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From Tragedy to Trend: Meme Culture, Content Creation, and The Legal Vacuum in India

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ABSTRACT

Modern digital technologies enable the progressive disappearance of boundaries between entertaining people and exploiting their lives. Human experience has become abnormal thanks to two factors: the widespread development of memes and the pervasive practice of converting daily occurrences into social media content. A worrying practice has emerged that turns the 2025 Meerut murder case involving the brutal murder of a merchant navy officer into a viral meme after his remains were discovered in a blue drum. The article examines the trauma-commercialization activities of meme culture as it affects public awareness and ethical, legal aspects. A socio-legal investigation reveals that Indian laws fail to properly govern digital content so that digital public participants can protect their dignity.

Keywords: *Blue-drum meme, content creation, cyber regulation, digital ethics, Indian law, Meerut murder case, meme culture, social media.*

I. INTRODUCTION

We apparently don't Mourn anymore; We Monetize. "Everything is Content". It is the unspoken mantra of the modern-day world. From birthdays to weddings to funerals, everything is a digital material with just one-click away. Content creators along with meme makers are not leaving any stones unturned. It seems that audiences have become immune to empathy and open to anything served in a platter in front of them. The consequences of which are not philosophical anymore. It delves deep into the social and psychological factors. It has significant legal dimensions as well.

Recently, in march, 2025, a promising merchant navy officer was brutally murdered allegedly by his wife and her love-interest in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India. His body was dismembered into 15 pieces and those body parts were stuffed into a 'Blue-Drum' and packed it with cement-

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water mix². Even before the family of the victim could start mourning, the ‘blue-drum’ had become over-night sensation. It paved its way ‘from mourning to meme’.

Social media users shared images of the ‘blue drum’ on platforms like X, Instagram³, Twitter, YouTube etc. where they added rude or dark humour or satirical commentaries. The crime severity vanished from public attention as popular hashtags became more prominent.

This article evaluates how meme culture merges with content creation strategies and promotes normalisation of spectacle in the Indian context. The analysis proceeds to evaluate India's existing legal systems regarding their adequacy to transform trauma content into entertainment products.

II. THE RISE OF MEME CULTURE AND THE DEATH OF NORMALCY

As an aspect of internet communication, meme culture uses replication and transformation of rapid idea but it adds humour and irony. Memes were introduced as a funny tool. However, it has slowly evolved into a very powerful tool that somehow shapes public opinion. The digital generation process information through memes, instead of consuming news as the traditional audience.

A continuous yet substantial transformation takes place in social standards. Today's world treats personal and sacred statements together with preventable disasters as materials that can become media content. The modification of our standard definitions makes our reality seem Mismatched. People viewing death-related and grieving events through a combination of distant and viral reactions.

The recent Meerut murder case⁴ of 2025, produced an initial state of astonishment in society. The blue drum holding the body became the centre of internet humour in less than twelve hours after being discovered. Internet users displayed a sensational mindset through the blue-drum meme which lost its authentic tragic value due to being severed from its original context.

This incident stands as among many others. Reality transforms into digital pieces which meme culture turns into social media-ready content starting with courtroom drawings and featuring mugshots as ironic social media avatars. This format simplifies complex human tragedies into a format with which people can engage by sharing and applying different elements.

²READ THE ARTICLE “THE STENCH OF A MURDER IN MEERUT” PUBLISHED IN ‘THE HINDU’ ON MARCH 30, 2025 AT 12:05 AM IST. ACCESSIBLE AT [HTTPS://WWW.THEHINDU.COM/INCOMING/THE-STENCH-OF-A-MURDER-IN-MEERUT/ARTICLE69382868.ECE](https://www.thehindu.com/incoming/the-stench-of-a-murder-in-meerut/article69382868.ece)

³ View the social media memes involving the blue-drum here at <https://www.instagram.com/indiato/day/reel/DHvv1r3SmOp/>

⁴ Supra note 3.

Tragedy becomes trend. Pain becomes punchline.

For example,

1. *Amber Heard vs. Johnny Depp Trial (2022)*⁵

- *Context:* A defamation case played out in court through accusations about violence between Heard and Depp.
- *Meme-ification:* The visual content platforms TikTok, YouTube and Twitter (now called X) overflowed with parodies through memes and video edits that ridiculed Heard's court testimony even while dismissing the important facts of the case. The trial served as a spectacle when a courtroom proceeding transformed into a meme-filled spectacle.
- *Consequence:* The domestic abuse claims received diminished importance as the trial built a space where real trauma became simplified into short video blocks and comedic reactions.

2. *Dahmer- Netflix Series and TikTok Trends*⁶

- *Context:* The premiere of the “Monster : Jeffrey Dahmer Story” series led people to rehash discussions about the serial killer's heinous acts.
- *Meme-ification:* TikTok users manufactured a form of fascination about Dahmer by posting thirst edits and costume videos. People didn't even hesitate to make Halloween costume appearances as the serial killer.
- *Impact:* Family members of the victims condemned the show while criticizing the public reaction because they felt their painful experiences were being reduced to mere commercial value for youthful spectators.

3. *Will Smith Slapping Chris Rock at the Oscars (2022)*⁷

- *Context:* A televised assault took place between Will Smith and Chris Rock because of a joke directed at Jada Pinkett Smith's alopecia.
- *Meme-ification:* People generated viral memes from the slap within the span of minutes after the incident. The incident lost its original meaning involving public humiliation

⁵ Accessible at https://www.courtstv.com/trials/depp-v-heard-2022/?utm_.

⁶ The article on this can be accessible at <https://www.businessinsider.com/netflix-jeffrey-dahmer-series-controversy-tiktok-romanticized-crimes-lgbtq-2022-10>.

⁷ Will Smith Slapping Chris Rock at the Oscars 2022, video available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-60897004>.

together with health concerns and boundary issues when meme creators and remix artists moved to produce the content.

- *Impact:* The meme eclipsed essential topics regarding mental health and public violence along with racial issues present in physical spaces.

This phenomenon exceeds its direct harmful nature. Memes shape perception. They flatten nuance. Young people and other users develop a habit of reacting to actual tragic events through carefree humour or lack of emotional involvement thanks to memes. The reduction of empathy as a result of such memes undermines our mutual capability of taking major matters seriously. Rather than mourning, reflecting or becoming enraged, we now resort to scrolling, laughing and reposting content. As a result of this process, emotional responses go through a fundamental transformation. Memes provide us with protection- by letting us face difficult situations while safeguarding ourselves from full emotional engagement. This protective shield which shields emotions demands a significant sacrifice.

However, negative perceptions of meme culture may be the new format that enables both marginalized communities to obtain visibility and introduces humorous elements which are needed in the modern world. Our humanity becomes endangered when we use memes to view everything including trauma without reserving human reactions for such experiences. Irony serves as the main language but stands insufficient on its own. Not everything should be meme-able.

The end result of this process reveals a deeper impact beyond comedic elements because it discusses the aspects we fail to recall while anticipating humour.

III. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS: FROM EMPATHY TO ENTERTAINMENT

The ethical and moral issues run deep when real-life traumas become material for viral content consumption. By turning someone's suffering into social media reactions, people deal a serious ethical harm to the victim and their grieving families while showing the cultural problems within society. The shift of murder into a meme format results in society's temporary halt of its human values.

Studies show that degrees of compassion fatigue emerge when individuals regularly view traumatic situations which result in their diminished capacity to feel sympathy⁸. The existing

⁸ Cocker F, Joss N. Compassion Fatigue among Healthcare, Emergency and Community Service Workers: A Systematic Review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2016 Jun 22;13(6):618. doi: 10.3390/ijerph13060618. PMID: 27338436; PMCID: PMC4924075.

issue of media sensationalism in India becomes worse when people adopt meme culture.

Victims and their families experience double trauma when they encounter their life tragedies turned into daily humour. Internet anonymity allows users to disregard the original ethical framework of their content.

IV. LEGAL LANDSCAPE IN INDIA: AN INADEQUATE FRAMEWORK

Presently, India lacks full legal instruments to manage memetic versions of physical crimes which harm victim dignity and the sentiment of their families. The existing Indian legal framework includes the following primary categories.

1. Information Technology Act, 2000⁹

Section 66A¹⁰ (now struck down) once criminalized offensive content sent through communication services. However, its vague wording led to misuse and was declared unconstitutional in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015)¹¹.

The current sections of the IT Act 67¹² and 67A¹³ deal with obscene or sexually explicit material fail to regulate violent meme material depicting non-nudity scenarios effectively.

2. Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023¹⁴ (replacing the Indian Penal Code, 1860¹⁵)

Sections such as 294¹⁶ (obscenity) [Section 292¹⁷ under IPC], 356¹⁸ (defamation) [earlier as section 500¹⁹ under IPC], and 352²⁰ (intentional insult) [earlier as section 504²¹ under IPC] could potentially be used, however, applying them to anonymous or widely shared memes proves challenging.

3. Right to Privacy and Dignity

In 2017, the honourable Supreme Court of India in the matter of Justice *KS Puttaswamy (Retd.)*

⁹Information Technology Act, 2000, available at <https://www.meity.gov.in/documents/act-and-policies/rules-for-information-technology-act-2000>.

¹⁰ Section 66A of the IT Act, 2000 can be viewed at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/170483278/>.

¹¹ *Shreya Singhal v Union of India*, AIR 2015 SC 1523

¹² Section 67 of the IT Act, 2000 can be viewed at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1318767/>.

¹³ Section 67A of the IT Act, 2000 can be viewed at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/15057582/>.

¹⁴ The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, available at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/250883_english_01042024.pdf.

¹⁵ IPC, 1860, available at <https://www.ncib.in/pdf/indian-penal-code.pdf>.

¹⁶ Supra note 14.

¹⁷ Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1704109/>

¹⁸ Supra note 14.

¹⁹ Section 500 of the Indian Penal code, 1860, available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1408202/>

²⁰ Supra note 14.

²¹ Section 504 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/555306/>

*v. Union of India*²² (2017) established the right to privacy as a fundamental right. However, no legal framework have been established to determine the relevancy of the existing laws in the context of viral content and meme culture.

4. The Digital Personal Data Protection Bill (2023)

The regulatory framework exists to address data misuse yet it neither explicitly scrutinizes meme culture unless personal data rights are violated and nor does it covers anonymous creators.

Comparative Jurisprudence

Regulations regarding the digital harm across the different jurisdictions in the world, maintain varying legal perspectives encompassing protection for freedom of expression, private rights and dignity. Individual control over personal data, functions as a primary principle in EU GDPR²³ which enables people to protect their reputations as well as exercise digital dignity. Under the UK's Online Safety Act²⁴, customers have priority because platforms must erase dangerous content to stop abuse especially when it affects children. Although the U.S. maintains a strong First Amendment protection of speech the country regulates speech only through restricted tort claims for intentional emotional distress and privacy violations. Legal constructs unite with new thinking about digital death rights alongside concepts of networked embarrassment alongside the idea that viral spread should be seen as harmful violence because they surpass traditional legal remedies in addressing lasting psychological and social damage.

V. PROPOSING A FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITAL DIGNITY

In order to the shift from censorship to ethical control based on rational judgement, ethical responses, and proactive attempts to minimise harm, following paths can be taken:

- ***Posthumous Privacy Should Be a Right***

Currently, legal system in India remains behind digital realities. Images of public deaths involving violence lead to millions of online views without any established method to delete them from the internet. Law does not allow families to seek removal of videos showing intimate violations or brutal deaths even though they should have a right to safeguard their privacy. Such failure seems both morally and legally unjust.

²² Justice *KS Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India*; AIR 2018 SC (SUPP) 1841, 2019 (1) SCC 1, (2018) 12 SCALE 1, (2018) 4 CURCC 1, (2018) 255 DLT 1, 2018 (4) KCCR SN 331 (SC), AIRONLINE 2018 SC 237

²³ General Data Protection Regulation of European Union, available at <https://gdpr-info.eu/>.

²⁴ Online Safety Act, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>.

Our laws require the creation of posthumous protection for privacy alongside dignity rights. The deceased's relatives should gain the legal ability to request content removal when material displays destructive imagery against the late person particularly when the death happened because of violence or entails sexual mistreatment or physical manipulation. Deciding to protect human dignity after death requires neither erasing important details nor causing trauma to survivors as the price for public information.

Defamation laws as well as protection of image rights have already been established in different parts of the legal system. Society should apply digital rights of privacy to handle postmortem situations.

- ***Mandate Ethical Response Protocols on Platforms***

Social media platforms today assume the role of unregulated public spaces while lacking proper ethical standards that public institutions maintain for shaping public life. The methods used for content moderation persist as inconsistent and detailed procedures while remaining largely unknown by the public. Users encounter complex and confusing procedures when they attempt to report material which cause injury to their families.

Mandatory ethical protocols must be established for platforms when dealing with graphic violence or harassment events. These should include:

- Fast-track grievance mechanisms for next of kin
- Transparency in takedown decisions

The examination of content should be conducted by experts with trauma expertise together with humans.

Tech companies frequently claim neutrality. Listing and earning money from distressing multimedia content stands as a deliberate decision instead of deriving from a position of neutrality. Taking such decisions imposes ethical accountability to the platform owner.

- ***Institutionalize Digital Ethics Education***

Most digital damages that occur through doxxing and violent video dissemination originate from people who just lack moral connection rather than harbouring malicious intentions. Many people are unaware of the complete effects that their online sharing and posting generates. Numerous youthful creators aim for their social media reach and engagement stats rather than examining the emotional or ethical impacts of their actions.

Education on digital ethics must become standard practice especially directed toward younger people and content producers. That means:

- The educational system should incorporate training about emotional intelligence and media literacy in its curriculum.
- Digital citizens should receive specific training on both responsibility and consent to become creators.
- Encouraging bystander awareness in digital communities

Just like road safety, digital citizenship responsibility must also be taught. The ability to empathize functions as a skill which requires defined training when applying digital principles.

- ***Viral Violence Is a Public Health Issue***

Harm generated by digital trauma exists very much in reality. Multiple encounters with violent media content including police shootings and abuses and war scenes demonstrate an association with mental health issues like depression and anxiety and emotional numbness in individuals. Members of marginalized groups experience a higher impact from violent content on video because their community faces continual screenshotted abuse of people who share their racial or ethnic characteristics.

Currently we need to see viral violence treated as a matter of public health priorities. That means:

- Developing trauma-informed content moderation guidelines
- The psychological effects of digital interaction need both research support and proper funding.
- The violent loops should be considered risk factors rather than success criteria for virality

The platform designs systems to attract users but lacks mechanisms to support emotional care for these users. Both users and moderators require fundamental changes because intensive processing of disturbing material results in overwhelming psychological pressure.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE BLUE DRUM AS MIRROR AND WARNING

The blue-drum meme phenomenon after the Meerut murder case shows how modern digital society has lost all sense of sensitivity. Lives of the netizens depend upon humour and relatability yet boundaries need to be established when human dignity faces potential damage.

India stands at a crossroads. The absence of proactive legal along with ethical and social interventions will turn our society into one that transforms every offense into a meme along with every adversity into a fleeting current trend. The main purpose is to root humour within

humanitarian values.

We are not powerless. We can pause before we post. We should identify the serious mistreatment that tries to hide itself behind humour. The social media platforms need to deliver higher standards to their users. And we, the people, need to learn that seeking attention does not lead to developing empathy.
