digital and English-speaking elite, supporting the argument that the CJP's participant base almost certainly skewed upper-caste. Subsequent reporting complicates that reading: coverage of the July protests identified Dipke as Dalit, a detail not prominent in the material available during the original study period (Al Jazeera, 2026d). This does not resolve the caste critique developed earlier so much as sharpen it. A movement built by a Dalit founder, organized around a metaphor of collective dehumanization that carries very different weight for Dalit and upper-caste participants, and reaching a following that may still skew upper-caste and English-speaking, is exactly the kind of founder-base mismatch that caste-attentive scholarship would flag rather than assume away. Whether Dipke's own position shaped the movement's central metaphor, and whether "Main Bhi Cockroach" read differently to Dalit and Adivasi participants once his identity became public, are questions this paper's data cannot answer, but they now belong among the priorities for future research identified in Section 5.4.

7.4 After the Resignation: Pressure Group, Not Party

Consistent with the movement's stated independence (Section 2.2), CJP leadership ruled out both forming a registered political party and formally aligning with an opposition party in the immediate aftermath of Pradhan's resignation. Dipke, recovering from typhoid contracted during the sit-in, told Reuters he did not see party formation as an immediate solution and worried it would expose the leadership to selective government investigation; he also declined support from opposition parties seeking to attach themselves to the movement's youth base (Reuters, 2026). Commentary at the time drew a comparison to Bangladesh, where a Gen Z party formed after 2024 protests performed poorly at the ballot box, while analysts suggested any electoral impact was more likely to register in the following year's state elections than in a near-term national contest (Reuters, 2026). On August 5 and 6, CJP leaders met in Maharashtra and confirmed the movement would remain a pressure group rather than register as a party, redirecting itself toward an ongoing campaign on education, employment, and government accountability (Bloomberg, 2026d; Kashmir Reader, 2026).

7.5 Reassessing the Framework

Several of the paper's original arguments hold up against these later events; at least one needs revising. The "conversion problem" discussed in Sections 1, 2.4, and 5.2 was framed around a single data point — hundreds of protesters against 22 million followers on June 6 — and the paper was appropriately cautious about generalizing from that ratio. The subsequent weeks show that the more decisive test was not how many followers turned up on a single day, but whether a comparatively small, committed core could sustain pressure long enough to extract a concession. On that measure the CJP succeeded, through exactly the conditions Section 5.2 identified as enabling: visible leadership willing to accept legal and physical risk, a concrete and time-bound demand, and peer recruitment sustained over weeks rather than

hours. Section 4.5's warning that the movement's anti-establishment positioning made it a target for co-optation proved directly relevant: opposition parties did try to attach themselves to the movement, and Dipke's refusal suggests the independence described in Section 2.2 has held under more strain than the original data could show. Section 5.3's recommendation that even distributed movements need visible leadership for high-stakes action is borne out by Wangchuk's hunger strike and by Ranka and Das's emergence as the government's actual negotiating partners. What the original data collection could not anticipate is that its own caste analysis would need revision on the strength of a single biographical fact about its central figure — a reminder that case studies of fast-moving movements remain provisional. The structural grievances linked to the CJP's origins — graduate unemployment near 29 percent, a dysfunctional examination system, and a caste-inflected digital divide — remain unresolved by one ministerial resignation; whether a pressure group with no electoral ambitions can sustain that leverage over the years structural change would require is now the live version of the conversion problem this paper originally posed only in its online-to-offline form.

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