

## FRAMING NATIONAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES THROUGH A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF LETTERS TO THE EDITOR FROM PUNJAB

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### ABSTRACT

*This study looks at how citizens of Punjab articulate and frame issues of nation and society in a second signature of the national public sphere: Letters to the editor published in regional newspapers. The research employs Entman's framing theory to which Iyengar's specificity of episodic or thematic frames is applied, and qualitative thematic analysis was used on 75 letters published from January to December 2024 in both The Tribune and Hindustan Times Papers (Punjab Edition). Five major themes emerged: The issues dealt with are those of governance and corruption, agricultural crisis, youth and migration, communal harmony and nationalism and civic infrastructure. The results suggest the dominance of thematic framing, when citizens engage more systematically and are able to identify system failures, to blame actors at the level of institution and to highlight possible solutions. However, differences among these categories of gender, age and rural-urban revealed the diversity of the public voice within a single province. Further, the contribution of the study to journalism and media studies is on the civic use of reader generated content as a mode of participatory discourse. It urges newsrooms to get past tokenism and meaningfully address concerns expressed in letters to the editor. Future studies based on this research should also examine regional media discourse across Indian states and seek to also include reader comments on digital news sites to further understand the growth of a new kind of public engagement.*

### INTRODUCTION

A cornerstone of democratic societies is public discourse, in which citizens can express their concerns, set agendas, and take part in policy debates (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Letters to the editor are among the most enduring and accessible forms of public engagement on a number of different platforms, and provide insight into the way the grassroots see the issues and the national ones at hand. (Hoffman & Slater, 2007) These are more than just individual grievances in these letters. Further, they are a participatory medium within the media ecosystem that forms a dialogic loop between the public and institutional power structures (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001).

The dynamics of civic engagement, public opinion formation and media framing are all

present in letters to the editor. Many forums for deliberative expression, in which communities voice opinions about contemporary issues and communicate the way that they feel about and envision what should happen (Massaro & Stryker, 2012). Content can show what it is that people think should be a problem, who should be held responsible and what their values are, which in turn affects the editorial practices and responsiveness of democracy.

However, there has been minimal attention to how reader generated content in local media frames national and social issues at a regional level. Probably more so in the Indian context, the public voice from socio-political diverse provinces, such as Punjab, remain academically underexplored.

**Research Objective:** This study seeks to identify recurring themes and framing strategies used by the public in letters to the editor published in Punjab-based newspapers.

**Research Question:** How are national and social issues framed and discussed by the public through letters to the editor?

This paper proceeds by reviewing relevant literature, outlining the methodological approach (thematic coding), presenting core findings from a sample of letters, and concluding with theoretical and practical implications for journalism studies.

### Literature Review

**Framing Theory and Media Studies:** This study is framed under the theoretical lens of framing theory presented by Entman (1993) to give us a path in understanding how issues are presented, interpreted, and are understood by media and individuals respectively. Entman (1993) considers that framing is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text,” and thereby, influence the perception of the public on a topic as well as the discussion held. In particular, letters to the editor are especially relevant because they deal with meaning making processes when everyday people blame, propose solutions, define values for their society.

One of the key applications of framing is the distinction between thematic and episodic frames. Thematic frames concentrate on systemic issues and pervasive patterns on the societal level-Iyengar (1991), whereas episodic frames revolve around a single case or event - Iyengar (1991). Letters to the editor are a reader generated text where both forms may coexist but thematic frames are more beneficial in understanding public consensus on long term national and social issues (Bhalla, O’Boyle, & Haun, 2019). As a result, thematic analysis is the appropriate method for this research.

Furthermore, framing is complemented by agenda setting theory, which argues that the media does not merely define treatments of a topic but also defines what is considered a topic (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the case of letters columns, for example, audiences not only respond to the media agenda but seek to set it.

**Letters to the Editor as Data:** Letters to the editor are a hybrid discourse—engaging modes of public and private opinion, the one operating within the realm of public media platforms, the other inhabiting letters in print format. Written by concerned citizens, they involve issues as varied as corruption and governance, health, education and foreign policy. Therefore, scholars have long contended that they serve to illustrate how people think about, as well as communicate socio-political realities (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001; Vasudevan, 2017). Voluntary, unscripted, and rich for thematic and discourse analysis.

In Pakistan (Hussain, 2024), the US (Gutsche & Pinto, 2024), these letters have been studied as more than feedback into their communities, but as attempts to shape their communities’ discourse, contribute to democracy, and claim visibility. Indian research on the reader feedback of this sort has often been anecdotal or editorial in nature but a few studies on media representations of issues such as 2014 elections (Vasudevan, 2017) and the problem of Delhi’s increasing air pollution (Bhalla et al., 2019) have shown that letters can reinforce or upset the mainstream narratives.

**Regional Focus Punjab:** The first field for the study of regional public discourse is Punjab, a northern Indian state with a unique socio-political landscape. In the last decade, it had experienced massive grassroots activism, as witnessed during the farmers’ protest of 2020–2021 that became a nationwide movement (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2024). Issues of chronic unemployment, youth migration, agrarian distress and drug abuse come in vogue in the state, rendering it an apt context to understand how citizens contextualize issues that are local and national at the same time.

Significantly, narratives from Punjab’s letters to the editor may carry cultural and linguistic nuances which may appear different than the ones appearing in national dailies. But Punjab’s role in constituting national debates about federalism, agriculture, and dissent has never been systematically studied from a regional dimension.

**Identified Gap:** While existing studies have engaged with framing in mainstream media and public policy coverage (Entman, 1993; Gutsche & Pinto, 2024), few have focused on how

regional populations articulate concerns through participatory formats like letters to the editor. Particularly missing is a focus on Punjab's public sphere, where such letters could provide a lens into both grievances and aspirations.

This study seeks to fill this gap by applying thematic analysis to reader-generated texts in Punjab-based newspapers, thereby advancing both media studies and regional discourse analysis.

### Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research design to investigate the ways national and social problems are conveyed through letters to the editor by the reader in Punjab. The methodology is structured to ensure transparency, validity and replicability through rigorous sampling, thematic analysis, and ethical research.

**Data Source:** Letters to the editor to two major English language newspaper readers in Punjab with a strong readership base are the primary source of data for this study. So, it saw publication in the Tribune (Chandigarh Edition) and Hindustan Times (Punjab Regional Editions). Selection of these publications is based on their fixation to publish reader letters, relevancy of the region they publish from, and influence in Punjabi's social politician landscape (Kumar, 2018).

Data collection time scale falls between January 1, 2024 to December 31, 2024, thus giving a year's insight to public engagement. I focused on letters that were published in the "Letters to the Editor" sections of the newspaper. The criteria for selection were letters that addressed matters pertaining to the region, the nation, or society (governance, public health, education, migration, agriculture).

### Sampling Technique

I used a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that different themes, and regions were represented. Variety was screened across issues, demographic representation (if names and locations were identifiable), and newspaper source in letters. If so, temporally, variation in public discourse was captured using stratification by month where necessary.

The final set of dataset was 75 letters in total. On the basis of the canonical multiple unit progression of inductive coding, the sample size in this study is sufficient to conduct depth in qualitative analysis and thematic saturation for studies using reader generated data (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007;). Bhalla et al., 2019).

**Analytical Framework:** The research employed thematic analysis, guided by the widely cited six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The phases include:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Each letter was read multiple times for deep immersion. Coding was conducted manually, using Microsoft Excel to organize excerpts and tags. Manual coding allowed for iterative reflexivity and contextual sensitivity, which is especially important when analyzing culturally embedded texts (Nowell et al., 2017).

**Ethical Considerations:** As the letters are already aired and published in the mainstream newspapers, this research does not come under any human subjects research that requires a consent form. However, ethical considerations were observed where; names and places were removed and concerns to do with interpretation were observed. In this regard, the study adheres to ethical research norms in media and communication research (Wiles et al., 2008).

### Findings

This section reports the researcher's non-subjective analysis of 75 letters to the editor that appeared in The Tribune and Hindustan Times, Punjab edition only for the period between January and December 24. Concerning the division by themes, it is based on the concept of frequency analysis as well as manual coding of representative problems. In each case, citations of the main themes are paraphrased and repeated literally, with basic demographics provided where visible

**Table 1: Thematic Overview of Letters (N = 75)**

Theme	No. of Letters	Dominant Contributors	Salient Issues
Governance and Corruption	16	Urban, older men	Bureaucratic apathy, bribery, red tape
Agricultural Crisis	15	Rural, farmers (middle-aged)	Farmer suicides, MSP, drought aid
Youth and Migration	14	Youth (18–30), students	Joblessness, exam fraud, visa exodus
Communal Harmony & Nationalism	13	Mixed (urban/rural)	Secularism, polarization, patriotic duty
Civic Infrastructure	17	Women, urban families	Schools, sanitation, hospitals, roads

### Theme 1: Governance and Corruption

This theme revealed consistent frustration with government inefficiency and institutional opacity. Letters from **urban contributors**, especially retired professionals, frequently highlighted how bureaucratic delays and corruption obstruct basic services.

“Even getting a domicile certificate takes three visits unless you know ‘someone,’” noted a letter from a 62-year-old in Mohali (The Tribune, July 2024).

Another contributor from Ludhiana wrote:

“We talk of digital India, but try lodging a complaint in the local office and you’ll be told to come back with a bribe.” (Hindustan Times Punjab Edition, March 2024)

The tone was often weary and disappointed, with occasional demands for stronger anti-corruption cells.

### Theme 2: Agricultural Crisis

Letters from rural regions—especially Malwa and parts of Doaba—addressed persistent agrarian distress. Farmers and local leaders expressed alarm over increasing debts and decreasing trust in state promises.

“We lost three young men to suicide in our village this year. The CM’s office sent condolences, but no compensation,” stated a farmer from Bathinda (The Tribune, November 2024).

Concerns were also raised over MSP irregularities and irrigation crises, particularly in drought-prone belts.

“For the government, the ‘annadata’ seems expendable,” wrote a 55-year-old farmer from Fazilka.

### Theme 3: Youth and Migration

Youth voices were notably distinct. Letters from students in Amritsar, Patiala, and Jalandhar spoke of frustration with local education systems and dreams of emigrating.

“We are trained to memorize, not innovate. No wonder Canada seems like salvation,” wrote a 21-year-old student from Amritsar (HT Punjab, April 2024).

Other letters mentioned rigged recruitment exams and the high costs of securing study visas.

“It’s a tragedy that the most ambitious leave while the helpless stay,” lamented a college professor from Ludhiana.

Younger contributors framed migration as strategic survival, while older writers expressed concern over cultural erosion and family breakdowns.

### Theme 4: Communal Harmony and Nationalism

This theme included letters promoting religious tolerance, as well as a few that reflected veiled communal anxieties. Many stressed the importance of keeping politics out of religion.

“We are Punjabis first—Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims all included,” emphasized a resident of Hoshiarpur (The Tribune, August 2024).

In contrast, one letter questioned the loyalty of “some groups,” illustrating how nationalism can be double-edged.

“National duty must override religious identity,” stated a schoolteacher from Pathankot.

Urban writers tended to emphasize constitutional secularism, while some rural voices emphasized cultural unity through patriotic lenses.

### Theme 5: Civic Infrastructure

The most common theme, civic infrastructure letters, came primarily from women and middle-class households in urban or peri-urban settings. Concerns focused on hospital overcrowding, school sanitation, road quality, and delayed municipal projects.

“Our government school has toilets but no water. What message are we sending to girl students?” asked a mother from Nawanshahr (HT Punjab, September 2024).

Others critiqued the apathy of local municipal bodies:

“Garbage heaps near hospitals are a disgrace to any smart city claim,” stated a senior citizen from Patiala.

Several letters demanded audits, stricter urban planning, and elected local bodies’ empowerment.

### Discussion

Thematic findings show that letters to the editor in Punjab provide not only a channel for expressing public sentiment but also for creating collective meaning because most are framed thematically. Most of the analyzed letters were structured narratives linking individual grievances to system failures similar to Iyengar’s (1991) concept of thematic framing. Unlike episodic frames, these letters frame these issues as ongoing institutional and policy level concerns, unlike the incidents to which episodic frames refer to.

### Thematic Framing Dominance

For all five themes, letter writers framed their observations using thematic frames. For example, it moved beyond isolated misconduct to discuss systematic bureaucratic culture. Likewise, the agricultural crisis was not viewed as an anomaly in the weather, but as a reflection of lack of state attention and policy gaps (frames of problem definition and causal interpretation, Entman, 1993).

### Diagnostic and Motivational Frames

Structural causes of problems were consistently cited by public contributors who, along with Entman’s treatment recommendation function also provide solutions. Suggestion and empowerment of decentralization and local governance were letters on civic infrastructure.

On the agricultural front, calls for the legalisation of MSP and mental health assistance for farmers in India show diagnostic and motivational framing respectively which are the “what” and “how”.

### Variations in Voice and Perspective

The framing varied with age, gender, and geography. Although youth contributors also framed migration through rational and practical lenses, they seemed to have primarily interpreted migration in motivational senses, conceptualizing emigration as a rational, survival oriented choice. On the other hand, older writers relied on moral evaluations, and often used nostalgic or cultural terms. Gender analysis found that female writers tend to write about civic infrastructure issues as extensions of family care—reducing broken toilets or clinics to safety and dignity. The rural voices expressed concern of tangible survival (e.g water, subsidy) while the urban voices highlighted concern of efficiency, governance, transparency, which illustrated the positional framing diversity, even within the same region.

### Implications for Media and Policy

This corpus of letters indicates the growth of a participatory media culture, in which readers try to determine how to participate in public discourse despite impediments by those in power who want to censor or use these letters. Letters as noted by Wahl Jorgensen (2007), are much more than mere reactions; they are acts of democratic expression. Taken together, these letters make a case for the grassroots engagement with policy framing, while sometimes offering more contextual nuance in framing than in corresponding editorial narratives in the Punjab context.

To the contrary, the public can relate micro issues back to macro policy debates suggesting that civic literacy is further developed in this respect, and is a key civic resource to help journalists and policymakers.

### Conclusion & Implications

This study focused on 75 letters to the editor published in major Punjab based newspapers between 2024 to find how citizens articulate and frame national as well as social issues. Five dominant themes emerged: The opinions were concerning governance and corruption, agricultural crisis, youth and migration,



communal harmony and nationalism and civic infrastructure. Within these categories, themes of systemic and structural explanations were highlighted above the isolation of an incident. They identified root causes, assigned accountability, and sometimes recommended something to be done.

The study illustrates how framing theory by Entman (1993) and the dichotomy of thematic vs. episodic framing by Iyengar (1991) present an example of how the grassroots discourse provides a richer, more contextually embedded narrative construction as compared with the traditional editorial commentary. As a result, letters to the editor are a microcosm of the civic agency and public deliberation which capture how lay citizens comprehend, criticize, and attempt to influence public policy and governance.

The results provide important contributions to the field of journalism and media studies. Readers are not passive consumers but active co-creators of discourse as they accept Wahl-Jorgensen's (2007) assertion. In a democracy, such as India, where local and regional voices such as those from Punjab get short shrift in big media, this kind of reader engagement becomes even more important.

Practically speaking, these findings illustrate how newsrooms can get more out of their study of letters to the editor. It also serves to facilitate inclusive agenda setting while, by doing so, aligns editorial with audience concerns. Additionally, if surfaced effectively, regional frames, such as on the topics of agriculture, or youth migration, can affect and eventually reshape national narratives.

### Recommendations

1. Editorial Inclusion and Participatory Framing: A means to institutionalise including reader generated discourse systematically as part of the editorial decision making process should be adopted by media organisations instead of only limiting to the symbolic use of reader letters as filler content. This can be achieved through:

- 1) Regular published letters thematic audits, In addition, they have dedicated editorial segments that respond to or engage with recurring reader concerns.
- 2) Editorial forums in public (physical or virtual) in which editors speak directly to readers. Such practices would not only strengthen democratic engagement, but would also aid the

localization of national debates, strengthening journalism's responsiveness, its grounding in, and its inclusion of local contexts. Training editors to be able to spot the ways of framing employed by readers both regionally (e.g. Punjab) and individually would result in sourcing bottom up narratives into top down media structures.

2. This leads to expanding the Scope of Future Research.

But future research needs to broaden geographically and technologically to fully understand the brain of public discourse. Studies across Indian states (that is Punjab vs. Kerala vs. Uttar Pradesh) can potentially explore such framing differences that are linked to the local language and culture and the economic priorities. Moreover, the scope of data should include not only printed letters, but also:

- 1) Comments on newspaper websites that are accessible digitally,
- 2) A social media thread tagged to regional issues,
- 3) User-generated petitions and public forums.

This would enable scholars to study the continuum of the citizen's production of meaning—from formal letters to spontaneous digital forms of interaction—which is the manner in which audiences are ever more producing public debate across a range of platforms.

3. Public Voice in Academic and Editorial Revaluation: This research confirms that reader generated content is no peripheral part of public opinion infrastructure. It should be studied academically with rigor and editorially with rigor. Such content must be seen as both data rich and theory relevant, and as culturally significant, in order to be treated as Journalism studies. In turn, editorial policies should understand these letters as acts of civic reasoning, moral voice, and framing that contribute to the overall health of a deliberative democracy.

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