

A COMPARATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL CARTOONS IN INDIA AND PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Political cartoons are powerful visual discourses where political ideologies are conveyed, where authority is satirized, and where social-cultural tensions are expressed. Cartoons in South Asia especially in India and Pakistan also dominate the ways in which people perceive leadership, governance and nationalism. This study explores the thematic variations in political cartoons that have appeared in Indian and Pakistani newspapers in the years (2020, 2021, 2022, & 2024) with respect to how satire, symbolism and humor discern political narratives and politician's ideological positions. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing 120 political cartoons gathered on The Times of India, The Hindu, Dawn, and The Nation. The critical discourse approach by Fairclough (2013) and multimodal visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) were used in the analysis. The results show that Indian cartoons are characterized by the focus on leadership caricature and populist criticism, whereas Pakistani cartoons prefer the symbolic images and institutional comment. The research finds that political cartoons are visual representations of national ideology and opposition, and represent a comparative study of the cultures of political communication in India and Pakistan.

Keywords: Comparative thematic analysis, political cartoons, India, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

The art, humor and social commentary of political cartoons are some of the oldest forms of art and commentary and they are used to mirror the political heartbeat of a society. Cartoons are discursive aids that streamline the complicated political realities, confront authority and offer citizens graphic accounts of governance and ideology across the world (El Refaie, 2009; Khanduri, 2014). Political cartoons take a unique niche in the print and online journalism in South Asia, especially in India and Pakistan. They express opposition, reveal contradictions, and are semiotic battlefields in which the state power, nationalism, and mass opinion intersect (Ashfaq, Shami & Toor, 2019).

The history, culture and politics of India and Pakistan have a complicated and interlinked past

and still affect their media. Even though they share this common history, they have vastly different political institutions, freedom of the press and ideologies. Therefore, in India, the democratic climate is very vibrant and the more liberal uses of satire and humor are usually successful as a means of criticism, whereas in Pakistan, the changing political stability and media restrictions impose restrictions on more threatening, symbolic and metaphoric practices (Fairclough, 2013; Husain, Begum & Ahmad, 2023). The way in which the cartoonists of these two countries address the issues of political sensitivity can provide an idea of how more general tendencies of visual discourse, censorship and ideological bargaining.

Although, a number of scholars have already discussed the political cartoons as a communicative

text, the gap in comparative thematic studies on India and Pakistan has been substantial throughout the recent years (2020-2024). The evolving geopolitical environment, populist politics, and the impact of social media on these processes has altered the functioning of political satire across the borders (Singh & Ozarkar, 2023; Shakeel & Alam, 2023). However, there is no systematic comparative analysis of how the theme of leadership representation, corruption, nationalism, economic crisis among others are variedly represented in the two countries. This study fills that gap with a thematic analysis of political cartoons printed in mainstream Indian and Pakistani newspapers in 2020-24 and how satire, symbolism, and humor are used to formulate different ideological positions. This study helps elucidate the theme and style differences in two historically interrelated countries as it can enlighten the visual communication, media studies, and political discourse analysis. It displays the encoded political meaning of the cartoonists via satire and symbolism which are expressed through thematic analysis, to represent national ideologies, censorship conventions, and expectations of the audience. The comparative focus provides us with novel understanding of humor as a uniting and a separative power of political communication (Kar & Das, 2024; Sadiq et al., 2023). In addition, it expands the research on how media influences the democratic participation and ideological polarization in South Asia where visual commentary is a common replacement of direct power criticism.

1.1: Research Objectives

- To identify and analyze the existing thematic differences in political cartoons published in India and Pakistan.
- To investigate how the use of satire, symbolism and humor in political cartoons reflect political narratives and ideological standpoints of political leaders of both countries.

1.2: Research Questions

1. What thematic differences do exist in political cartoons published in India and Pakistan?
2. How does the use of satire, symbolism and humor in political cartoons reflect political

narratives and ideological standpoints of political leaders of both countries?

1. Literature Review

Political cartoons are considered to be one of the most effective modes of political communication that combines both visual and written forms to criticise authority, represent popular opinion, and generate ideological discourses (Khanduri, 2014; El Refaie, 2009). The form has not been the focus of much research in the South Asian context, especially in India and Pakistan, as compared to traditional news and commentary, but the research indicates that they play an immense role in the political discourse and representations, as well as in media culture.

2.1 Background History and Culture

According to Khanduri (2014), caricaturing culture in India has charted the historical development of cartooning, starting with colonial caricatures and moving to the editorial cartoons of the 21st century, through which cartoons were not only illustrative but also involved with the issue of power of colonialism, nationalism and post-colonial identity. Still newer studies consider the rhythm of satire in the Indian caricature and cartoon activities (Kar & Das, 2024). In this way, the cartoon shape is placed into a long history of visual critique of power, and satirical practices are modified in response to a shift in media technologies and politics.

Pakistani Political cartooning also has a tradition of opposition and censure to different regimes. As an example, Zahid and Ashraf (2024) have reviewed the cartoons by Anwar Ali (1922-2004) to follow the process of satire directed at the ruling elites and social hypocrisy during the early years of Pakistani formation. Other Pakistan works emphasize the use of semiotic and discursive strategies of cartoons in the representation of religious-political conflict (Syed, Khan & Sarwar, 2022) or elite stereotyping (Muhammad et al., 2020).

2.2 Audience, Ideology and Framing

A lot of the literature focuses on cartoons as places of ideological work, producing and challenging meaning instead of entertaining. As an example, Ashfaq, Shami & Toor (2019) show that in Pakistan, cartoons on relations between Pakistan and the US and India are both mirrored and

created by the state under censorship conditions. Likewise, Muhammad et al. (2020) discovered that cartoons of The Nation newspaper favor some of the political elites (ingroup) at the expense of others (out-group), which implicitly create ideological stances. Based on the studies of the Indo-Pak cartoons (Ashfaq, Ijaz & Shami, 2019), the visual representation of the national rivalry is presented in the cartoons in English-language daily, whereby the self and other constructions are presented as symbols and caricatures. These contributions indicate the importance of framing, ideology and semiotics in the study of the cartoons.

2.3 Visual Grammar and Multimodal Analysis

The application of multimodal and semiotic analysis to cartoons as visual texts of image, caption, symbol and humour is a significant area of the modern scholarly analysis. In the case of Indian cartoons, Singh and Ozarkar (2023) write about the transformation of the face of the political cartoons in the 10-20 period of time that occurred since 2010, based on interviews with editors and cartoonists. Indian cartoons have been subjected to conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) by researchers like Conceptual Blending in Indian Political Cartoon Discourse (2024) to demonstrate how a metaphoric blend can be used to create meaning through visual means. On the Pakistan side, Shakeel and Alam (2023) apply the visual grammar framework of Kress and Leeuwen (2006) to deconstruct the multimodal strategies of cartoons in the Pakistan case of the economic crisis and show how the functions of exaggeration, contrast, metaphor and framing work rhetorically. Therefore, the literature underlines the idea that cartoons are not mere funny drawings, but multimodal pieces, which have rhetorical, ideological and communicative authority.

2.4 Jokes, Satire and Reaction of the Audience

The other aspect of the literature is the role of the humour and satire in the cartoons. In India, the mapping of how humour in cartoons is adjusted to evolving political conditions, media forms and censorship is done in The Language of Humour and Its Transmutation in Indian Political Cartoons (2023). Kar and Das (2024) also speak about caricature and satire in cartoon practices in India. Sadiq et al. (2023) examine the topic of Pakistan and social media and their influence on the youth

through the analysis of political comics and their dissemination by visual humour, which is an independent factor outside of print media affecting political awareness and polarization. Those writings are signs of the significance of humour as a rhetorical tool and as a social-psychological impact.

2.5 Media, Censorship Relations and Power

The structural/organizational background of cartoons is also put into focus by the research: editorial restriction, media ownership, censorship, print/online shift and political influence. As an illustration, the analysis of editorial cartoons in India and Pakistan (Husain, Begum & Ahmad, 2023) indicates that the editors are appreciative of cartoon space, yet they are also aware of the decrease in print sales and editorial autonomy. Ashfaq et al., (2019) demonstrate that cartoons that criticize influential relations are likely to be met with disapproval and censorship in Pakistan, which reveals the political economy of cartooning.

2.6 Lacuna and Thematic Comparative Research

Although, the literature provided above is very insightful, comparative thematic studies of cartoons in India and Pakistan between 2020-2024 are lacking. Numerous works are confined to single countries, past periods or specific happenings (Indo-Pak rivalry & economic crises). Others explore in very few ways the cross-national visual strategies, thematic variations in satire/symbolism and comparative ideological positions through cartoons in neighbouring states. This gap fits the research objectives of this study (to determine differences in thematics, and to explore satire/symbolism/humour in the form of political narratives) and therefore contributes to the literature by placing cartoons in a comparative cross-national context.

2. Research Methodology

This research draws a qualitative comparative analysis based on thematic analysis, to examine the role of political cartoons of India and Pakistan in 2020-24 to capture divergent political narratives, ideological position, and rhetoric schemes. Political cartoons are rich multimodal documents and encode the meaning of social, cultural, and ideological in both the visual and linguistic elements (El Refaie, 2009). Being condensed commentaries on contemporary activities, they give

an understanding of what is being discussed in the society, media framing, and political awareness in the two societies.

3.1 Research Design and Approach

The study is in the format of a comparative qualitative study, which allows interpreting visual information in the context of socio-politics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The conceptualization of the thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was selected due to its flexibility and its applicability to recognize patterns of repeated meaning in data sets. This method is applicable to the interpretation of explicit (textual labels and caricatures) and implicit meaning (symbolism, humor and satire). The design focuses on cross-case comparison and contextual interpretation, which align with the goals of the study to find the differences in the themes and examine how satire and symbolism expression reflect the ideology.

3.2 Data Collection

The sample size was twenty political cartoons that were selected in both countries based on the major national newspapers and online editorial portals. ThePrint, the Last Laughs-section, Indian Express (author: E. P. Unny), as well as The Hindu (edited articles), were used to find Indian cartoons. The cartoons used were mostly obtained through the online cartoon archive of Dawn that contains the works of Zahoor, Maxim, and Sabir Nazar regularly. The sampling included major political events of 2020-24 such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the protests of farmers, economic hardship, environmental crisis, and foreign policy crisis. The purposive sampling was aimed to select the politically relevant and socially resonant materials according to the rule of theoretical saturation that the qualitative visual research follows (Rose, 2016).

3.3 Data Analysis

The cartoons were studied as the multimodal texts that are the combination of the visual semiotics and the text. With the help of the six-phase structure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition and reporting, common patterns were detected in both datasets. Categories like leader-centered satire, institutional critique, metaphorical humanitarianism and crisis representation were then narrowed down into larger theme by going

through the process of refinement. A comparative analysis was done on how the Indian cartoons have the tendency to personalize satire using caricature and the Pakistani cartoons are using metaphor and symbolic to criticize institutions and humanitarian implications. This interpretive procedure focused on the reflexivity and cultural literacy to prevent ethnocentric bias when assigning meanings (Fairclough, 2013).

Triangulation of sources and cross-checking interpretations against editorial captions were done to build credibility. The analysis has taken into account positionality and cultural context and has taken into consideration the reflexive understanding of the researcher about the interpretative position (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Every piece of information was publicly accessible and credited to the cartoonists and publications. As the research is based on publicly disclosed material with no human participants, it is ethically sound research in terms of qualitative media research.

3. Data Analysis

Comparative thematic analysis of the political cartoons that could be found in India and Pakistan (2020-2024) demonstrates a group of similar topical priorities and significantly different semiotic and rhetorical choices. Throughout the two settings, the cartoons tap into the recurring events within the nation, such as the management of pandemics, economic hardship, mass protests, climate disasters, and geopolitics, however they are systematically differentiated in how they represent the actors, what they foreground and what mode of humor and symbolism they favor. This thematic analysis clusters the substantive patterns into six themes, interrelated, namely: (1) crisis and attribution of responsibility (2) leader-centred versus institution-centred framing (3) protest and popular agency (4) modes of satire and metaphor (5) foreign policy and regional imaginaries and (6) affective tone and intended audience uptake.

4.1 Crisis and Attribution of Responsibility

Crises are recurrent points of entry into criticism in cartoons in both countries, but on different sides of the fence. In Indian cartoons, the greatest crises (COVID-19 waves, vaccine rollout scandals, economic shocks) are often anthropomorphized by the gestures and

expressions of individual leaders. The physical, clothing or speech-bubble of the leader becomes the kind of shorthand to policy decisions and their effects; guilt is frequently imaged as a conscious, individual failure or brag. Comparatively, Pakistani cartoons about floods, inflation or governmental disintegration focus on the systemic failure: rotten infrastructure, under-invested bureaucracy, or a safety net that has been drained. Thus, the visual metaphors of Pakistani works hold no one person responsible, but rather an institutional incompetence or structural negligence, presupposing administrative dysfunction and the plight of common people (Dawn, 2022a; Dawn, 2022b). The patterns show that though both the publics are dealing with the same distinction of crisis, the cartoonists in both nations have different diagnostic frames that influence the understanding of the publics on where the crisis is based.

4.2 The Leader-Centred and the Institution-Centred Framing

The theme of focalisation is closely connected to the one of attribution. The focus of Indian cartoons is often leader-based: the leader is depicted as caricatured heads, personal accessories (identifying clothing), direct labelling, so that the leader turns out to be the driving force of the cartoon. This form makes it possible to satirise quickly and directly, create a politics of responsibility, which directs critique through a recognizable front. Pakistani cartoons, in their turn, turn on institutions (courts, ministries, relief agencies) transformed into the anthropomorphized objects or inept machines. This distinction is semantically consequential: leader-oriented cartoons encourage the politics of personal responsibility and voting behavior, whereas institution-oriented cartoons direct the readers toward systemic change and humanitarian implications.

4.3 Protest and Popular Agency

Comparison of representational strategies is found in cartoons devoted to protests, i.e., the 2020-21 farmers mobilization in India and other political rallies in Pakistan. Cartoons about protests by Indians tend to make use of recognizable, easy-to-read scenes: the tractor, the road block, or the legislature building are iconic and easy to identify motifs. This clarity is more focused on instantaneous political inscription and allying itself

to visible modes of opposition. When included, Pakistani protest cartoons tend to make more use of allegory empty-seat, puppet-string arrangements or domestic metaphors that coded dissent in multiple levels of symbols. The allegorical mode in Pakistan is often the result of editorial circumscription where the direct depiction is dangerous; metaphor thus acts as a kind of defense as well as rhetorical enhancement resulting in cartoons which involve more decoding but provide a critique which implicates wider power relations.

4.4 Modes of Satire and Metaphor

Major thematic dissimilarity is found in the favored comedic and symbolic means. Indian cartoons prefer stereotypical graphic depiction, frontal labelling, and punning headings, all of which create an instant, even viral comedy impact. Visual hyperbole (exaggerated facial features, exaggerated props) and textual anchors make ambiguity less and also enhance political targets. Pakistani cartoons show a closer tendency to the positions of the layered metaphor and tragicomic contrast: the economy as a shrivelled suitcase, floodwaters as an intruder, the country as a wounded animal. These metaphors are open to empathy and moral judgment; they are less about making fun of a specified butt of the head and more about bringing into focus the human cost of policy and neglect. The two approaches are a demonstration of varying rhetorical purposes immediate ridicule and responsibility and long-term critique and moral persuasion.

4.5 Regional Imaginaries and Foreign Policy

Both corpora have international relations and security but in different ways. In Indian cartoons, the foreign policy is more often placed in the context of national prestige or technology (trade alliances, diplomatic posturing), and occasionally ridiculed by the performance of leaders in the international arena. Pakistani cartoons also have the tendency to put foreign-policy questions in humanitarian and economic context, as the flow of refugees, aid to foreign countries, and destabilisation of the region are understood in the view of their domestic consequences. This gives rise to the fact that, in Indian cartoons, geopolitics is frequently a platform of melodramatic leaderly performance, whereas in Pakistani cartoons it is a prism of the effects of regional politics on the ability of the state to take care of its citizens.

4.6 Emotional Intonation and Target Audience Pick-Up

Last, cartoons vary in terms of tone and affective register. Cartoons that use confrontational satire are a common feature of Indian cartoons: they are acerbic, performative, and intended to be shared on social media. Their humour may be vituperative, partisan, and directed to populars who demand to be directly mocked, and at the leader. Pakistani cartoons have a restrained tone: the most common registers are sorrow, irony, and sympathetic indignation, and the humor is often bitter. This tonal difference implies different editorial and civic ecologies: in India, the cartoon is used as a form of governmental scrutiny that seeks to be noticed; in Pakistan, it is used more commonly to express grief, caution, or cautious indignation. The two registers achieve ideological work, framing of political problems, establishing moral valence, and directing interpretive responses, but via mobilizing divergent affects.

4.7 Cross-Cutting Observations

There are two cross-cutting patterns that can be observed across the themes. To start with, the idea of topical overlap does not mean the same rhetorical resolution, the same event (the pandemic) is prised through national semiotic repertoires, where different targets and moral lessons are given priority. Second, the limitations, editorial norms, press freedom, expectation by the audience, etc., seem to influence semiotic decisions: where it is possible and profitable to name the character directly, cartoonists reach caricature and labelling; where it is impossible or unprofitable, metaphor and allegory can be effective tools. These trends suggest that cartoons are not merely mirrors of social attitudes but active formers of political discourses through coping and selecting focal points, symbolic words and emotional tints.

4.8 Consequences

The thematic contrasts demonstrate the ideological positioning of satire, symbolism and humor which are devices. Direct caricature and labelling adopt code an ideology of personal responsibility and challenge; metaphor and tragicomic framing adopt an ideology of structural causes and human costs. Therefore, the interpretation shortcuts given to the readers of cartoons in each setting are varied-one leading to the focal point of political actors, the

other to institutions and victims. These thematic selections are critical to the scholars utilizing cartoons as data: the semiotic approach taken by a cartoonist is an ideological assertion in its own right that moderates the perception of causality and moral responsibility by audiences.

4. Findings and Discussion

The thematic comparison of political cartoons (Indian and Pakistani newspapers, 2020-2024) indicates that the two media cultures use satire as a tool of the socio-political commentary but the emphasis, interests, and ideology are manifested differently. Whereas Indian cartoons are leader-focused and stridently aggressive, cartoons in Pakistan are institutionally sarcastic and metaphorically subtle. These variations indicate the media freedom, political system, and traditions of the discourses of the people of a particular country.

One of the key discoveries is that Indian cartoons prefigure political leadership as the national policy and national crisis agent. ThePrint and Indian Express cartoons published in 2020-2021, tended to present Prime Minister Narendra Modi as the nominal centre of power, particularly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests by farmers. Slogans, gestures, or clothes that Modi used were caricatured to be a shorthand symbolizing state policy, a personalized accountability (ThePrint, 2021a, 2021b). This is a personalisation of criticism and it fits in with the much mediated democracy of India which is a country whose leadership performance is directly related to the political identity of the nation (Fairclough, 2013). On the other hand, Pakistani cartoons in Dawn usually criticize political and economic organizations but not the leaders. In moments of crisis, like economic downturn or the 2022 floods, cartoons resorted to allegory: sinking ships or crumbling buildings, and so on, to indicate that the system was malfunctioning (Dawn, 2022a, 2022b). This emphasis on institutions shows caution on the part of an editor and the intricate balance of power between the state institutions, the military and the media in Pakistan. The focus on metaphor and symbolism can prove the point that visual ambiguity of cartoons gives a chance to flourish even in the restrictive conditions, as El Refaie (2009) argues.

The other important observation is related to the role of humor and emotional tone. Indian cartoons

have an aggressive sense of humor, which is based on parody and exaggeration, which contributes to immediate publicity and spreading a virus. However, Pakistani cartoons are done using irony and tragicomedy to arouse empathy and moral thought instead of laughter. The tonal divergence in this case illustrates how humor is culture-specific, and it works as both entertainment and social criticism (Tsakona, 2009). By theme, the two groups of cartoons unite on issues of governance, inequality and handling of crisis but differ on the tools of representation. Such disparities help to demonstrate how political satire reflects national discursive practices, the responsibility of the citizens to the government in India and institutional bargaining in Pakistan. In both cases, cartoons are used as multimodal discourses exposing ideological subtexts and defining a shared consciousness of politics.

5. Conclusion

This thematic and comparative analysis proves that political cartoons in India and Pakistan serve as an effective instrument of visual commentary and represent different political, cultural, and ideological backgrounds. Though, the socio-political issues that both countries have overlapping interests include governing, crisis management, and accountability to people, the visual rhetoric and humor approaches vary greatly. Indian political cartoons are overtly caricatured and directly saturated, with the foreground of leadership being the incarnation of state power. By personalizing critique in this way, cartoonists are able to contextualize complicated policy failures into comprehensible, leader-oriented humorous stories that appeal to a participatory democratic constituency. These visual techniques reflect the dynamic media landscape and relatively liberal discursive field in India, in which dissent and parody are still the components of political communication (Fairclough, 2013).

Conversely, the use of symbolic and metaphorical imagery in the Pakistani cartoons does not criticize an individual person but criticizes the institutions. Their allegorical and tragicomic tone reveals the dysfunction of systems and the inequality between social classes and limits editorial restrictions. This oblique way of critique is in line with the fact as observed by El Refaie (2009), that ambiguity enables political cartoons to avoid censorship and yet be able to carry rather cut-throat commentary.

The tone of Pakistani cartoons is somber, ironic, and sympathetic, which makes one think of the suffering of people and the ethical obligation of the government. Finally, the results confirm the fact that satire, symbolism, and humor are communicative resources which are culturally situated. Political cartoons are not very long but they carry the ideological messages that are too complicated to sense the power and legitimacy of the people. They unveil the way the visual discourse reflects and creates national political identities. Through a comparative analysis of the Indian and Pakistani cartoons in terms of thematic orientations, the study adds to the wider debates of media, ideology, and freedom of expression in South Asia, and highlights the visual politics of humor as a long standing arena of negotiation between the authority and the dissent.

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