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EDITORS' NOTE

Nickeled and Dimed, the official research platform of the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) at Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, serves as an open academic forum. It offers well-researched, balanced commentaries on critical political, economic, social, and legal issues across seven research clusters: Public Policy, International Relations, Legal Studies, Environment & Social Issues, Gender & Society, History & Culture, and Finance & Economics.

In an era of abundant information but scarce clarity, Nickeled and Dimed bridges academic inquiry with public discourse. This edition comprises of insightful articles that address contemporary issues and examines their broader implications through books, critical commentaries, and audio-visual narratives.

- History and Culture- "Democracy in Name? An Ambedkarite Analysis"
- Environment and Social Issues- "When 'Too Toxic for Europe' Finds a New Home: Miteni's PFAS legacy and its move to India"
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Democracy in Name?
An Ambedkarite Analysis

History and Culture cluster - By Chandril Ray Chaudhuri

INTRODUCTION

B. R. Ambedkar, in his writings and interviews, has cautioned several times that any attempt to impose political democracy on a caste system would render it more volatile than liberation. He wrote in the last address to the Constituent Assembly that political equality existing with social and economic inequality would place democracy in jeopardy. The idea discussed in this article is that Indian democracy did not collapse due to the unequal society, it was built on inequality.

This article is therefore a warning in itself and it claims that in India, democracy is mostly paper-based since there are social underpinnings that are lacking in order to implement democracy. Elections continue to occur and increasingly individuals participate yet the reality of democracy, equality and considerate discussion remain bound together by the framework.

AMBEDKAR'S WARNING: POLITICAL DEMOCRACY WITH SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Ambedkar did not struggle against democracy, he struggled with the notion that it was expected to work in India without questioning the foundation on which it was expected to function. He drew a clear distinction between political democracy (through elections and politicians) and social democracy (a society founded on liberty, equality and brotherhood). Without liberty, equality and fraternity, the political bits will only be present in a symbolic sense.

Ambedkar in Annihilation of Caste had defined caste as a system of destruction of brotherhood that divides a society into graded inequality, distributing respect and dignity unequally. Democracy however presumes that every citizen views the other as equal. Ambedkar was very specific in his speech of 25 November 1949: "We are entering a life of contradictions on 26 January 1950. Equality will prevail in politics and inequality in social as well as economic life". He cautioned that such contradictions would soon blow up the fabric of political democracy.

Ambedkar did not care about ambition; he simply did not believe that by voting, voters could simply learn democracy. The domineering groups would take over political institutions without breaking caste and economic peckings without busting collective self-rule.

CASTE, HIERARCHY AND THE LACK OF EQUAL POLITICAL AGENCY

Caste is not merely a discriminatory term, but it also takes an active form in influencing the behavior of people, politically. It conditions you to follow, to rely and to wait as it obviates independent critical agency. In Who were the Shudras? Ambedkar explained that caste assigned people's position and made them remain in a type of cycle, which replenishes itself. Political democracy is providing citizens that are capable of thinking independently. In the caste society, you have subjects, whose politics are dictated by loyalty, fear, and patronage.

Indian political studies continue to indicate that the voting is being organized by blocs rather than by individuals. Instead of referring to caste as a cultural identity, Andre Beteille termed it as a system of power, which determines who receives resources and whose voice is represented. In that case, democracy does not really add preferences up, it merely supports hierarchies by continuing to exist.

This is not a mental illness of the voters, but the outcome of a social order which penalizes nonconformity and rewards conformity. In situations when being loyal to caste is the only way to survive, democracy is a second priority.

THE INEQUALITARIAN EDUCATION AND THE FALTERING OF CRITICAL POLITICAL THINKING

Democracy presupposes that individuals are able to make decisions about policies, institutions, and leaders in the long run. In India, there is inequality in access to education, which greatly inhibits such capability. Although the literacy figures mask enormous disparity in the standards of schools, language access, and instructional practices, the majority of children receive rote learning that destroys their critical thinking and political consciousness.

It has been demonstrated by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen that the lack of education directly undermines political agency by depriving it of access to information and general reasoning. This situation is still reflected in the Annual Status of Education Report where the basic comprehension levels remain low even among children who are enrolled in a school. Therefore, democracy is not deliberative but symbolic.

Ambedkar regarded education to be the foundation of democracy. In States and Minorities, he wrote that political rights without the ability to utilise them only increase domination and not freedom. The absence of education as a means to bring about critical judgment results in the voter basing his judgment on identity signals, emotional appeals, and appearance of the candidate.

THE DIVISIVE ISSUE BETWEEN THE CLASSES AND 'FREEBIES', AND RATIONAL SHORTRUN POLITICAL CHOICE

All election nights are dramatic and voters are regularly morally indoctrinated to accept welfare and freebies. That moralizing lacks the reasoning of making a choice in economically constrained times. A free fridge or a subsidy is more tangible than the institutional reforms that are being abstractly discussed by families that struggle to even put a sandwich on the table.

Partha Chatterjee terms it the Politics Of The Governed whereby the marginalized individuals form the state to exist and not follow any exalted ideal. Democracy desires long-term evaluation of policy yet poverty alters the horizon. A refrigerator is better today than reforms tomorrow.

It does not necessarily imply that democracy is corrupt, and it simply seems truncated. The elections are turned into transactional neglecting deliberations. Economic inequality, according toAmbedkar, would render political equality meaningless because it would transform votes into a means of survival and not an instrument of judgement.

TAMIL NADU CASE STUDY: WELFARE AND DEMOCRATIC LIMITS

A good example is Tamil Nadu. The movement of the Dravidians upset the traditional power system that was Brahmin-centric and demanded welfare and social mobility. M. S. S. Pandian demonstrates how anti caste politics transformed the state representation and the public sphere. These profits should be appreciated and cannot be swept away, but prolonged populism has made the process of democracy stricter rather than liberal. Welfare programs have begun to take the place of profound ideological discussion and politicians are becoming more authenticated by personality and show than policy.

Narendra Subramanian believes that Tamil Nadu mobilizing is founded on symbolic recognition instead of practical deliberation participation. The outcome is a subaltern bureaucracy that is materialistic and shallow on substantive decisions; having shifted from ideological Dravidianism to transactional welfare, after all, government benefits for social welfare purposes do not require deep democratic understanding.

FAIRNESS IN DEMOCRACY DISTORTED BY CELEBRITY POLITICS

When movie celebrities enter politics, the boundary between acting and ruling becomes unclear. Such characters as Vijay Chandrashekhar break the line between performance and bona fide governance. Democracy limits the campaign time in order to even the playing field, however, celebrities have already established decades of campaigns in the form of movies, media and fan clubs. Murray Edelman refers to politics as a spectacle in which symbolic discourse substitutes policy discourse. The cinematic heroism used in Tamil Nadu can be a beacon of moral power in the electorate and distinguishing the fictitious virtue and the real political ability may be difficult. This level playing ground allows familiarity to prevail over criticism and popularity over responsibility.

Ambedkar's warning about bhakti as a political movement becomes highly relevant when people study this celebrity-based voting system. In his 1949 "Grammar of Anarchy" speech, Ambedkar made the argument that people who show devotion to political leaders develop an emotional weakness which creates a fundamental threat to democratic systems. He developed his argument about hero-worship through the statement that it leads to "degradation and to eventual dictatorship" because it transforms citizens into people who follow their leaders without understanding. The political environment causes voters to see their leaders as people who should be treated like holy figures instead of their duty to represent the people.

NO CREDENTIALS OF POWER

We have been accustomed to qualifications in medicine, law, or engineering since errors are not punishable publicly. Life, liberty and resources, however, can be taken away by politics without the same 'gatekeeping'. It is so-called democratic openness, which is in fact an institutional failure. Max Weber also cautioned that competency and restraint must be the ethic of responsibility in politics.

Democratic power is easily demagogued and incompetent without some accountability and baseline training. This is what Ambedkar dreaded when the political power was lost to both moral and institutional foundations.

CONCLUSION

Indian democracy is robust on the surface of appearance but fundamentally fails to be what it was promised to be. Elections continue to be held, people increase participation but equality, fraternity and critical evaluation remains in the bondage of caste, class and inequality. Ambedkar did not have hopelessness as a warning but a diagnosis: when social hierarchy enslaves the very consciousness, democracy can never prosper. Understanding this does not amount to the abandonment of democracy, it disillusions us to the way we see it in India today. Democracy in India will be more of a nominal than a substantial approach until social equality, educational change, and institutional accountability can keep pace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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When “Too Toxic for Europe” Finds a New Home: Miteni’s PFAS legacy and its move to India

Environment cluster - By Varsha M

INTRODUCTION

It was a victory for public health in 2018 when European regulators finally closed down the Miteni chemical plant in Trissino, Veneto, Italy. However, simply closing down the plant failed to prevent the danger of pollutants from finding a new home. Now the technology, equipment, and patents associated with the manufacturing processes of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) have moved abroad, with the same type of manufacturing being established in the Indian state of Maharashtra. This is a reflection of the tragic trend of dangerous industries, which are considered unviable in the Global North, moving to the Global South, where they are received with less stringent environmental regulations and populations that are more vulnerable.

THE ITALIAN CATASTROPHE

Since the 1960s, Miteni plant and its former corporations have operated on the same location as they continued to make fluorinated chemical intermediates (PFAS) decades afterwards. The chemicals are also known to be used in pharmaceuticals, agrochemicals and specialty chemical uses. In 2010 research studies have found the plant to be the major source of PFAS contamination of ground water and surface water in large portions of the Veneto region. Later, the results of the court and media inquiries pointed out how at least approximately 300, 000 to 350,000 individuals had been impacted by the years-long, controlled discharge of the PFAS pollutions, particularly given that its toxicity and permanence is a well-known fact. It is a significant health issue of the population with its connection to increased risks of certain cancer, thyroid disease, reproductive harms, etc.

The Miteni plant was forced to stop its operation and declare bankruptcy in 2018 under the growing regulatory pressure and criminal investigation. The Trissino plant was then closed down and the task of cleaning up the environment was transferred to the government. In any case, the production of the PFAS was to come to a stop, but the legal cases were not.

In June 2025, in the long-standing PFAS criminal case, the Court of Assize in Vicenza issued the verdicts. Eleven of the previous executives and managers associated with Miteni and their affiliated parent companies were convicted of polluting the environment and other offenses and sentenced to jail terms, which they are expected to appeal.

FROM TRISSINO TO LOTE

Following the bankruptcy of Miteni, its assets, including patents, technical know-how, and production machinery, were put up for auction. Investigative reporting in 2024 and 2025 reveal that these assets were acquired by Viva Lifesciences in 2019, a subsidiary of Laxmi Organic Industries. The Indian chemical company was looking to enter the fluorochemicals market, and the company had then started production in industrial locations in Maharashtra, including the Mahad and Lote industrial areas in Raigad and Ratnagiri districts, which are industrial estates bordering the fragile Koyna Wildlife Sanctuary.

Functionally, the manufacturing has extended the operational life of a European PFAS facility by decades, under different regulatory frameworks and far from the communities originally impacted by the pollution.

WHY THIS MATTERS: POLLUTION HAVENS AND REGULATORY ARBITRAGE

PFAS are sometimes called "forever chemicals". They are man-made substances widely used by industry to manufacture many consumer products, such as electronic devices, paint, cars or cosmetics. However, they are a major health concern since they persist in water, soil, and human bodies for decades. They have very often been associated with increased risk of some cancers, reduced fertility, and impaired immune functions. In 2023, an investigation by the Forever Pollution Project estimated that almost 23,000 mostly industrial sites across Europe were contaminated by such "forever chemicals."

Italy, and other EU authorities, horrified by these ecological and social costs after long protests by citizens, managed to phase out the PFAS production. However, selling the machinery has become a way for corporations to capitalize or realise value by externalising the environmental risk. This depicts the classic pollution haven and regulatory arbitrage problem, which is a corporate practice of utilising more favourable laws in one jurisdiction to circumvent less favourable regulation elsewhere, allowing relocation of hazardous production, and avoiding the legal and financial consequences they would face in the Global North.

As a result, environmental degradation moves away from politically empowered populations and toward communities with fewer resources to resist or seek redress.

Although India has environmental statutes and pollution control boards, PFAS are not uniformly monitored across the states, and there is no regulatory framework for PFAS in India as there is in the EU. This blind spot in regulation means that the risk of harm is higher if PFAS manufacturing is allowed to continue without proper containment and monitoring.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON PEOPLE AND PLANET IN MAHARASHTRA

Mahad and Lote have industrial areas with villages that are supported by agriculture, fishing and ground water. They are also sensitive areas that are ecologically sensitive and very near forest corridors and reserved areas of wildlife. In this case, the contamination of PFAS would not be restricted only to the factory. It would flow across rivers, infiltrate aquifers and come in crops.

However, to the employees that work in these facilities, the risk is even closer. The studies conducted in Europe and the U.S. have repeatedly detected a greater concentration of PFAS in the blood of chemical plants workers, even decades before the affected area. However, to the workers in India the limits of the occupational exposure to these chemicals is very loosely defined.

More importantly, the harms of PFAs are hardly instantaneous. The cancer clusters, reproductive issues and immune system failures are developed with time and this may even be decades after exposure. The unfortunate reality about this is that by the time that a community can find causality, the corporations might already have restructured, divested or even fled out of the region altogether. Then, the social costs, both in terms of spending on healthcare and lost livelihoods, and polluted land, are incurred by individuals and state.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY GAP IN GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

The case of Miteni to India shows the issue of the lack of accountability. Domestic courts are able to penalize the evils committed within the nation but there exists minimal international mechanism to restrict the exportation of hazardous plants or technology. Although Basel Convention and other international treaties restrict the export of hazardous wastes, the sale of property and equipment in the name of the purportedly legitimate industrial projects might be beyond the scope of these arrangements.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON PEOPLE AND PLANET IN MAHARASHTRA

The possible solutions may be enhanced cross-border due diligence to corporations, regulating and monitoring PFAS in India, restricting equipment exports to prohibited or heavily regulated chemistries, and civil society campaigning to urge corporations to disclose their assets and clean-up their liabilities.

CONCLUSION

The Miteni case is not just an Italian scandal, or an Indian industrial story. It is a policy and ethical dilemma; is it even possible to prevent the dumping of environmental loads on the most defenseless populations by the markets and the regulators of the world? Otherwise the answer will be recorded in the ground water. Better domestic controls on PFAS in India, global corporate responsibility, and citizen oversight of transfers of assets will be urgent issues, otherwise the expenses of a country will be replicated in another.

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Risk as the New Inequality

Public policy cluster - Hritika Mishra

ABSTRACT

This article argues that current forms of economic disparity are also influenced by unfairly distributed risks of injustice, in addition to unequal incomes. Although economic inequality is often understood primarily in terms of differences between the rich and the poor, the fact is that a person's exposure to risk in their everyday life, due to unstable employment, poor health, climate change, and uncertainty about the legal system, has a significant impact on their economic security over time. By looking at examples using labour markets, health care, climate change, and legal systems, this paper shows that the risks faced by individuals are created through the political and legal systems, which allow certain groups to have a higher degree of protection from these risks while other groups do not have that same level of protection. As such, tackling economic inequity must involve redistributing security and predictability, not just addressing income disparity.

INTRODUCTION

When a crisis strikes, whether a pandemic, a flood, or a sudden job loss, it does not strike evenly. For some households, shocks are absorbed through savings, insurance, and institutional support. For others, the same event becomes catastrophic and leads to debt and displacement. What separates these experiences is not merely wealth, but the presence or absence of buffers against risk.

This article argues that modern inequality is best understood not as a gap in resources, but as a gap in exposure to uncertainty. As affluent groups are increasingly able to purchase predictability through stable employment, enforceable contracts, insurance, and access to institutions, middle- and lower-class people are forced to live with constant volatility, facing unstable work, health shocks, and environmental crises with little protection. This distribution of risk is not accidental and is an essential consideration to understand modern inequality.

RISK AS A SOCIALLY DISTURBED BURDEN

Traditional accounts of inequality often focus on income and wealth. While these measures are important and relevant, they fail to capture how uncertainty and risk also shape everyday life.

Even among individuals with comparable incomes, levels of risk can vary significantly depending on job stability, access to healthcare, housing security, or legal status. These conditions shape whether income results in lasting security or remains fragile. Thus, while income inequality is crucial to examine, exposure to uncertainty has emerged as a distinct and compounding dimension of inequality. It determines who can plan, recover from shocks, and invest in the future, and who remains perpetually vulnerable to disruption.

Risk is often understood as an economic phenomenon, and thus, it is treated as an unfortunate by-product of markets or individual choice. However, such a narrow view often fails to consider how risk allocation shapes modern inequality. In modern society, risk goes beyond financial loss and determines who is protected during uncertainties such as sudden illness, environmental displacement, job instability, and legal uncertainty. These risks shape all our daily lives and influence whether individuals can plan for the future or are forced to respond constantly to crises. Sociologist Ulrich Beck described modern societies as "risk societies," in which threats are increasingly produced by social and technological systems rather than nature alone. However, the fact that risks are widespread does not mean it is universal. Some individuals are protected through insurance, stable employment, and enforceable rights; others are left exposed to volatility with minimal support.

Legal Scholar Martha Fineman's 'vulnerability theory' can help explain the imbalance within risk allocation. Fineman argues that while vulnerability to risk is a universal human condition, the institutional response is deeply unequal. Institutions choose which vulnerabilities to address and which to ignore, reinforcing social hierarchies rather than mitigating them. In this sense, risk is not just an economic phenomenon but a political and legal one.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY OF RISK

A great example of this unequal distribution of risk is in the labour market. The gig economy, while granting flexibility to the workers, largely benefits employers by enabling them to transfer risks onto workers. By classifying workers as independent contractors, platforms shift responsibility for injury, illness, unemployment, and retirement onto individuals, while avoiding obligations traditionally associated with employment. This is not the result of an absence of labour law, but of how existing legal categories are used and enforced. Gig workers fall outside formal employment protections not because work has become unregulated, but because it has been deliberately reorganised in ways that place uncertainty on workers while preserving stability for firms.

Similar patterns can be seen in health and environmental risks. Illness is a universal risk, but the consequences are deeply unequal.

For individuals with good insurance, paid leave, and savings, health shocks are disruptive but manageable. For others, they can mean job loss, debt, or untreated conditions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies by the WHO(World Health Organization) depicted how socio-economic status shapes vulnerability to both illness and its economic consequences.

Similarly, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has found that climate change disproportionately affects those with the least capacity to adapt. Floods, heatwaves, and displacement are not only environmental events. They are social shocks that intersect with poverty, housing insecurity, and weak legal protection. These risks accumulate. A climate event can trigger health crises and lead to job loss, displacement, and thus, compounding vulnerability.

LAW AND RISK

The legal system is often viewed as a source of predictability and order. However, for many people, it functions as a sign of uncertainty. Delays, judicial discretion, and procedural complexity create risks that disproportionately burden marginalized groups. Access to welfare benefits, housing rights, or legal remedies usually depends on documentation, compliance, and administrative processes, which aren't always easy to access. Small errors or delays can result in exclusion.

Legal uncertainty becomes a form of governance, disciplining individuals through the constant threat of denial or delay.

These procedural burdens often affect those with the least institutional literacy and time drastically. As welfare systems increasingly rely on conditions, checks, and discretionary decisions, support starts to feel unpredictable. Instead of reducing risk, the legal system can end up adding another layer of anxiety, where people are constantly waiting, unsure whether help will arrive or not.

While individuals are exposed to uncertainty, the state and capital are often shielded. Financial crises offer a clear example. When markets fail, losses are frequently socialised through bailouts, while gains remain private. Wolfgang Streeck describes this as a transformation in which states act to protect markets rather than citizens. This reveals the paradox within risk allocation. Risk is treated as unacceptable when it threatens capital or state stability, but inevitable when it affects individuals. The result is an economy in which risk is normalized for some and intolerable for others.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the modern inequality is not just about who earns more, but also about who has predictability and support during a crisis.

Risk allocation has thus become central in social stratification and shapes the health, work, and legal standing of individuals. Law and policy do not simply respond to this reality; they produce it. Thus, to seriously address the inequality in the twenty-first century, it is essential to consider who is protected through institutions and who is the most vulnerable to uncertainty.

Since modern inequality is also affected through risk allocation, addressing it requires more than the redistribution of income. It requires redistribution of predictability. Amartya Sen's capability approach emphasizes that freedom depends on real opportunities, not formal rights alone. Without basic predictability, it is difficult for individuals to plan, aspire, and recover, and thus they are less likely to be able to reduce modern inequality. Policy responses might include universal social protection, stronger labour guarantees, predictable welfare systems, and climate adaptation strategies centred on vulnerable communities. The International Labour Organization's Social Protection Floors framework provides one such model.

AUTHOR'S BIO

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Politics in a World of Memes

International Relations cluster - Delishaa Clara Rao

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital media has transformed the nature of political communication, with internet memes emerging as influential tools in shaping contemporary political discourse. This article examines the role of memes in global politics by analyzing their societal functions, their potential to desensitize audiences to political crises, their role in the ironic glorification of authoritarian leaders, and their influence on youth political engagement. This article also delves into their viral nature and raises concerns about the trivialization of serious geopolitical events and the normalization of authoritarian imagery through humor and irony. Drawing on examples from major political developments in 2024 and 2025, including the U.S. presidential election cycle, the European Parliament elections, and ongoing geopolitical conflicts, the article argues that memes have become central instruments of political framing in the digital age. While they democratize political participation and enhance visibility of political debates, they also contribute to the “clownification” of politics by transforming governance and leadership into forms of digital spectacle. Understanding meme culture is therefore essential for analyzing how political narratives, public perception, and power relations evolve within contemporary global communication networks.

MEMES AND THEIR FUNCTION IN SOCIETY

Memes make political expressions democratic. In earlier times, political satire and commentary was mostly restricted to established media organizations, editorial cartoonists, as well as professional comedians. The internet has made it possible for any citizen with a computer and an internet connection to produce and spread political commentary in the form of memes. This participatory dynamic enables millions of users to engage with global politics.

Memes are powerful since they compress complicated political processes such as elections, diplomatic disputes or debates about a policy, and can be summarized in one picture with a small amount of text. In times where the nature of media consumption is hurried, shorter content is progressively favoured over the analysis of political issues at length. The 2024 U.S. presidential election cycle provides a good example of such a phenomenon. During the campaign period, the social media were full of memes that stereotyped candidates in exaggerated ways. Viral cuts of political speeches, humorous comparisons between campaign pledges, and the reaction memes based on the moments of the debate spread across Tik Tok and Instagram. These memes did not merely entertain audiences; they shaped public perceptions of candidates by framing them as charismatic, incompetent, relatable, or absurd.

Similarly, during the 2024 European Parliament elections, political memes circulated across platforms in multiple languages, mocking bureaucratic institutions, immigration debates, and nationalist rhetoric. In many cases, meme pages and digital satire accounts attracted millions of followers, rivaling the reach of conventional political journalism. Memes also contribute to agenda-setting within digital discourse. When a political event becomes a meme template, it gains visibility and cultural significance. For example, when leaders' public appearances, policy announcements, or diplomatic gestures are turned into memes, they become embedded within the cultural memory of online communities. In this sense, memes shape how political events are remembered and interpreted long after the initial news cycle has passed.

In addition to satire, memes have also become employed as a means of digital diplomacy and propaganda. Governments, political movements, and ideological groups understand that humor and visual narratives can be effective persuasive means. Memes have the ability to frame political stories behind the scenes, reaffirm ideological identities, and sway international audiences in ways that conventional state messages fail to do.

MEMES AND THE DESENSITIZATION OF POLITICAL CRISES

Meme culture may also have a political desensitization effect due to its viral nature. Social media thrives on the ideals of ever-present newness and significant events that happen around the world are frequently transformed into meme formats a few hours after they happen. Although humor may be employed as a form of coping mechanism during times of uncertainty, when it becomes a habit to transform serious news and events into something that is of comedic value, the effect of drama may be diluted over time. This was reflected in the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war during 2024 and 2025.During the war, the Internet was full of memes which revealed the events on the battlefield, political speeches, and military signs in the form of funny templates. Although there were memes aimed at solving solidarity or resistance, others undermined the humanitarian impact of the war by turning the war scenes into comedy.

The psychological effect of repeated exposure to humorous representations of crises can lead to a "compassion fatigue," a condition in which audiences gradually lose their emotional responsiveness to suffering portrayed in the media. When crises are consistently framed through humor or irony, the boundary between awareness and indifference becomes blurred. Memes can raise visibility for an issue, but their constant repetition may also shorten the lifespan of public concern.

Global politics usually require long-term focus to create diplomatic pressure, humanitarian assistance, or policies to respond. The meme cycle, in its turn, promotes the quick switching of the subjects. Trends of events have a short-lived trend that is substituted with new viral content. This disjointed attention space renders the ability of the audience to continue to pay attention to complex geopolitical issues.

MEMES GLORIFYING TYRANTS

One controversial element of the meme culture is the authoritarian leaders which the meme culture ironically praises. On other online communities, popular figures of strongmen are often exaggerated into extreme characterizations of the so-called sigma leader, the hyper-masculine mastermind, or the rebellious nationalist hero. The depictions are usually based on irony, and this gives the creators a chance to present admiration as a form of humor and still project positive images.

Some of the most popular memes were created in 2024 and 2025, which featured the strength of leaders such as Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un or other dictators in edited versions that emphasized their strength, control over discipline or strategic advantage.

The cult of personality of these leaders was also criticized and certain of these memes were very clearly satirical. Others, however, went too far on the border between parody and admiration, and authoritarian leadership was a decisive or admirable style of leadership as compared to democratic deliberation.

These types of memes carry with them the sense of irony and it blurs the line between satire and admiration. Referenced to as the "Colbert effect" in pop-culture, wherein audiences interpret satire in ways that confirm their existing biases. This over time turns into a normalization of authoritarian imagery and the seriousness behind it falls away. Meme humormakes it hard to know whether the piece is a joke or not, which is why it is especially effective when propagating controversial political memes. According to scholars of digital culture, irony offers some kind of plausible deniability: one can insist that offensive memes are merely jokes and yet buttress ideological propaganda. Due to the repeated propagation of memes through various pages, the imagery may slowly desensitize some political views.

Even the authoritarian governments are becoming aware of the strategic importance of meme culture. Digital propaganda campaigns are frequently based on humor and meme format to have access to younger audiences. Such campaigns attempt to reshape global perceptions and counter international criticism.

This paradigm shows the symbolic strength of memes in political communication. The repeated usage of images and stories via digital networks can determine the perception of leaders and affect the attitudes of the people to the authority, governance and political authority.

YOUTH, POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE CLOWNIFICATION OF POLITICS

Younger generations increasingly encounter political information through social media platforms where memes, short videos, and visual satire dominate the informational environment. As a result, political discourse among youth often unfolds through humor, irony, and visual storytelling rather than traditional news formats.

This change does not always reflect political apathy. Memes, in most instances, act as points of access to political awareness and political messaging. Posts that are satirical in nature concerning elections, government policies or a conflict that may be occurring in a foreign country may create a discussion which may result in people digging deeper into political matters. Meme culture has contributed to protest mobilization and social movements through disseminating slogans, images, and messages that appeal to younger people. Political leaders are more and more packages in the meme stories as opposed to serious policymakers.

Memes of debate, remixing speeches into comedy editing, turning diplomatic conflict into an online rivalry are all parts of the reaction meme. The 2024 U.S. election cycle again illustrates this phenomenon.

Viral TikTok edits of campaign speeches, humorous comparisons between candidates, and meme compilations of debate reactions circulated widely among young audiences. Political discourse often resembled an entertainment event rather than a deliberative democratic process. Although this approach allows for a more democratic discourse it ultimately diminishes the depth and gravity of issues being discussed. When news is reduced to oversimplified formats and packaged with elements of entertainment, its substantive complexity is lost. Over time, this transformation risks producing an apathetic audience that becomes desensitized to the seriousness of political and social developments, thereby weakening the public's capacity to critically engage with and respond to important issues.

CONCLUSION

The meme is now one of the strongest instruments of culture that has a direct impact on political communication during the digital age, reducing the intricate political notions to the easily replicable formats that spread fast across the global networks.

Memes are a form of political expression that democratizes the process of participation, as people in different parts of the world are able to take part in political events using humor, satire, and stories told in pictures.

Currently, the emergence of meme politics presents new concerns to the global political culture. The speed at which crises can be transformed into the content of memes can also desensitize the audiences to serious occurrences, decreasing the lifetime of the concern of the people. The satirical worship of dictatorial leaders proves the extent to which humor may be used to normalize extreme political stories. In the meantime, this preponderance of memes in the youth political speech leads to a larger cultural change where politics become more like entertainment.

The world politics today is no longer determined by the diplomatic negotiations and the institutions of state, but it is also defined by the cultural processes of online communication. Memes are effective narrative instruments that shape how a society perceives leaders, wars and politics. Their power must not be overlooked when discussing the dynamic connection between digital culture and world power.

Informed Consent or Legal Fiction? Digital Literacy and Privacy under India's DPDP Rules

Legal studies cluster - Shreya Maheshwari

INTRODUCTION

Data collection has become integral to business and services in the present day. In today's digital world, the idea of personal data protection is based on how users interact with consent notices for understanding how and why their data is used. The new DPDP Rules 2025 adopt a consent-centric framework to ensure that every citizen can exercise control over their personal data. However, owing to low digital literacy in India and time constraints on users, this objective can be undermined. The article critically analyses various DPDP Rules 2025, including Rule 3 and Rule 10, from a digital literacy, time and cognitive constraints perspective. It compares the statutory framework of DPDP rules to the realities of digital literacy rates in India. It further draws parallels with the research studies focusing on how users react to long consent notice forms to examine whether the notice requirements under Rule 3 allow the user to form informed consent.

CONSENT AS THE CENTRAL PILLAR OF THE DPDP FRAMEWORK

The DPDP rules 2025 place a heavy emphasis on the free consent of individuals (data principals) to ensure that citizens are aware of how their data is used and willingly consent to its use. To ensure meaningful consent, the new rules require organisations to display consent in the 22 languages mentioned under Schedule 8 of the Indian Constitution. While this aids individuals in forming informed consent, it overlooks that Schedule 8 still does not consist of many local languages. Thus, creating difficulties for providing meaningful consent for some sections of society.

Further, the act follows the SARAL approach to ensure that consent notices are in plain language so that individuals are able to comprehend the rules. However, effective consent under this approach might be hindered owing to the assumption that linguistic accessibility allows people to comprehend technical and legal terms despite a low digital literacy rate of 38%. This might create hurdles in forming informed consent, as more than half of the population might face challenges in forming meaningful consent. This impacts privacy as individuals will resort to providing a superficial consent by simply accepting or declining consent rather than forming a substantive consent by understanding the consent terms as required by Section 6 (1) of the DPDP Act, 2023.

RULE 3 AND INFORMATION-DENSE CONSENT NOTICES

Rule 3 of the DPDP rules 2025 requires the platforms to provide a detailed itemised notice in simple language. This includes a description of personal data, its specified purpose, etc. This detailed description ensures that the user understands the purpose and usage of their data. However, this often makes the notices information dense and lengthy. Thus, creating problems for the individuals who do not understand certain technical or legal words, as they might require a longer time to comprehend them. This detailed provision might create a gap, as platforms might insert important information in long notices for a population with low digital literacy. Hence, requiring them a longer reading period for comprehending the notice might also result in cognitive overload.

Thus, risking user privacy. Additionally, it is important to understand that expecting users to fully comprehend extensive consent notices from multiple platforms negates their actual capacity to do so. Thus, resulting in consent fatigue, as users will be required to read lengthy notices, making them resort to skipping them. These structural concerns are amplified by the requirement of parental consent for each online activity for their minor children under Rule 10 of the DPDP Rules 2025.

Hence, requiring them a longer reading period for comprehending the notice might also result in cognitive overload. Thus, risking user privacy. Additionally, it is important to understand that expecting users to fully comprehend extensive consent notices from multiple platforms negates their actual capacity to do so. Thus, resulting in consent fatigue, as users will be required to read lengthy notices, making them resort to skipping them. These structural concerns are amplified by the requirement of parental consent for each online activity for their minor children under Rule 10 of the DPDP Rules 2025. Hence, users might resort to giving quick consent without reading the terms of the notice, thereby risking the children's data for misuse. Moreover, many parents are not digitally literate to provide informed consent. Hence, they might have to resort to blind acceptance of terms and conditions so that their children are not deprived of services, including online education.

TIME CONSTRAINTS AND THE ILLUSION OF MEANINGFUL CONSENT

The DPDP rules intend to allow individuals to form meaningful consent. This is done by enabling users to have control over their data. However, the implementation of this provision reveals deeper structural barriers. Detailed privacy notices under Rule 3 are often excessively long, requiring a substantial amount of time to read through them.

This time investment in reading long privacy notices creates friction, which stops users from immediately completing their task. Moreover, many users prioritise immediate task completion over their privacy. Research shows that users prioritise saving time over reading privacy policies.

This investment deters users from a thorough review of policies, making them click the "I agree" button without understanding the consequences. Hence, these long notices, instead of informing users informed may worsen the situation as excessive information drowns important points. Thus, it is important to understand that making privacy notices long and detailed does not guarantee privacy protection but might risk it owing to consent fatigue. For example, based on average adult speed, reading privacy notices takes 30 minutes to read, making 74 per cent of people skip it and select quick join. Hence, the aim of securing personal data via informed consent cannot be fully achieved owing to time constraints coupled with low digital literacy levels, making it a more tedious task.

CONCLUSION

DPDP Rules 2025 are centred around the consent model, thus making it a primary requirement for processing data. However, the above analysis highlights several gaps, including digital literacy and cognitive overload, which hinder effective implementation. Hence, these gaps call for a rethinking of how to ensure informed and meaningful consent. Some of the suggestions include having an at-a-glance card where only key elements will be mentioned, including what data will be utilised, the purpose of processing it, and lastly, one clicks option to withdraw the consent. However, an expanded notice should be provided below it in case a user wants to know the full details. Lastly, it must be ensured that the notice also appears in regional languages along with the languages mentioned in Schedule 8. This will help ensure inclusivity, thereby allowing a wider population to form meaningful consent.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Health Security Tax Paradox: Fiscal Centralization and the Black-Market Boom

Economics and Finance cluster- Inika Gupta

INTRODUCTION

The first trading session of 2026 will likely be remembered not for optimism, but for the sea of red that engulfed the FMCG sector. On January 1, 2026, the Ministry of Finance fundamentally altered the fiscal framework for the tobacco industry by notifying the transition from the temporary GST Compensation Cess to a permanent, non-lapsable Health Security-cum-National Security Cess (HS-NSC), alongside a steeper 40% GST slab for sin goods. The market's verdict was swift. ITC Ltd. shed over ₹60,000 crore in market capitalization within hours, while peers like Godfrey Phillips saw double-digit erosion.

This health cess is not exclusively a corporate shake-up; India's fiscal federalism risks being compromised as well. Yet, the consequences extend beyond constitutional debates. While the government's intent is to secure long-term revenue for healthcare infrastructure, this aggressive fiscal policy has inadvertently created a massive arbitrage opportunity. The January 2026 reconstruction does more than just tighten margins; it effectively subsidizes the black market, forcing compliant corporations to pivot their legal strategy from mere tax compliance to aggressive Intellectual Property (IP) litigation to survive the rising tide of counterfeit illicit trade.

CONSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND THE EROSION OF FISCAL FEDERALISM

Excise levy duties are procured from specific domestically produced goods, a manifestation of which are cigarettes. The introduction of the HS-NSC on tobacco products threatens not only the tobacco industry, but also state autonomy and funding, posing a hit to India's fiscal federalism. While the levy is officially designed for public health and national security, its implementation effectively replaces the GST Compensation Cess, which was originally designed to reimburse states for revenue losses.

Under Article 270, the net divisible pool of taxes that must be shared with states, leaves out two increasingly utilised fiscal instruments, these being levies and cesses. By replacing a state-oriented compensation measure with a non-shareable Union cess, the central government secures these funds exclusively for itself. This legislative move effectively bypasses the mechanism of revenue devolution, the collateral damage of which includes, constraining the fiscal autonomy and income potential of the states.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE REVISED TAXATION REGIME

This new excise levy is being charged per 1000 cigarettes sold in addition to the already applicable GST charges, significantly hiking up their retail prices.

Previously cigarettes were taxed through GST and ad valorem Compensation Cesses, which in totality amounted to roughly 50-60% of its MRP, GST alone making up 28% of that component. Under the revised regime, the GST rate itself is estimated to hike to 40%, along with the new excise levy.

This compounding effect, a higher percentage-based GST combined with a flat volume-based excise, is expected to raise the cost of each cigarette by at least Rs. 1.5 to Rs. 2.5. Depending on whether the cigarette is filtered and its length measured in millimetres, the excise levy ranges from Rs. 2,700 to Rs. 11,000 per 1,000 cigarettes. The total tax collected on tobacco products is expected to rise to approximately 70% of its MRP, still unable to reach the WHO's 75% yardstick. While taxation is an important instrument used to regulate tobacco consumption, to make it effective, it is vital to precedingly understand the pattern of Indian tobacco consumption and in what forms it is so consumed.

PRICE ELASTICITY AND DEMOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF THE TAX BASE

Tobacco consumption is shaped by a complex matrix of demographics including age, gender, literacy and income; but price sensitivity stands out as the primary behavioural lever. Tobacco products are generally price inelastic; their demand does not decrease proportionately to price hikes, characterising the irrationality of addiction. Furthermore, the tax base is precariously narrow, relying almost entirely on cigarette smokers. Despite representing only 15% of tobacco consumers, this segment effectively subsidizes the remaining 85% of non-cigarette tobacco consumers who contribute just a meagre 15% to total collections.

Price elasticities vary by product. Bidis and leaf tobacco harbour almost perfect inelasticity. The tax hike up in bidis to 18% rather than the 40% tax imposed on cigarettes is highly inefficient. About 20% of all smokers consume both bidis and cigarettes, making the policy shift a gateway to increased bidi usage. Small scale bidi producers fall under tax exempt categories, making up roughly 31% of the market.
While increased bidi taxation faces administrative barriers, it offers huge revenue potential and health benefits. Conversely, for low-income and younger groups, who make up about 70% of consumers, keeping up with rising cigarette prices will become impossible.

MARKET VALUATION SHOCKS AND SUPPLY-SIDE ECONOMICS

Companies are often equipped to offse policy-driven losses, yet the scale of th market's reaction to the HS-NSC, wher state-owned LIC alone lost ₹10,445 crore i valuation in just 48 hours was shocking. ITC and Godfrey Phillips, fell 10% and 19% respectively within the first two days o January and to approximately 21% from th effective date of February 1st.

The new tax structure creates a dual threat; either slashes EBIT by over 40% or, passed to consumers, threatens sale volumes. Passing the burden creates legally induced, artificially high price floo This cess causes an upward shift of th supply curve equal to the tax amoun Inevitably, the demand curve will not adjus to the same extent, creating deadweigh losses in the economy.

CONSUMER SUBSTITUTION AND THE PROLIFERATION OF ILLICIT TRADE

When producers pass costs to consumers the price of elastic tobacco product exceeds affordability. In consumer theory individuals maximize utility within a finit budget. As the price-per-cigarette increases the rational consumer does not necessaril exit the market; instead, they see substitutes.

The drive to satisfy addiction outweighs the financial incentives to quit, leading consumers to the black market. Despite the hidden costs associated with health and safety risks, counterfeit cigarettes offer a competitive price point, allowing consumers to maximize perceived utility.

This arbitrage allows illegal traders to undercut legal vendors by evading tax compliance. Illegal cigarette trade already accounts for as high as 26% of the Indian cigarette market, the 4th largest globally. This will spike starting February 1st. Ironically, this worsens public health, as they lack regulatory standards or quality checks, and are made in unhygienic conditions. Despite efforts to curb it, the sheer volume of illicit trade across rural and urban areas remains unchecked. Illegal vendors capture market share by mimicking brand packaging, maintaining the social signalling of premium brands while offering competitive prices, fuelling an Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) crisis.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS AND TRADEMARK INFRINGEMENT CHALLENGES

A trademark, defined under S.2(zb) of The Trade Marks Act, 1999, constitutes a mark capable of graphical representation and is the identifying factor of that company's product, (e.g., ITC's "Gold Flake"). Owning a trademark grants exclusive rights and acts as a guarantor of quality, fostering consumer trust necessary for brand loyalty.

Counterfeiters infringe upon these rights under Section 29 by using deceptively similar identifiers. While owners have civil and criminal remedial routes, the hurdle is the sheer volume of illicit trade. To remain viable, big tobacco must spend heavily on IP litigation without guarantees of speedy justice in India's overburdened courts. Although the HS-NSC targets public health, its adverse effects threaten tobacco farmers, public health standards, and producers by increasing reliance on the illegal sector.

CONCLUSION

The HS-NSC paradoxically risks compromising the very health standards it seeks to protect. It mistakenly focuses on cigarette-driven taxation rather than higher taxes on widely consumed products like bidis. By incentivizing a mass exodus to the unregulated illegal trade, the new regime penalizes the compliant while subsidizing the criminal.

The consequences are tripartite. The States lose revenue due to the constitutional bypass of the divisible pool, the legal cigarette industry faces an existential crisis, and consumers are pushed toward dangerous alternatives. As the gap between the legal and street price widens, the battle for the Indian market be fought not on brand equity, but in the courtrooms. For Big tobacco, the future is now a litigation warzone, where The Trade Marks Act,1999 becomes the last line of defence against a fiscal policy that has arguably done more to stimulate the counterfeit economy than any smuggler ever could.

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The Algorithm Has a Gender, and It's Judging You

Gender and Society cluster - Siddarth Poola

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence is frequently described as impartial, objective, and free from human prejudice. This claim is repeated by developers, policymakers, and institutions precisely because it is useful. If AI is neutral, then any harm it causes must be accidental, unfortunate, or the result of misuse rather than design. The problem is that this claim is demonstrably false.

However, research by the UNDP does show that AI systems do not merely reflect social inequalities but amplify them by encoding historical power relations into automated decision-making processes. UN Women renders a similar point, noting that AI systems frequently reinforce gender stereotypes and exclusions while presenting their outputs as data-driven truths.

Through this piece I would like to take that argument one step further; I show that AI is increasingly used as a mechanism of social enforcement, particularly against people whose gender expression does not conform to binary norms. AI systems do not simply misunderstand gender diversity; they penalise, rank, flag, misclassify, sexualise, and erase bodies and identities that fall outside what the model has learned to recognise as legitimate.

In doing so, AI outputs often confirm and normalise harmful ideas about gender, making discrimination appear inevitable, technical, and objective rather than political.

BUILDING THE WEAPON: GENDER BIAS ACROSS THE AI DEVELOPMENT LIFECYCLE

Gendered harm in AI does not originate at the moment an algorithm produces a biased output. It is built in systematically across the development pipeline. The Observer Research Foundation's analysis of gender bias in the AI lifecycle demonstrates how bias enters at every stage, from problem formulation and dataset construction to model evaluation and deployment.

The initial framing of a system often assumes gender as a fixed, binary attribute. Data collection practices then reinforce this assumption by excluding or misclassifying trans, non-binary, and gender nonconforming people. When such data is used to train models, the resulting system learns that gender diversity is statistically rare, anomalous, or irrelevant. AI development illustrates how these early design decisions shape downstream outcomes, embedding normative assumptions about gender roles, competence, and appearance into algorithmic systems. Crucially, these assumptions are not neutral. They reflect dominant social hierarchies and treat deviation from them as noise rather than meaningful variation.

The result is that AI systems are structurally predisposed to reward conformity and punish difference. Gender nonconformity becomes a technical problem to be corrected rather than a social reality to be respected.

LANGUAGE MODELS AND THE POLICING OF GENDER EXPRESSION

Large language models play a growing role in shaping how people write, learn, search, and understand the world. They are also remarkably efficient at enforcing normative gender narratives. The UNDP's analysis of AI-generated language highlights how models consistently associate men with leadership, ambition, and authority, while linking women to caregiving and emotional labour.

More insidiously, these models often struggle to represent gender-diverse identities without framing them as deviations that require explanation. Age and gender distortion across online spaces results in large language models systematically skewing representations of gender, reinforcing narrow ideals of legitimacy, attractiveness, and credibility.

When users ask neutral questions about careers, relationships, or authority, the answers frequently reproduce cis-normative assumptions. When users ask about trans or non-binary identities, the tone often shifts to explanation, justification, or moral debate. In both cases, the model reinforces the idea that binary gender is the default, and everything else is commentary.

This is not accidental. Research on AI and gender equality notes that language systems trained on biased corpora internalise the norms of the societies that produced the data. The output then feeds those norms back to users, creating a feedback loop in which harmful ideas appear repeatedly validated by the machine.

COMPUTER VISION, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE ERASURE OF GENDER-DIVERSE BODIES

If language models police gender discursively, computer vision systems do so materially. Facial recognition technologies have repeatedly been shown to perform poorly on women, trans people, and gender nonconforming individuals. The Swaddle's reporting documents depict how these systems misgender, misclassify, or entirely fail to recognise trans faces, with consequences ranging from denial of services to heightened surveillance.

These failures might arise due to technical limitations but they also reflect design choices that prioritise recognisability over inclusivity. Systems trained primarily on cisgender faces learn to treat gender diversity as error. When deployed in contexts such as policing, border control, or identity verification, this error becomes institutionalised exclusion. Performance metrics rarely account for whose bodies are misrecognised, only how often recognition succeeds on average.

The consequence is a technological regime in which visibility is conditional. To be legible to the machine, one must conform to its expectations of gender. Nonconformity becomes a risk factor.

GENERATIVE AI AND THE AUTOMATION OF GENDERED DEGRADATION

Perhaps the clearest example of AI as a weapon against gender expression lies in generative abuse. There's been a lot of outrage about AI tools being used to create non-consensual sexual images, including the digital undressing of women and children, often targeting those already vulnerable to gender-based violence.
These tools go beyond just reflecting misogyny or transphobia; it helps automate and justify it. The ease of access helps make harassment normal, anonymous, and technically mediated and provides people who use AI in such an unethical way with an easy way to justify their actions by saying something along the lines of 'You shouldn't have put a picture of yourself online if you didn't want this to happen to you' (The excuse has been toned down for obvious reasons). Gender expression that deviates from dominant norms becomes a site of punishment, humiliation, and control.

UN Women's 2025 interview on how AI reinforces gender bias explicitly warns that without strong governance, AI will intensify existing patterns of violence and exclusion. The International Women's Day campaign on gender and AI echoes this concern, emphasising that ethical principles alone are insufficient when systems are structurally aligned with harm.

In these cases, AI outputs do not merely confirm harmful ideas about gender. They actively participate in enforcing them.

CONCLUSION

Across the specific studies, reports, and investigations discussed here, a consistent pattern emerges. AI systems do not passively reflect social bias. They legitimize it by translating prejudice into technical output. When an algorithm misgenders a person, ranks them as less credible, or facilitates their sexualised abuse, it does so with the authority of computation.

This authority matters. As UNDP and UN Women both stress, AI systems increasingly shape access to work, safety, recognition, and dignity. When these systems are built on binary assumptions and deployed without accountability, they become tools of social discipline.

Efforts to address gender bias in AI must therefore move beyond inclusion rhetoric and technical fixes. They must confront the ways in which AI is used to reward conformity, punish difference, and make discrimination look inevitable.

The algorithm does not learn gender politics. It optimises them, deploys them, and insists that the outcome is neutral.

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