

The Migrant as Political Entrepreneur

Krishanu Bhargava Neog

There is a rich body of studies that show how migrants/refugees or those considered to be of such origin are often framed as the 'other' in mass media and social media discourses. We want to discuss how, especially on social media platforms, they are often singled out for humiliation, mockery and vituperation in images and visual content such as memes by everyday users. There is a wide cross-section of such individuals who are identified, vilified, and framed for this particular form of calumny that appears to have been enabled by technological affordance. This paper will trace the details of a representative case of a particular individual, a minority figure of East Bengali origin but hailing from Dhubri in Assam. The paper will discuss how he was subjected to widespread media coverage and online commentary since declaring his candidacy in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. As we shall see, an entire media ecology was built around him with interviews and videos, mainly feeding on his poor language skills in English and Hindi, besides his command over Assamese marked by heavy accent. The paper will draw on the images circulating on social media platforms that derive their humour based on *schadenfreude*, making fun of the subject's attempts to speak in a manner that will find acceptance in the caste Hindu Assamese dominated media-political space. As part of the contemporary public discourse, such memetic images associate him with sartorial markers such as the 'lungi', that is a sign of the 'Bangladeshi Miya' in popular Assamese imaginary. There are YouTube videos that play with and refer to his identity practically as a human-animal. A daily wage-earner, the subject's lack of social and cultural capital is underscored in particular ways, that are telling about constructions of migrant others in the region at large. The paradox is that the same individual was recruited as a 'star' campaigner for the BJP in the 202 state Legislative Assembly elections. He had photo-shoots with the current Chief Minister. In subsequent interviews our subject displayed a strategic self-awareness about the nature of the image he was framed with and projected in turn. The paper will explore the complex negotiation between our subject as a 'political entrepreneur' and the enframing he has endured by dominant sections in the media. We shall probe how he has deployed what may be described as becoming a micro-celebrity while contending with an antagonistic media framing, in some ways 'returning the gaze'. Finally, the paper will speculate how far such an individual performance of a marginalized 'other' can be generalized as a wider section's attempts to 'game' the attention economies of online and offline public and its political implications.