

LONG STORY

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HOW #BJP FUSED WITH #STRONGINDIA IN #2019

Congress had turned the tide on Twitter in early February. And then, nationalism showed up



The wave of nationalism that gripped Indian social media in the middle of February set the ground for the BJP's 'Main Bhi Chowkidar' campaign.

Jyojeet Pal, Anmol Panda & Rasal Laban
feedback@themint.com

By early February 2019, the Indian National Congress looked set to do something that has little precedent in recent memory. Boosted by the official entry of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra into active politics on 23 January 2019, the Congress, and hashtags associated with it, had begun to trend on Twitter much more than those related to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and causes sympathetic to it (see chart 1).

Despite the idiosyncratic nature of what makes a hashtag or topic go viral on Twitter, the development was still unique. The trends, in a broad sense, reflect the social media pulse of the nation. For much of the previous five years, the BJP's official and unofficial arms online had completely dominated social media. In spite of Rahul Gandhi's efforts to increase his retweet rates and broader reach by deploying a calibrated mix of insult and confrontation since late 2017, the BJP's social media citadel had stood for the most part—until a brief window opened up in February.

Immediately after Priyanka's entry, the BJP machinery swung into action. Boosted by a populist budget and Modi's *Pariksha Charcha*, the saffron party slowly clawed its way back into the Twitter trending board. However, the topic that really changed the game came on 14 February 2019—the Pulwama attack. What happened on Twitter in the intervening few weeks till the end of March largely explains how the general elections unfolded.

These findings are based on an analysis of a subset of hashtags and tweets which gained the most traction. From a sample of more than 142,000 topics that trended on Twitter in a four-month span since 1 January (each hour, Twitter API returns the top 50 trends). Though only an estimated 30 million Indians are active on Twitter on an average day, the platform has outside influence due to its ability to set the "political *baari* mood".

BJP BECOMES INDIA

The wave of nationalism that gripped Indian social media in the middle of February, following the Pulwama attack, had one significant fallout: some of the surge automatically transferred into pro-BJP sentiment by the middle of March.

trending even BJP hashtags that had nothing overtly to do with nationalism (see Chart 1)—thereby, offering a ready template for the party by the time campaigning began for the elections.

The battle cry on Twitter that emerged around the time of the retaliatory airstrikes in Balakot in late February soon morphed into nationalist messages coloured with the distinctively Hinduva-tinged *Har Har Mahadev*, while jingoistic hashtags including #IAToFToMumkinIai were crafted to increase the recall value of a Modi Iai To Mumkin Iai, as did the clarion call of "How's the Joshi", which too was widely used by the Modi campaign.

The seamless melding of India and the BJP was the biggest early success of a hectic poll season, and it happened much before campaign stump speeches on nationalism became a routine feature. In the chaotic cauldron that was Twitter in late February, hashtags such as #Godardit and #ShameToAntiNational also began trending for the first time (within month, at least 10,000 people made a mention of these topics in the preceding 24 hours).

These trends laid the foundation for the 'Main Bhi Chowkidar' campaign in March 2019. The trend war had already swung significantly to the right, with corruption, which was a major trending topic in January, now or less falling off the list. Consequently, the very hashtag that had the most traction on the Congress side—#ChowkidarChorIai—was swiftly adopted by the BJP in its own chowkidar campaign. This was a keen reading of the pulse of social media—the nation seemed to be seeking a guardian, not a conscience-keeper. The appropriation of 'chowkidar' may have been far less effective if it was merely about corruption, with none of the nationalistic overtones.

The same month (March) trended #RahulLovesTerror, replacing the oft-favoured *ata* (a derogatory term based on the dismissive moniker 'pappan' in immature person). The intersection of nationalism and the Hinduva narrative became clear in the trending against Unleashing the #BoycottSurfExcel, following an ad that depicted a friendship between a Muslim boy and a Hindu girl amidst Holi festivities.

The loss of pole position on the trend board for the Congress was never regained till the end of April, well into the polling season. Akshay Kumar's interview

WHAT
An analysis of hashtags and topics that trended on Twitter in a span of four months since 1 January explains how the BJP and the Congress used social media to set the tone of the elections.

HOW
While the Congress' popularity surged on Twitter with the entry of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra in Jan, the Pulwama attack catapulted the BJP back into the Twitter trending board in Feb.

AND
The seamless melding of India and the BJP following Pulwama and the subsequent 'Main Bhi Chowkidar' campaign ensured that Modi ruled Twitter throughout the elections.

of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Modi's Varanasi rally continued the momentum that chowkidar had set forth. In fact, chowkidar was one of the most enduring topics of conversation among Indians in the past four months—first due to the Congress and subsequently due to the BJP (see Chart 2). Nationalism and surgical strikes mostly dropped off the charts by mid-March, but chowkidar endured.

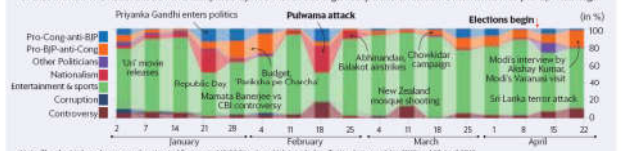
ART OF GAMING A TREND
Beyond chowkidar, the other two trends which had immense staying power were #GoBackModi and #TNWelcomeModi—an indicator of what happens when vested actors try to game the levers of audience attention in the age of social media.

South India's frustration with Modi has been evident in a number of large-scale surveys, and obviously it has left a deep footprint on Twitter too. Since the summer of 2018, every time Modi has ventured southward, particularly to Tamil Nadu, the hashtag #GoBackModi has trended. Suddenly, a few months ago, the competing hashtag, #TNWelcomeModi, began vying for attention.

Over the past four months, both

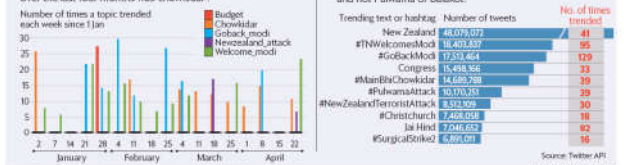
POLITICS OF HASHTAGS

Chart 1
While the Congress looked set to disrupt the BJP's social media dominance in early Feb, nationalism took centre-stage in the middle of that month. The nationalistic wave dissipated by mid-March but organically transferred some momentum to pro-BJP hashtags.



Note: The chart is based on a sample extracted from over 142,000 topics which trended on Twitter between 1 Jan 2019 and 28 April 2019.

Chart 2
The budget and the New Zealand terror attack witnessed brief peaks on the trend chart, but the topic that was most sticky over the last four months was chowkidar.



#TNWelcomeModi and #GoBackModi repeatedly trended—strangely, at a frequency that dwarfed even the New Zealand mosque-shooting, which in terms of scale of engagement (number of tweets) was much larger, and was also a much more organic trending topic. This suggests a concerted effort to aggressively trend these particular pro- and anti-Modi topics, rather than it being an outcome of ordinary user activity.

A recent report by the US-based think-tank Digital Forensic Research Lab also singles out these two trending hashtags as the two lowest of 'recent-breaking level of automation' (a false-by-robots). Among the two, #TNWelcomeModi seemed to be more driven by automated traffic than the anti-Modi messaging, the report added.

The instances of bot-driven trending are an important warning because, sometimes, momentum trends end up guiding media coverage. Ultimately, all political parties seem to be indulging in a strategy of crafted hashtags that have sudden spikes in use followed by their disappearance from Twitter. For instance, there were a total of 15 widely trending hashtags from the Modi camp in just April 2019—with names such

as #DeshModiKeSaath, #ModiHiAayega, #BharatDekNaMoNaM, #BharatKaGavyModi, #AayegaToModiHi, which all received significant boosts in Twitter traction during short periods before passing on to the next hashtag.

Ironically, this strategy has long been employed by the spiritual cult, Dera Sacha Sauda, which trends almost every week on Twitter using hashtags with Gurmeet Ram Rahim in them such as #NurtureBirdsSaysS (Ram Rahim) and #IamEarthCampaignBySMSG.

IN CONCLUSION

Despite the daily din of politics, and even in the middle of an important national election, the most significant topics that most Indians on Twitter care about on an average day are entirely non-political. They are entertainment and gossipy. The large-scale trend analysis shows that Indians love to greet each other, even about days of the week. Tags like #MondayMotivations and #TuesdayThoughts invariably outper-

form most political issues on any given week. For instance, #MondayMotivation, #TuesdayThoughts, #WednesdayWisdom, and #FridayFeeling consistently outperformed chowkidar and nationalism.

The top 20 trending non-entertainment tags give a sense of what the mood of the nation has been since January (see Chart 3). The New Zealand terror attack led, by far, the highest level of trending among various subjects, getting much higher traction than even Pulwama or Balakot.

Besides the year-opening greetings week, mid-February was the only period when entertainment was less significant than a political topic, and it took a major terror attack to move social media, if only for a week. Despite all the polarized political discourse and shrill chest beating about nationalism, on an average day, the nation may not really want to know. It is too busy with that #FridayFeeling.

The authors are social media researchers based in Bengaluru.

Source: Twitter API, AHMED SAZAL MANAN/INT