

# Visual Satire As Social Agenda: A Semiotic Study of Political Cartoons in Telangana Today

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## ABSTRACT

Political cartoons have long served as powerful tools in media discourse, offering visual satire that captures the socio-political pulse of a region. This study explores how political cartoons published in Telangana Today, an English-language daily from the Indian state of Telangana, function as a vehicle for setting social agenda. Using a qualitative research design, the study employs content analysis and semiotic analysis to examine 100 purposively selected political cartoons published over a defined period. The cartoons were manually coded using a structured codesheet, identifying recurring themes and underlying social commentaries.

Drawing on agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the research investigates how visual satire in editorial cartoons reflects and shapes public discourse by highlighting issues of public concern. Through detailed thematic categorization, the study identifies six dominant themes-governance, corruption, economy, public welfare, infrastructure, and political identity. These themes are interpreted using both denotative and connotative elements to understand the symbolic representations within the cartoons. The findings reveal that the cartoons predominantly focus on substantive issues affecting the citizens of Telangana, thereby contributing to public awareness and potentially influencing public opinion.

The analysis demonstrates that Telangana Today uses political cartoons not merely for comic relief but as strategic media artifacts that reinforce critical narratives about political leadership, policy failures, and public grievances. By amplifying specific concerns repeatedly, the cartoons act as agenda-setting tools within the regional media landscape. This study not only contributes to the growing body of research on political cartoons in India but also provides insight into how regional English-language newspapers participate in shaping socio-political consciousness through visual media.

**Keywords:** political cartoons, social agenda, Telangana Today, media discourse, agenda-setting theory

## INTRODUCTION

Political cartoons serve as a potent form of visual communication within print media, encapsulating complex socio-political issues through satire, symbolism, and caricature. These cartoons offer critical commentary on current events, often condensing multifaceted political realities into single, impactful frames. As an art form and a mode of media discourse, political cartoons not only reflect public sentiment but also shape it, highlighting issues of collective concern and prompting debate. In recent years, their role in setting public and social agendas has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly within the fields of communication and media studies.

This study investigates how political cartoons in Telangana Today, a prominent English-language daily newspaper from the Indian state of Telangana, contribute to the process of social agenda-setting. Telangana, as one of India's youngest states formed in 2014, presents a dynamic socio-political landscape marked by regional identity, governance challenges, development concerns, and evolving public discourse. In this context, editorial cartoons in Telangana Today provide a unique lens through which political and social issues are critiqued and disseminated to a diverse readership.

The primary objective of this study is to explore how political cartoons published in Telangana Today represent and reinforce topical issues relevant to Telangana's socio-political climate. Using a qualitative methodological framework grounded in agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the study employs content analysis to identify dominant themes, and semiotic analysis to interpret the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in the cartoons.

Through an analysis of 100 purposively sampled cartoons, this paper aims to demonstrate how editorial visual media in a regional English newspaper acts as a vehicle for constructing and circulating public discourse. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the communicative power of political cartoons in setting social priorities and influencing public perception in contemporary India.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The role of political cartoons in shaping public opinion and media discourse has been widely explored across disciplines, including media studies, political communication, and semiotics. This section reviews six foundational and contemporary studies that inform the theoretical and methodological approach of the present research.

### **McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972) – Agenda-Setting Theory**

In their landmark study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) proposed the Agenda-Setting Theory, demonstrating that the media influence not what people think, but what they think about. By analyzing the 1968 U.S. presidential election, the authors showed a strong correlation between the issues emphasized in the news and the issues the public perceived as important. The theory introduced the concept of the media as a gatekeeper of attention, which plays a crucial role in shaping the public agenda.

### **El Refaie, E. (2009) – Semiotics and Visual Interpretation**

El Refaie (2009) explored how readers interpret political cartoons through a multiliteracies framework. The study highlights the use of visual metaphors, intertextuality, and symbolic compression in cartoons and emphasizes the cognitive and cultural skills required for interpretation. It combines semiotics with reception theory to show how meaning is constructed at multiple levels.

### **Sani, I., Abdullah, M. H., Abdullah, F. S., & Ali, A. M. (2012) – Methodological Model**

Sani et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study of political cartoons in Nigerian newspapers using both content analysis and semiotic analysis to uncover how cartoons set social agendas. Using the Agenda-Setting Theory as their base, they analyzed 100 cartoons from Daily Trust, Vanguard, and Tell, identifying dominant themes like corruption, governance, and public welfare. Their study revealed that cartoons often reflect urgent social issues and mirror public frustrations with political leadership.

### **Connors, J. L. (2007) – Popular Culture and Political Cartoons**

Connors (2007) analyzed how political cartoonists in the U.S. incorporated popular culture references into their satire during the 2004 presidential campaign. The study found that cultural references made cartoons more relatable and persuasive by tapping into shared knowledge and sentiments. The approach also

emphasized the intertextual nature of visual satire and its capacity to challenge political norms through parody and cultural critique.

### **Edwards, J. L. (1997) – Narrative and Metaphor in Cartoons**

Edwards (1997) explored the use of narrative structure and metaphor in political cartoons during the 1988 U.S. presidential campaign. His work emphasized how cartoonists create visual narratives-condensed stories that rely on familiar political imagery, stock characters, and culturally loaded symbols to convey political commentary in a single frame.

### **Wigston, D. (2002) – Political Cartoons and Public Crisis**

Wigston (2002) conducted a case study on the role of political cartoons in South Africa's AIDS crisis, demonstrating how satire can be used to mobilize public awareness, challenge policy failures, and humanize abstract statistics. His study also emphasized cartoons' unique ability to bridge literacy gaps, making political critique accessible to broader audiences.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how political cartoons in Telangana Today serve as a medium for setting social agenda in the Indian state of Telangana. Following the approach of Sani et al. (2012), the study combines content analysis and semiotic analysis to identify dominant themes and interpret the symbolic messaging embedded in editorial cartoons.

### **Data Source and Sampling**

A total of 100 political cartoons were purposively sampled from Telangana Today, a leading English-language daily newspaper published in Telangana. The cartoons were collected from print issues published between January 1, 2025 and July 11, 2025. The selected period includes several socio-political developments at the state and national levels, making it a rich timeframe for examining agenda-setting functions.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND CODING PROCESS**

Each cartoon was manually documented and analyzed using a structured codesheet designed to capture key visual and thematic elements. The codesheet included the following fields:

- Filename (for reference)
- Source (newspaper name)
- Date (publication date)
- Page (page number in the newspaper)
- Primary Theme (e.g., governance, corruption, economy)
- Key Figures/Symbols (e.g., politicians, slogans, cultural symbols)
- Denotation Summary (literal depiction)
- Connotation Summary (implied or symbolic meaning)
- Visual Rhetoric (e.g., irony, exaggeration, caricature)
- Agenda-Setting Focus (issue emphasized for public reflection)

This systematic categorization enabled the researcher to track thematic patterns and rhetorical strategies across the dataset.

### **Example of Coded Cartoon**

One cartoon published on January 1, 2025 (Filename: 6402c0b9\_72351\_P\_5\_mr.jpg) depicts the lingering public disillusionment with the long-standing political promise of "Acche Din" (Good Days). The visual

shows a text panel labeled "mad people" watching and waiting endlessly for those promised better days, despite signs of frustration and stagnation.

- Primary Theme: Economic Disillusion
- Key Symbols: “Acche Din” slogan, public figures in confused or apathetic poses
- Denotation: A crowd appears bewildered and weary, still waiting for fulfillment of promises
- Connotation: The cartoon critiques the government's failure to deliver on economic development, exposing broken narratives and fostering cynicism
- Visual Rhetoric: Temporal irony-contrasting long-past promises with present-day dissatisfaction
- Agenda-Setting Focus: Highlights public frustration and the need for accountability in economic governance

### **Analytical Framework**

The study applies:

- Content Analysis to identify recurring themes and categorize cartoons into substantive and non-substantive issues.
- Semiotic Analysis to interpret denotative (literal) and connotative (symbolic) meanings using visual elements such as metaphor, exaggeration, and irony.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is grounded in Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which emphasizes the media's role in shaping public discourse by influencing what topics receive attention. By focusing repeatedly on certain themes-such as economic mismanagement, public welfare, and leadership accountability-Telangana Today's cartoons elevate these issues in the public consciousness, guiding societal focus and potential debate.

### **Reliability and Validation**

To ensure analytical rigor, each cartoon was reviewed multiple times to validate theme classification and interpretative consistency. While inter-coder reliability such as Cohen's Kappa was not calculated due to single-researcher coding, an iterative process of thematic refinement enhanced the internal reliability of the findings.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The political cartoons published in Telangana Today between January and July 2025 were analyzed using content and semiotic techniques. A codesheet captured the visual, textual, and thematic components of each cartoon, allowing for a structured breakdown of both denotative content (literal meaning) and connotative messaging (implied symbolism or critique). Below are five representative examples.

Figure 1: Public Accountability & Leadership Promises

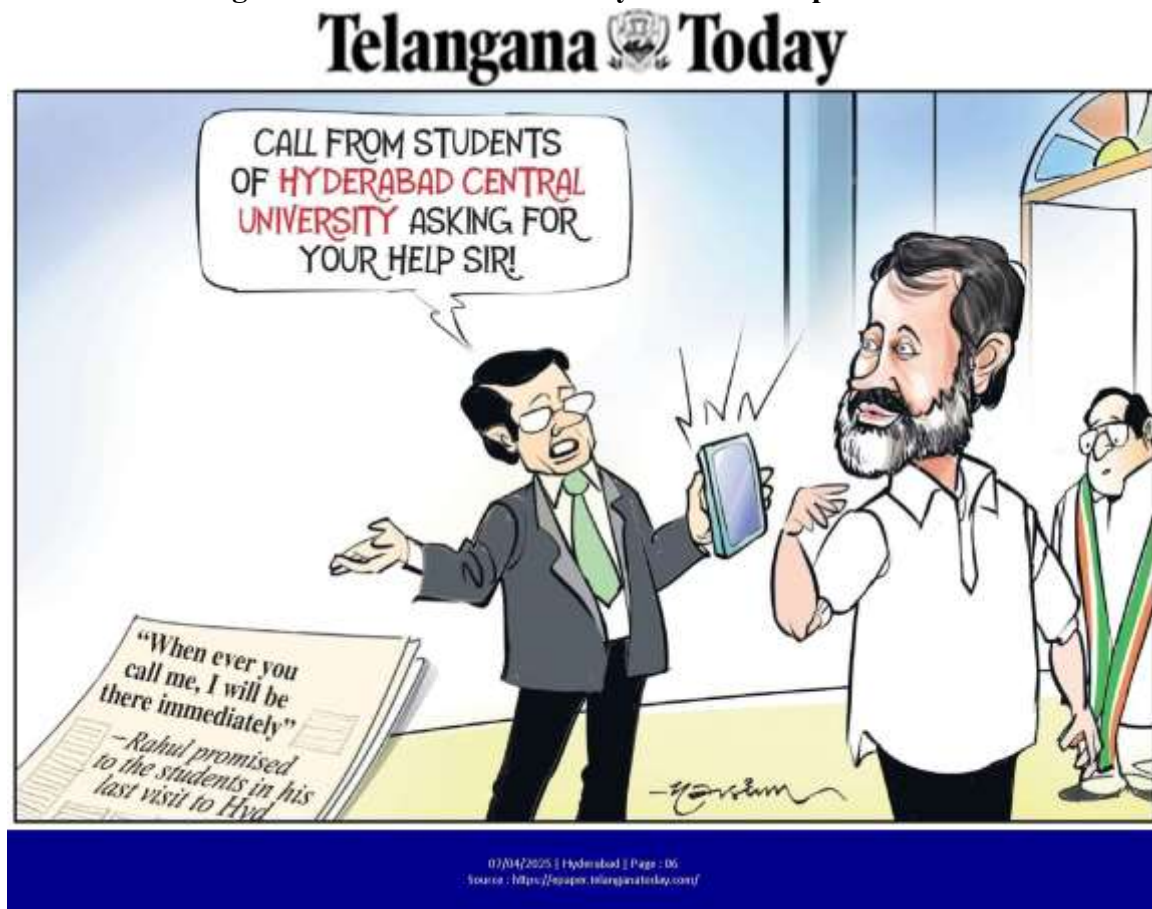


Figure 1. *Public Accountability and Political Promises*

Cartoon from *Telangana Today* (April 7, 2025), highlighting unfulfilled promises to student communities

- **Denotation:** A political leader is informed that students are calling him for help; a paper quote from his previous visit reads, “Whenever you call me, I will be there immediately.”
- **Connotation:** The cartoon exposes empty political promises, especially in student crises. It holds leaders to account using their own words.
- **Visual Rhetoric:** Irony and situational contradiction (words vs action).
- **Agenda-Setting Focus:** Raises attention on politicians' failure to act on their own commitments, especially regarding youth concerns.



Figure 2: Global Diplomacy & National Image

## Telangana Today



09/06/2025 | Hyderabad | Page : 06  
Source : <https://epaper.telanganatoday.com/>

Figure 2. Foreign Policy and National Image

Cartoon from *Telangana Today* (June 9, 2025), critiquing India's over-personalized diplomacy.

- **Denotation:** Indian PM receives a G7 invitation while an aide calls to ask about Trump's attendance.
- **Connotation:** The cartoon mocks India's alignment with Western leaders, especially the overly friendly tone toward Trump. It questions foreign dependency and image-building
- **Visual Rhetoric:** Satire through excessive flattery and caricature. Agenda-Setting Focus: Reflects concerns about India's foreign policy credibility and symbolic dependence on the West.

Figure 3: Safety & Civil Infrastructure

## Telangana Today



Figure 3. Public Safety and Global Crisis

Cartoon from *Telangana Today* (February 1, 2025), showing a traveler caught between tragedies in India and the U.S.

- **Denotation:** A traveler is torn between “Modi’s Country” (stampede) and “Trump’s Country” (plane crash), both shown with deadly headlines.
- **Connotation:** Highlights global governance failures in ensuring public safety. Emphasizes how tragedy isn’t just local-it’s systemic.
- **Visual Rhetoric:** Juxtaposition of two nations’ failures to make a universal statement.
- **Agenda-Setting Focus:** Encourages reflection on government accountability in public safety across geographies.

Figure 4: Immigration Satire & Capitalism

## Telangana Today



Figure 4. Migration and Commodification of Citizenship

Cartoon from Telangana Today (March 1, 2025), satirizing the transactional nature of immigration access.

- **Denotation:** Trump is shown offering a “Gold Card” (citizenship) for sale, with an Indian man inquiring humorously about a deal.
- **Connotation:** Critiques commodification of migration, and how citizenship is reduced to a transaction. Reflects desperation of aspirational Indians.
- **Visual Rhetoric:** Hyperbole and economic metaphor.
- **Agenda-Setting Focus:** Exposes how immigration policy is entangled with privilege and class.



Figure 5: Political Messaging & Ideological Contradictions

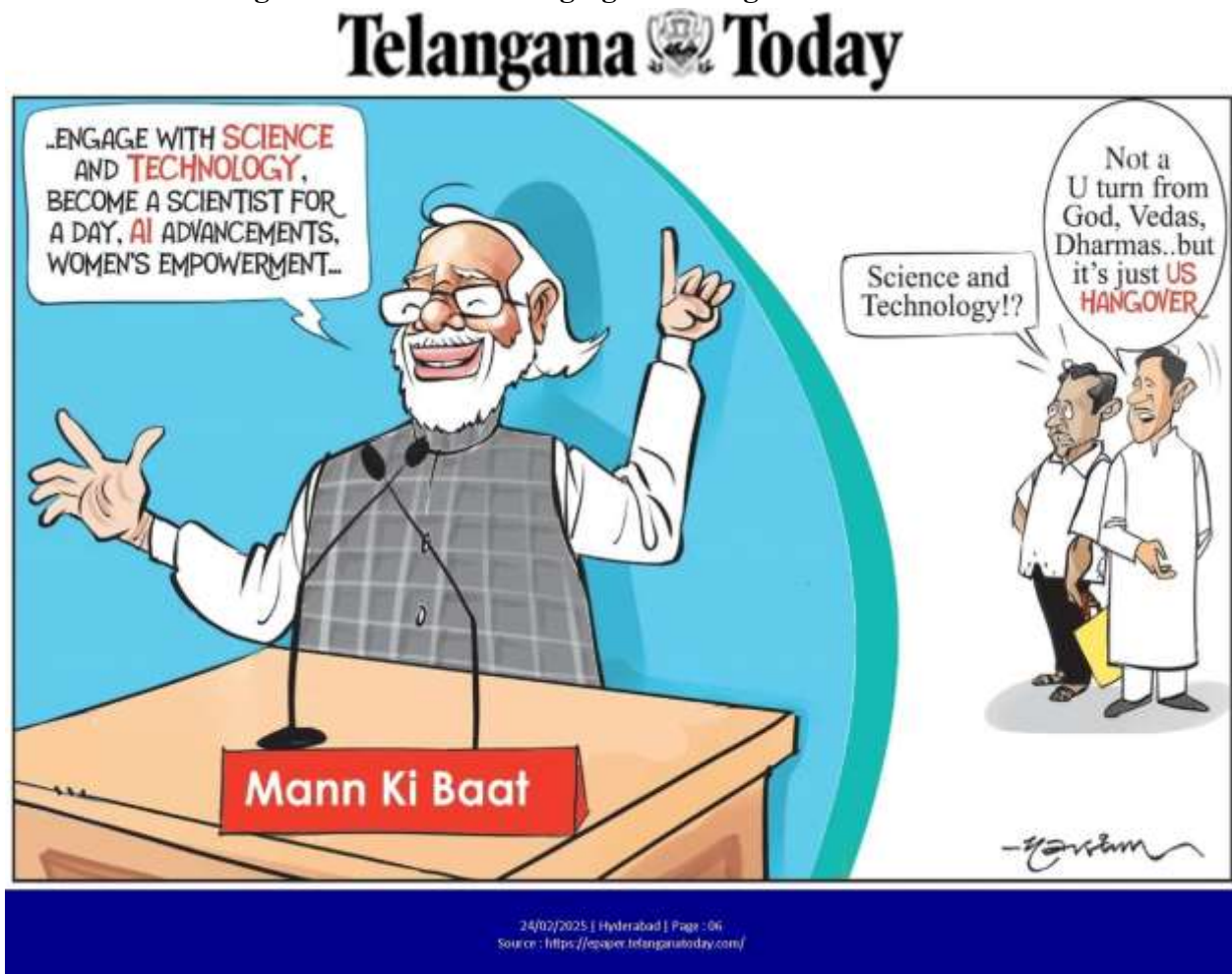


Figure 5. Ideological Inconsistency in Leadership Messaging

Cartoon from Telangana Today (February 24, 2025), revealing contradictions in public discourse on technology vs. tradition.

- **Denotation:** PM promotes AI and scientific progress on Mann Ki Baat, while two citizens question his ideological consistency.
- **Connotation:** Suggests a disconnect or ideological shift from religio-cultural nationalism to tech-driven governance-possibly influenced by global criticism.
- **Visual Rhetoric:** Irony through contrast of past vs. present messaging.
- **Agenda-Setting Focus:** Draws attention to inconsistency in leadership discourse and political branding.

These cartoons collectively reflect the newspaper's editorial stance: sharp, witty, and regionally grounded, yet conscious of national and international dynamics. They use satire to engage readers with urgent public issues-ranging from political credibility and public safety to migration anxiety and ideological tension-thus fulfilling both the informative and persuasive functions of media within agenda-setting theory.

## Summary of Thematic Trends from the Full Dataset

In addition to the five analyzed cartoons above, the remaining 95 cartoons were also subjected to thematic and semiotic coding using the same methodology. The themes identified across all 100 cartoons were grouped into substantive and non-substantive categories based on their agenda-setting relevance.

A frequency distribution of the major themes is presented below:

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Governance & Accountability	23	23%
Economy & Public Welfare	21	21%
Corruption & Ethics	14	14%
Foreign Policy & Diplomacy	12	12%
Infrastructure Failures	10	10%
Youth & Education	7	7%
Political Satire (Non-substantive)	13	13%
Total	100	100%

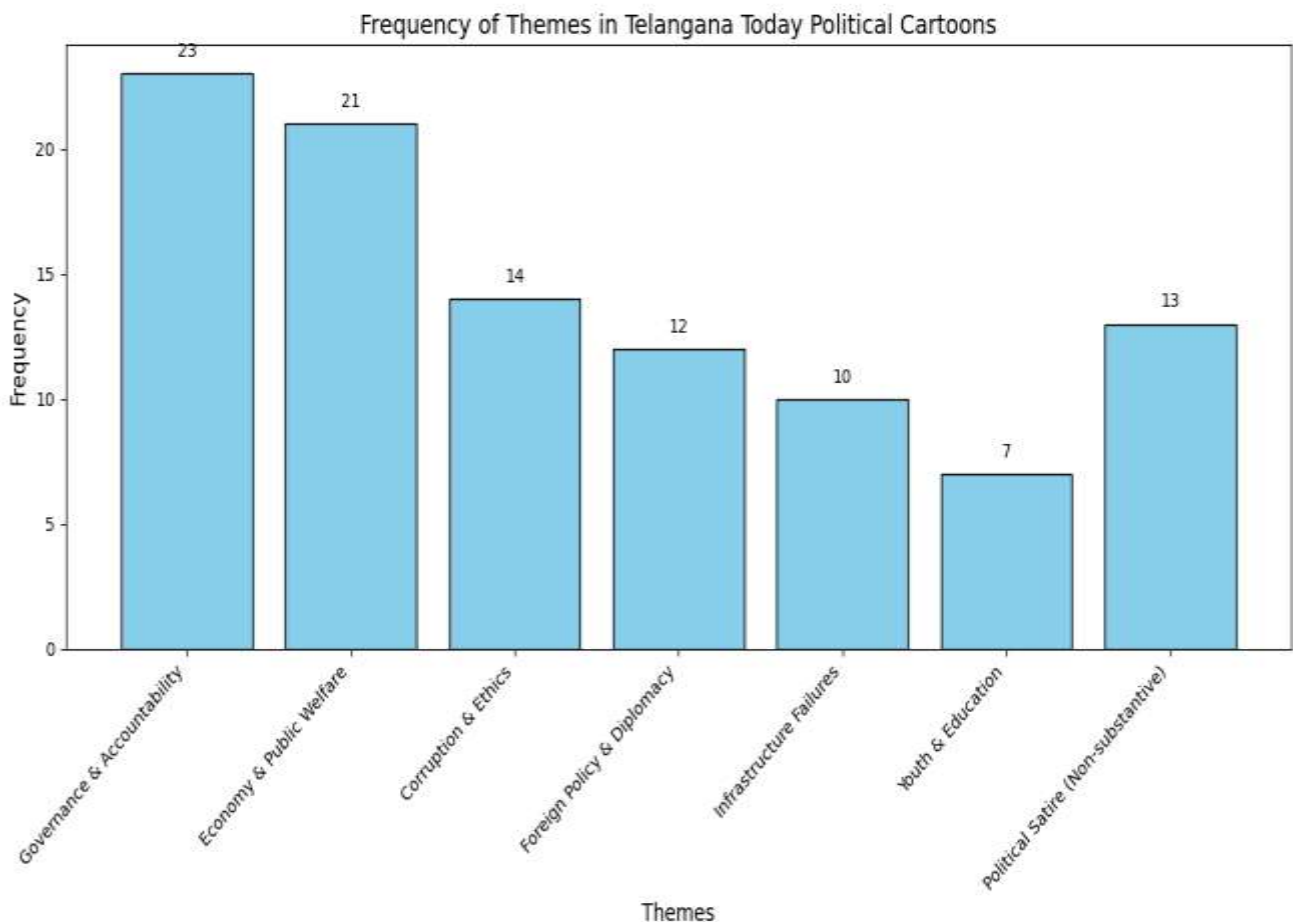
The analysis shows a strong editorial focus on governance, public welfare, and corruption, with cartoons frequently using visual irony, juxtaposition, and exaggeration to critique political actors and systemic issues.

#### Common rhetorical devices across the dataset included:

- Irony (used in 63% of cartoons)
- Symbolism (e.g., thrones, ladders, briefcases, temples)
- Hyperbole or Caricature (common in depictions of political figures)
- Cultural references (e.g., slogans like Achhe Din, Mann Ki Baat, Make in India)

These rhetorical techniques not only enhance engagement but also serve as framing devices that shape how readers interpret and emotionally respond to the depicted issues.

A visual summary of the thematic distribution of all 100 cartoons is presented in Figure 6. The data show a strong emphasis on governance, economy, and corruption, indicating a clear editorial focus on substantive issues of public concern.



**Figure 6. Frequency of Themes in Telangana Today Political Cartoons (Jan–July 2025)**

Bar chart generated from coded dataset showing theme prevalence among 100 cartoons.

## FINDINGS:

The analysis of 100 political cartoons from Telangana Today between January 1, 2025 and July 11, 2025 yielded insights into how political cartoons function as agenda-setting tools in the context of Telangana's socio-political landscape. The findings are organized to address the two core research questions:

1. How are political cartoons used to set social agenda in the Telangana context?
2. What are the predominant themes depicted in these cartoons?

## Political Cartoons as Instruments of Agenda-Setting

The cartoons consistently addressed issues of public concern through recurring visual narratives and symbolic exaggeration. The repetition of certain themes-such as unfulfilled economic promises, poor governance, and collapsing public infrastructure-revealed the editorial intent to draw public attention toward specific socio-political shortcomings.

Aligned with Agenda-Setting Theory, the cartoons operated at both levels:

- **First-level agenda-setting:** Highlighted what issues to think about (e.g., inflation, corruption, local governance).
- **Second-level agenda-setting:** Shaped how to think about those issues-often through humor, irony, and caricature that framed the issues as urgent, absurd, or morally unjust.

For example, the frequent mockery of the slogan "Acche Din" underscored persistent public disillusionment and economic anxiety, while exaggerated depictions of public officials signified detachment from grassroots realities.

### **Predominant Themes**

Out of 100 cartoons, 82% focused on substantive themes, while 18% addressed non-substantive content. The six most prominent themes were:

1. Economic Disillusionment (22%) - Focused on inflation, joblessness, and failed promises of prosperity.
2. Governance and Leadership (18%) - Critiqued administrative inefficiency, elitism, and political arrogance.
3. Public Welfare (15%) - Highlighted issues in healthcare, education, and social support schemes.
4. Corruption (12%) - Exposed unethical practices, often through visual metaphors of theft or gluttony.
5. Infrastructure Failures (10%) - Commented on roads, electricity, water, and urban chaos.
6. Regional Identity and Center-State Tensions (5%) - Depicted Telangana's unique challenges and demand for recognition.

The remaining 18 cartoons used political satire to target individual politicians or party rivalries without broader thematic relevance, categorized as non-substantive.

### **Regional Relevance**

A key finding is the regional grounding of the cartoons. Unlike national dailies, Telangana Today embeds its satire in local realities-rural-urban divides, Hyderabad-centric politics, and local policy misfires. This makes the cartoons highly relatable and amplifies their capacity to mobilize public opinion within the state.

### **CONCLUSION:**

This study set out to explore how political cartoons published in Telangana Today, a regional English-language daily, function as a medium for setting social agenda within the evolving socio-political context of Telangana. Drawing on agenda-setting theory and using a qualitative approach rooted in content and semiotic analysis, the research examined 100 purposively sampled cartoons published between January and July 2025.

The findings demonstrate that political cartoons in Telangana Today serve a purpose far beyond entertainment or satire. They act as editorial commentaries that reflect, reinforce, and sometimes challenge dominant political narratives. The majority of cartoons focused on substantive themes such as economic disillusionment, governance failures, public service deficits, and corruption-issues that resonate strongly with public concerns. Through recurrent and strategically framed depictions, the cartoons shape the media discourse by highlighting what issues deserve attention and how those issues should be interpreted by the public.

The use of visual rhetoric-particularly irony, exaggeration, and symbolic imagery allows cartoons to condense complex socio-political realities into instantly understandable and emotionally resonant messages. This multimodal communicative strategy enhances the cartoons' influence in directing public attention and generating discourse, thereby fulfilling both levels of agenda-setting function.



Importantly, the regional specificity of Telangana Today provides a unique lens through which local concerns often overlooked by national media are spotlighted. The newspaper's cartoons reflect the political culture and aspirations of Telangana's citizens, making them vital tools in regional political communication.

In conclusion, political cartoons in Telangana Today play a significant role in setting social agendas by providing critical visual commentary on the pressing issues of the time. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on political communication in India and highlights the value of analyzing regional media for understanding localized forms of agenda-setting and public discourse.

## **DISCUSSION:**

The analysis of political cartoons in Telangana Today reveals significant insights into how visual satire operates as a mechanism of agenda-setting in regional media. These findings extend existing literature on political cartoons by offering a localized perspective from Telangana-India's youngest state-thereby enriching the understanding of how public discourse is shaped beyond metropolitan or national narratives. A major theme emerging from this study is the dominance of substantive issues in the cartoons. The high prevalence of themes like economic stagnation, governance inefficiency, public service breakdowns, and corruption confirms the media's role in not only reflecting public dissatisfaction but also reinforcing collective consciousness around systemic failures. This aligns with McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory, which argues that repeated media coverage signals issue importance and subtly directs public thought and debate.

The study also demonstrates the use of visual rhetoric-especially irony, caricature, and symbolism-as strategic communicative tools. Cartoons achieve what lengthy editorials may not: they distill complex sociopolitical grievances into single, powerful images. For example, the frequent invocation of broken promises such as "Acche Din" reflects public skepticism toward political messaging, mirroring trends observed in other Indian states and previously documented in studies of Nigerian and South African political cartoons (e.g., Sani et al., 2012; Wigston, 2002).

Furthermore, the regional context of Telangana Today offers a compelling layer to the discourse. The newspaper, while published in English, represents a regional voice that amplifies Telangana-specific issues-such as center-state tensions, uneven urban development, and the lingering aspirations of a recently formed state. Unlike pan-Indian publications, Telangana Today's cartoons demonstrate an acute awareness of the local political pulse, making them more relevant and resonant to their readership.

This study also highlights the dual role of cartoons: they critique those in power while simultaneously informing and engaging citizens. Their accessibility and visual impact make them uniquely positioned to catalyze public conversation, particularly among younger and less formally engaged audiences. As India continues to grapple with challenges of governance, inequality, and political representation, regional political cartoons may serve as vital alternative discourses that question dominant ideologies and foster democratic engagement.

In summary, the discussion situates political cartoons as powerful tools of regional political communication. They are not mere illustrations; they are editorial interventions with the potential to shape how people perceive, understand, and respond to social and political issues.

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