

LONG STORY

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WHAT TWEET FOR TAT TELLS YOU ABOUT RAHUL

Rahul Gandhi may have expressed regret to the SC, but data shows insults are crucial to virality and reach



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On the evening of 11 April, as the first phase of India's national elections wound to a close, Samajwadi Party chief and former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh Akhilesh Yadav took to Twitter to reflect on the significance of humanity's first-ever snapshot of a black hole, which had been released to the public only a few hours ago. "Ab to black hole bhī dikh gaya. Bas ache din hi hain jo nazar nahī aatey (We have even seen a black hole now, but 'ache din' are still out of sight)," he wrote. Within minutes, that short, pithy one-liner was retweeted hundreds of times.

Whether Yadav understands the actual significance of the black hole image or not, he does have a firm grip on one aspect of Indian politics: insults work. They have been useful. And they can inform a great deal about particular moments in politics.

This poll season, the Election Commission has been sent scrambling several times due to the use of insults—targeted at individuals, communities, and even geographic regions (Bharatiya Janata Party president Amit Shah said it was difficult to make out whether Rahul Gandhi's Wyanad rally happened in India or Pakistan. Why do politicians rely so often on insult though? It is of course a guaranteed applause line at an election rally, garners instant media attention, and if one is lucky, pertains to one's votes. But it is hard to quantify these effects—until now.

Most politicians these days say so on Twitter and often choose to lay past traditional media and speak directly via online channels. Every tweet can be tagged, analyzed and tracked on metrics of virality. And a sample of every tweet since January 2017 (over 100,000 of them) had coded for insults or confrontational language by five top politicians—Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Amit Shah, Akhilesh Yadav, Rahul Gandhi, and Mamata Banerjee—throws up some interesting findings.

Insults clearly increase traction and politicians instinctively know it. On average, a tweet that includes an insult is significantly more likely to be retweeted, with retweet rates ranging from 32-30% higher than a normal tweet. Congress president Rahul Gandhi has become a master of the insult genre and his political make-over is closely tied in with an ability

to insult effectively, which, data shows, began in earnest in the final months of 2017. While long insults are also a weapon of the opposition, as Akhilesh Yadav's transformation shows once he stopped being the Uttar Pradesh chief minister.

POLITICS OF NAME CALLING
The Indian political landscape, of course, has a long history when it comes to insults. During her early political career, former prime minister Indira Gandhi was dismissed as a "goongi gadhiya" (stomach-drum), Modi once called Sonia Gandhi a "Jersey cow". And Modi himself has been called everything from a thief to a merchant of death. But perhaps no other insult campaign has been as sustained and as politically effective as the pejorative nickname for Rahul Gandhi—"Pappu" (an immature person).

During much of the 2014 general election campaign, the Congress thought that social media wasn't worth engaging in. Meanwhile, the cult of "pappu" was built into a powerful meme. Starting in 2015, even brand criticism of Modi would invite a furious backlash online but "pappu" jokes could be freely shared. However, things began to change in 2017. First, the "Ole of Rahul Gandhi" came online. Then, after a short spell of benign tweeting, around the middle of 2017, Rahul discovered a new, edgy side (see chart 1). His tweets started to get noticed and retweeted aggressively (see chart 2).

In India, one can never go after demigods, and Modi almost never allowed Rahul to become one, despite the attempted political makeover. If not "pappu", he was a "Shehzada" (a prince-

ling). The insult campaign against Rahul has been BJP's biggest branding victory. However, in terms of online virality at least, Rahul began to turn the conversation around by early 2018. Among a subset of 1,933 known politicians active on Twitter, belonging to both the BJP and the Congress, the Congress began to consistently talk about Rahul more than they were talking about Modi. More importantly, Rahul went from being mentioned by less than 10% of BJP politicians to consistently finding space in over half of the ruling politicians' tweets. And yet, he never became a demigod, arguably even within his own party. Even in the first quarter of 2019, there were 16 different trending hashtags with "pappu" in them, and only 11 with "Rahul".

Modi, meanwhile, has dominated the role of a statesman since becoming the Prime Minister of India, at least on Twitter. It is the second rung of the BJP which has kept its Twitter blades sharpened. Rahul's aggressive debut in late 2017 also coincided with the opening of the floodgates into a new era of antagonistic political messaging on social media. All the major parties were by then online, and many had realized their electoral prospects and brand images were sufficiently impacted by what happened on social media. Congress leaders joined Twitter on mass, Akhilesh Yadav went from chief minister of Uttar Pradesh to opposition leader and Trinamool Congress chief and West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee moved to openly confronting Modi, and presenting herself as the consolidator of the regional challenge to the BJP regime.

REGIONAL SATRAP'S STRATEGY
Modi used significantly on potential allies in other parts of the country. Mamata's "national ambitions" were in-

WHAT
The advent of social media has taken political insults to a whole new level. From Rahul Gandhi being a 'pappu' to 'chowkidar chor hai' campaign against Modi, Twitter is the battleground of wit.

WHY
Indian politicians understand that sense of humour, sarcasm or name-calling has a wider reach, and more likes online mean more votes. The BJP's Rahul is 'pappu' campaign is the biggest example.

BUT
From being the subject of insults, 'pappu' has transformed himself into the master of insults on Twitter. The election results will tell us if 'gabbar singh' will turn into votes for the 'Shehzada'.

ally crafted via banal Twitter greetings and birthday wishes, much before an "anti-BJP alliance" became a publicly stated political goal. The firebrand Bengal leader exchanged online pleasantries with many politicians, from Omar Abdullah to M.K. Stalin, through 2017 and 2018. However, being a non-Hindi speaking leader has its limitations. Mamata has been pushed to tweet far more in English than Bengali (see chart 3), denying the projection

of an online persona which is closer to her aggressive, street fighter image. The Messages on Twitter is a far cry from the Mamata in real life, although, even online, the issue of a national strongman invading Bengal is one of her favourite topics. Unlike Mamata, Akhilesh has turned almost entirely inward, with Uttar Pradesh-centric issues dominating his attention span. Up until mid-2017, he had very little confrontational posturing, but the proportion of antagonistic tweeting increased dramatically around late 2017—uncannily mirroring Rahul Gandhi. Something clearly changed in the "political hawa" in the run-up to the Gujarat polls of December 2017. Akhilesh who also regularly tweeted in English till 2016 now relies almost exclusively on Hindi (see chart 3).

On the BJP side, interestingly, both Amit Shah and Narendra Modi are far less likely to use confrontational language than Rahul Gandhi, Akhilesh Yadav and Mamata Banerjee. But when Amit Shah does launch an online attack, it offers important insights into broader party strategy. In the run-up to the 2019 elections, the state leaders Shah has repeatedly attacked Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik and Mamata Banerjee, not Akhilesh Yadav or Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati.

IN CONCLUSION
Tough and antagonistic exchanges have unfortunately become central to the electoral process. It does seem like Rahul Gandhi has picked up at least two important lessons from 2014: insults, like "pappu" have immense power and corruption is a saleable political issue. The "chowkidar chor hai" campaign is an obvious byproduct of these lessons.

A pool of 8.1 million tweets since January 2019 from the accounts of 1,933 known politicians shows Congress attacks have heavily relied on the theme of corruption. The BJP, on the other hand, has made a decisive shift toward national security and cultural issues, a far cry from the "vikas" discourse of 2014. On 23 May, we will know which approach worked.

Ultimately, social media will not dictate the outcome of the election. That said, the online narrative war is here to stay. The new government post 23 May will have a short honeymoon and many vocal critics. Andre Goncalves, Anand Pande, Ram-arvind K.M. and Ajai Sreeravaan contributed to this story.

THE INSULT IS THE MESSAGE

CHART 1: Rahul Gandhi discovered an edgy, new side in late 2017. In the months since, nearly half of his tweets have included insulting or confrontational language.

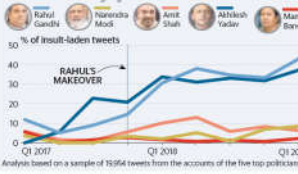


CHART 2: The increasing traction Rahul Gandhi began to receive since early 2018 uncannily overlaps with the period during which he began to insult more.

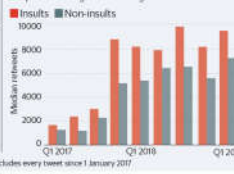


CHART 3: Mamata mostly tweets in English in an effort to reach a wider national audience. Amit Shah and Akhilesh, however, rely heavily on Hindi.

