



RESEARCH PAPER

Religious Minorities in Pakistan: A Thematic Analysis of the Editorial Coverage of the Lynching of a Sri Lankan Citizen in Sialkot

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ABSTRACT

The killing of a Sri Lankan activist Mr. Priyantha Kumara in Pakistan on charges of blasphemy became another burning issue in a series of similar incidents in Pakistan. A non-Muslim being killed for blasphemy in Pakistan is not unusual news. National and international media have reported various incidents in the recent past. This study is an attempt to find and analyze the main themes of the editorial content of the selected Pakistani and Sri Lankan newspapers regarding the lynching of Mr. Priyantha Kumara. We have employed thematic analysis as a theoretical and methodological framework to explore and comparatively analyze the editorial themes regarding the murder of Mr. Kumara. Our findings show that Pakistan's leading newspaper The Express Tribune and Sri Lanka's leading newspaper Daily Mirror both portrayed the incident as a heinous crime against humanity without fanning the flames of 'religious extremism'. Both the dailies described the perpetrators as irrational, barbaric and inhumane.

Keywords: Blasphemy, Priyantha Kumara, Religious Minorities, Sialkot Incident, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

The problem of extremism is getting worse with each passing day. It has adverse effects that significantly affect people's lives. There are many examples that illustrate how extremist ideologies have turned into real-life tragedies. Mass murder of students in America, racial and religious violence in European countries, attack on mosque in Christchurch, Australia, riots in Pakistan and India, misuse of blasphemy laws and genocide of Rohingya Muslims etc. to name a few. Various governments around the globe have been trying to tackle this problem and reduce extremism, but unfortunately, there has been no significant success (Musa, Usama, & Uppal, 2022).

In this article, we will specifically discuss the extrajudicial killing of Mr. Priyantha Kumara, a Sri Lankan citizen residing in Pakistan, over the allegations of blasphemy. In Pakistan, blasphemy has often been used as a pretext for torture or extrajudicial punishment. In 2020, 80 people were awaiting execution for blasphemy. But often, cases of alleged blasphemy are settled out of court through targeted attacks and mob violence. Even mere accusations of blasphemy have been known to incite mob violence (Brody, 2021). Over the past ten years, Pakistan has seen an increase in blasphemy-related protests and acts of violence. Supporters of the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) have repeatedly taken to the streets, pressuring the government to make concessions and leave the area (Gautam, 2022).

In Pakistan, accusations of blasphemy can result in serious violence, including in some cases the lynching of the accused by angry mobs, whether the charges are proven or not (Fazl-e-Haider, 2023). In most cases it has been seen that personal problems have turned into communal rage as people try to take the law and matters into their own hands. They are

not derived from a thorough fact-based examination and analysis of the circumstances surrounding the blasphemy in relation to the legal process. The killers usually claim that the victims are "wajib al-qatal", a term roughly translated as "worthy of being killed", because they have committed an unforgivable religious transgression (CRSS, 2021). Another incident of blasphemy occurred on 3 December 2021, when a man named Mr. Priyantha Kumara was brutally killed by a mob in Sialkot, Pakistan. They then dragged his body through the streets and burned it mercilessly. All this was done on the basis of mere blasphemy allegations without any evidence (Fazl-e-Haider, 2023).

The controversy began when rumors surfaced that Mr. Priyantha Kumara, who had worked as a factory manager in Sialkot for seven years, had removed a poster containing verses from the Holy Quran. By early afternoon, a mob gathered at the factory gates, stormed the building, and captured Mr. Kumara. As a result of this incident, the First Investigation Report (FIR) was registered against 900 people (*The Guardian*, 2021 December 03). TLP, a far-right group, was suspected to be behind the incident. In a video posted on social media, the alleged attackers could be seen shouting TLP slogans (Musa, Usama, & Uppal, 2022). An anti-terrorism court in Pakistan sentenced six people to death for killing the Sri Lankan factory manager (Gul, 2022). As the public prosecutor said, the anti-terrorism court in Lahore also sentenced nine people to life imprisonment, one to five years and 72 to two years. Eight of those convicted were minors (*Al Jazeera*, 2022 April 18).

After this horrific incident, there was an outpouring of sympathy from people inside and outside Pakistan. A people-to-people gathering was organized with the sole purpose of collecting donations and donations for the victim's family. Similarly, media around the globe in general and from Pakistan and Sri Lanka in particular took the incident seriously. The press in both the countries reported and opined on the incident quite vigorously. This study is an attempt to find and analyze the main themes of the editorial content of the selected Pakistani and Sri Lankan newspapers regarding the lynching of Mr. Priyantha Kumara.

Literature Review

Pakistan is a multicultural society in which Muslims are the majority. Due to this there is a diversity of language, religion and race. Since the creation of Pakistan, religious minorities have been recognized because the white color in the flag has given them a distinct identity. (Ambreen, 2014). Rahman (2021) has analyzed various reports and studies, which have revealed that religious minorities are not treated well, and that there is an evidence of hostility and prejudice against them over time. The existing literature since 2011 on the issue has been analyzed and the research findings have revealed that religious minorities face a lack of basic amenities and are insecure about their existence in society. . The author said that as far as state policies are concerned, the government has failed to give them basic rights (Din & Jacob, 2019). Facilities like 'education, religious freedom and security' have been lacking. Laws such as blasphemy laws are not providing protection, instead leading to 'extrajudicial killings' and discrimination by authorities (Rahman, 2021; Din & Jacob, 2019; Ambreen, 2014).

Rahman (2021) further argues that there is also prejudice and discrimination against religious minorities in the education system, where teachers have this practice that extends to students (Hussain et al., 2011). In madrasahs, males are more biased against minorities, while female madrasahs are less biased, but it is present in mindset (Hussain et al., 2011). Pakistani media's treatment of religious minorities is also problematic because minorities are underrepresented in the mainstream media. In English newspapers, however, they are fairly represented and more positive (Ambreen, 2014). In a comparative study of the Pakistani and Indian press, Batool (2018) studied that Hindus are underrepresented in the Pakistani media, while Muslims are portrayed negatively in the Indian press. Many issues regarding minorities are ignored in the media.

There is research evidence that claims that because the spread of information is less checked/verified through social media platforms, these platforms promote 'religious hatred' and discrimination against religious minorities. This has also played an important role, which led to religious intolerance. Social media has also been used as a 'weapon' by mainstream media platforms and individual hate mongers. On the other hand, there is evidence that social media has also been used by minorities as a platform to voice and address their issues and challenges. One argument is that youths were depressed because of discrimination against minorities because they suffer from lack of freedom of expression (Anthony & Hussain, 2018; Tanveer, 2016).

Fuchs and Fuchs (2020) have attempted to answer questions related to citizenship, identity and belonging caste and political representation of religious minorities in Pakistan. They have tried to explore discourses and researches from different fields of research including sociological, political, and anthropological perspectives regarding finding the answers of questions related to minorities in Pakistan. Mostly the case studies presented in their research are from Punjab and Sindh and rightly so because these two provinces are considered as the most vulnerable places for minorities in Pakistan. The researchers started out by assuming that religious minorities have many overlapping identities and we can see these identities are constantly created, molded, redefined, and displayed in public by different members of the state and society. Arguing about the notion of dual discrimination against Christians on the basis of religion and caste the authors argue that their findings are the evidence that the daily life of Christians in Pakistan full of discriminations regarding the employment opportunities and kinship ties.

All these research studies with latest findings are the evidence that the representation, portrayal and coverage of religious minorities in the press is a worth studying problem. Additionally, the cases like killing of Mr. Priyantha Kumara make it more pertinent to study how various media outlets cover, opine and produce themes on them. Given the significance of the issue and its coverage in both the relevant press outlets, this research endeavor is an attempt to explore and analyze the predominant themes produced by the *Daily Mirror*, a Sri Lankan renowned newspaper, and by daily *The Express Tribune*, a renowned Pakistani newspaper, in the aftermath of the killing of Mr. Priyantha Kumara, a Sri Lankan citizen in Pakistan.

Material and Methods

Thematic analysis is a method and process of interpreting qualitative research and making an analysis of what the collected data is trying to conclude. Thematic analysis is a way to find efficient outcomes from any qualitative data. This form of analysis helps in making the data systematic by classifying and adding themes (patterns), which helps make the analysis easy and establish a relation between the data set. There are four situations where this model of analysis is applied; data interpretation, inducting or deducting data sets, analyzing two data, and coding or categorizing data into themes. From this, we learn the importance of thematic analysis as well as where it is used in research (Alhojailan, 2012).

There are three main steps through which the data reduction process is done. In the first step of the process the data is collected and after the collection of data, it is further tabulated to bring direction and accuracy to the data to indicate main themes making it easier to review the data for the researcher. In the second step of the data reduction process the fundamental descriptions are marked that are relating to the research objectives of the researcher in the thematic analysis process. The third stage involves the further reduction and breaking the data sets into smaller groups for clarity and understanding of the researcher to focus clearly on their main objective of study. This process is a very time consuming process and very lengthy as it requires a lot of extensive work for breaking the data into smaller sets and categorizing the data and oftentimes the biases of the researchers comes into play while analyzing the data and thus it is a difficult process to imply in research (Alhojailan, 2012).

Herzog et al. (2019) have enlisted and proposed various steps to be followed for an efficient thematic analysis. The first step is to become acquainted with your data. Here, the researcher should dissect a data set from the data corpus, read the complete data set, and interact with it by actively looking for meaning patterns. Phase 2 produces coding categories. The process of coding designates segments of data that are crucial to answering the research topic (s). Finding out what qualifies as a theme is the third step of a research project. When rereading data samples, the researcher constructs themes and subthemes using these criteria. In the fourth stage, dubbed "reviewing themes," tentative ideas are refined into definitive overarching notions. In this phase, you may rearrange coded data extracts, merge two primary themes, change the name of a theme, or even eliminate a theme altogether. Phase 5 involves defining each theme's essence. Theme names should be vivid, short, memorable, snappy, and instructive. Writing is the focus of Stage 6, i.e. "Producing the Report." Any data extracts, such as interview quotes, that particularly stand out as illustrative of a theme that arose during analysis should be included in the final report.

In qualitative research, TA is used as an interpretive strategy. One of its merits is that it is relatively simple to understand, and another is that it can be applied in a variety of different ways. If a researcher is able to perfect this method, they will be equipped with fundamental skills that may be applied to a wide variety of other types of qualitative research. A sound TA necessitates having knowledge both fundamental and specific about the data gathering, the data analysis, and the reasoning behind it.

Keeping in view the scope, suitability and appropriateness of the TA as a theoretical and as a methodological framework with the research objectives of this study we have employed TA inductively to explore and analyze the predominant themes produced by the *Daily Mirror*, a Sri Lankan renowned newspaper, and by daily *The Express Tribune*, a renowned Pakistani newspaper, in the aftermath of the killing of Mr. Priyantha Kumara, a Sri Lankan citizen in Pakistan.

Data Collection and Sampling

We have selected the *Daily Mirror* as a Sri Lankan press representative and daily *The Express Tribune* from the Pakistani press because of their distinguishing characteristics in their respective countries. Editorials/op-eds appeared in both these newspapers in the aftermath of the killing of Mr. Priyantha Kumara i.e. during December 03, 2021 to December 12, 2021 (first ten days after the incident took place) were collected. The data was collected from the reliable database LexisNexis by employing key words including; killing of Priyantha Kumara, Priyantha Kumara, Lynching of Sri Lankan Citizen, Sialkot Incident, and Blasphemy.

A total of 07 editorials/op-eds were found from the selected dailies during these ten days i.e. 03 from the *Daily Mirror* and 04 from daily *The Express Tribune* regarding the Lynching of the Sri Lankan Citizen. After employing census sampling the data was sorted out and then initially published two editorials were selected as sample from each newspaper. Hence, the sample size under study is 04 editorials/op-eds.

Keeping in view the research objectives and the research question the researchers have identified recurring codes in the forms of words, phrases, verbs, adjectives and sentences to determine predominant themes regarding the killing of Mr. Kumara. The frequent codes in the editorial contents of both the newspapers related to the murder have helped the researchers to identify the predominant themes which is the ultimate research question of this study.

Results and Discussion

Analysis on the *Daily Mirror*

First editorial published on December 04, 2021 by the *Daily Mirror* among the sample selected from this newspaper was entitled "At least 800 booked under ATA over killing Sri Lankan manager in Pakistan". Keeping in view the objectives and research question of the study, this 542 words editorial contained following key words considered as 'codes' for the sake of analysis; prime suspect, booked, mob tortured, Sri Lankan man, murder, dragged his body, allegations of blasphemy, provocateurs, deceased, condemned the killing, grave crime, Sialkot incident, "tarnished the image of Pakistan and Islam", "violent state of affairs", violence, shell-shocked, disgusted, brutally lynched, sickening incident, denounced, "horrific, shameful, extra-judicial vigilantism", vigilante attack, gut-wrenching incident, gruesome video, victim, body set ablaze, burning corpse, and grisly incident.

All these words, phrases, verbs and adjectives have been considered as 'codes' that create an overall theme about the incident within the editorial contents of the newspaper. All these codes imply that the incident has been covered as an 'inhumane', 'brutal', 'unlawful' and 'painful' for the humanity and 'harmful for the image of Pakistan and Islam'. However, the newspaper did not employ any loaded words and codes to construct some stereotypical themes about Islam, Muslims and Pakistan. Rather, the newspaper highlighted the incident as "sickening incident outraged the nation". The *daily Mirror* opined that "...the nation (Pakistani nation) was shell-shocked and disgusted...". Similarly, the newspaper quoted a renowned religious scholar from Pakistan Mufti Taqi Usmani saying that the incident was 'condemnable', "blasphemy was a "grave crime" but the evidence to prove the blasphemy charges must be beyond doubt".

Therefore, keeping in view these explicit codes within the editorial contents it can be claimed that the *Daily Mirror* in this editorial has condemned the incident and has produced predominant themes regarding the murder such as; 'inhumane', 'brutal', 'unlawful' and 'painful' for the humanity and 'harmful for the image of Pakistan and Islam'.

"Religious extremism: Beyond and Before Sialkot" is the second editorial regarding the killing of Mr. Priyantha Kumara published on December 08, 2021 by the *Daily Mirror* among the sample selected from this newspaper. Keeping in view the objectives of the study and the research question, the 1209-word editorial included the following key words which were considered as 'codes' for the purpose of analysis; denunciations, hate speech, brutal torture, "fundamental Islamic radicalism", gruesome act, "douse the flames of religious hatred", heinous act, moderate Muslims, dastardly act, unrestrained few, "religious extremism", "never-ending spiral of religious hatred and violence seem to grip our societies quite regularly", blood thirsty act, lynching mob, Sialkot incident, unruly factory workers, torturing, burning the body, religious oppression, religious freedom, vigilantes, and sheer brutality etc.

All these words, phrases, adjectives and adverbs considered as 'codes' imply that the newspaper has produced themes regarding the killing of Mr. Kumara such as; brutal killing, inhumane act, gruesome act, 'unlawful' and 'painful' for the humanity and 'harmful for the image of Pakistan and Islam'. However, in this editorial the *Daily Mirror* has also produced themes such as religious oppression, intolerance, religious extremism, and religious fanaticism etc. while talking about and opining on the role of Pakistani state, politicians and the constitution in dealing with religious extremism. Although the newspaper did not single out Pakistan while highlighting religious intolerance and 'use of religion for the political gains'. For instance, the newspaper opined;

From the Crusades to inquisition in Mediaeval Europe, from Fatwa and honour killings in Pakistan or the Middle East, to acts of violence in Digana or Aluthgama in Sri Lanka, a never-ending spiral of religious hatred and violence seem to grip our societies quite regularly (Daily Mirror, 2021, December 08).

Nonetheless, the focus of the newspaper has been critical towards religious intolerance and 'use of religion for the political gains' in Pakistan. For instance, the newspaper opined "...all acts of such intolerance is the fact that they do not occur in isolation". *Daily Mirror* highlighted the constitution of Pakistan as 'tacit condoning of religious fanaticism' as;

It happens in a country which is notorious for religious extremism not only in terms of mob activity, but in terms of a state apparatus as well as a constitutional structure that promotes religious exclusiveness and oppression. The Constitution of Pakistan provides for death penalty for acts of blasphemy, whatever in might mean, for those who engage in acts of "imputation, insinuation or innuendo" against Prophet Mohammad (Daily Mirror, 2021, December 08).

The newspaper further criticized the then PM of Pakistan Mr. Imran Khan for using religion for his political gains in words such as; "it should not be forgotten that Imran Khan has benefitted from extreme and fundamental Islamic sentiment in Pakistan in getting elected". However, in later part of the editorial the newspaper applauded his efforts to cope with the 'religious extremism' at the expense 'electoral implications';

"But to his credit, he has shown his willingness to take on the extremist elements of the populace despite the electoral implications that might prove to be detrimental to his re-election prospects" (Daily Mirror, 2021, December 08).

Despite this vocal and explicit criticism on Pakistan, its politicians and constitution, in creation of themes such as 'religious oppression', 'intolerance', 'religious extremism', and 'religious fanaticism', *Daily Mirror* did not single out Pakistan as state "condoning of religious fanaticism" but also included Sri Lanka and India in this criticism as;

Pakistan is not alone in this predicament as India as well as Sri Lanka fall in to the same category of state and political patronage of religious and racial extremism and bigotry, which is very lucrative political and electoral currency (Daily Mirror, 2021, December 08).

Keeping in view this detailed, minute and careful thematic analysis of the contents of this editorial, we can conclude that the *Daily Mirror* has produced predominant themes such as; 'inhumane', 'brutal', 'unlawful' and 'painful' for the humanity and 'harmful for the image of Pakistan and Islam'. Along with that, more subtly, the dominant themes produced by the newspaper for the incident are; 'religious oppression', 'intolerance', 'religious extremism', and 'religious fanaticism'. And, the newspaper has produced themes for Pakistan as a 'fragile secular state' which is "condoning the religious fanaticism" and wherein politicians 'use religion for their political gains'.

Analysis on daily *The Express Tribune*

First editorial published on December 06, 2021 by daily *The Express Tribune* among the sample selected from this newspaper was entitled "We are ashamed". Keeping in view the objectives and research question of the study, this 360-word editorial contained following key words considered as 'codes' for the sake of analysis; shame, brutal act, condemnable, disgusting crime, "blot on the conscience of humanity", "great disservice to Pakistan", "un-Islamic in essence", lynched, radicalism, intolerance, ignorance, "extra-judicial vigilantism", "failure of civil society", barbarism, "utter lawlessness", vandalism, extremist tendencies, savagery, "collapse of moralism", and "site of annihilation" etc.

All these words, phrases, verbs and adjectives are treated as 'codes' which form an overall theme about the event in the editorial content of the newspaper. All these codes indicate that the event is coded as 'inhumane', 'brutal', 'unlawful' and 'painful' for the humanity and 'harmful for the image of Pakistan and Islam'. Daily *The Express Tribune* has criticized administration in words such as; "there are serious lapses and deficiencies in our

retribution system and the capability of the administration to thwart such incidents". In the similar way, the editorial contains criticism on over society in the words such as;

It is utter lawlessness, coupled with vandalism, and exhibits the level to which the society has stooped. It goes without saying that such extremist tendencies run contrary to cogent pursuit of peaceful co-existence, thereby undermining the evolution of a society on the lines of compassion and emancipation (The Express Tribune, 2021, December 06).

The newspaper's condemnation of the incident comes in the words wherein the killing has been criticized with reference to the teaching of Islam and Holy Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) as;

This is, indeed, a negation of the teachings of Islam and the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). This is savagery and confirms the decay of the role of peer leaders and a lawful society (The Express Tribune, 2021, December 06).

The newspaper's criticism on the state of Pakistan is continued in words such as; "Kumara, unfortunately, may not be the last in the list of people who have met such a fate. This tendency might continue if the state doesn't put its foot down" (The Express Tribune, 2021, December 06). In the end of the editorial *The Express Tribune* suggests a stern option to deal with such 'barbaric' incidents in words such as; "In order for us to dwell like a normal moderate country among the comity of nations, the state must establish its writ – whatever it takes".

Therefore, keeping in mind these clear 'codes' in the editorial contents, it can be claimed that daily *The Express Tribune* in this editorial has condemned the incident and presented predominant themes regarding the murder, such as; 'inhuman', 'brutal', 'illegal' and 'humiliating' to humanity and 'harmful to the image of Pakistan and Islam'.

"Clouds of evil" is the second editorial regarding the killing of Mr. Priyantha Kumara published on December 07, 2021 by daily *The Express Tribune* among the sample selected from this newspaper. Keeping in view the objectives of the study and the research question, the 734-word editorial included the following key words which were considered as 'codes' for the purpose of analysis; infectious ideas, endless abyss, calloused hearts, evil, morally culpable, moral injury, capitulation, irrevocable condition, "recurring winds of evil", and "moral abdication" etc. All these words, phrases, adjectives and adverbs considered as 'codes' imply that the newspaper has produced themes regarding the killing of Mr. Kumara such as; brutal killing, inhumane act, gruesome act, 'unlawful' and 'painful' for the humanity and 'harmful for the image of Pakistan and Islam'.

Similarly, the editorial contents contain 'codes' that suggest critical stance of the newspaper towards the society and the state of Pakistan. Such codes are explicit in words such as; "They are indeed like us — flawed and misguided — but their brokenness and the concomitant spinelessness of our state is now dismembering our souls". The newspaper creates a divide between the perpetrators of the 'heinous crime' and the rest of society as; "Karbala calls. Let us not be Kufa". The editorials analogically and symbolically employs 'Karbala' as a place of victimhood and 'Kufa' as a place of 'indifferent' people. And, the newspapers warns the society against such crimes against humanity in words such as; "if we do not look depravity in its eyes, we relinquish a fragment of our souls".

So, drawing on the explicit 'codes' in the editorial contents, it can be claimed that daily *The Express Tribune* in this editorial has condemned the incident and produced predominant themes regarding the murder, such as; 'inhuman', 'brutal', 'illegal' and 'humiliating' to humanity and 'harmful to the image of Pakistan and Islam'.

Conclusion

This research endeavor is set out to explore and analyze the predominant themes produced by the *Daily Mirror*, a Sri Lankan newspaper, and by daily *The Express Tribune*, a Pakistani newspaper, in the aftermath of the killing of Mr. Priyantha Kumara, a Sri Lankan citizen in Pakistan, on blasphemy allegations. Drawing on the thematic analysis as theoretical and methodological framework we have analyzed editorials from both the newspapers. Two editorials/op-eds from each newspaper that appeared on the opinion pages immediately after the murder of Mr. Kumara have been analyzed.

A careful and detailed analysis of the selected sample revealed that the *Daily Mirror* condemned the incident in its editorial content and presented important themes regarding the murder such as; 'Inhuman', 'brutal', 'illegal' and 'hurtful to humanity' and 'harmful to the image of Pakistan and Islam'. Also, more subtly, the dominant themes developed by the newspaper for the event are; 'Religious oppression', 'intolerance', 'religious extremism', and 'religious fanaticism'. And, the paper made headlines for Pakistan as a 'fragile secular state' that is 'prone to religious fanaticism' and in which politicians 'use religion for their political advantage'.

On the other hand, keeping in mind the explicit 'codes' in the editorial content of daily *The Express Tribune*, it can be claimed that daily *The Express Tribune* has also condemned the incident in its editorial content and produced important themes regarding the murder, such as; 'Inhuman', 'brutal', 'illegal' and 'humiliating' to humanity and 'harmful to the image of Pakistan and Islam'. However, the codes used by *The Express Tribune* and the codes it subsequently developed around Mr. Kumara's murder are less binary and stereotypical than those developed by the *Daily Mirror*.

Our findings are consistent with findings from the reviewed literature on religious minorities in Pakistan. As the literature reviewed shows, portraying religious minorities in Pakistan is problematic. That is, they are underrepresented, their issues are highlighted less frequently and less strongly, and that religious issues in Pakistan and the misuse of certain laws addressing religious minorities are not adequately debated. Our findings also show that while the *Daily Mirror* pointed to 'religious extremism' and 'misuse of blasphemy' by political parties and the less educated, *The Express Tribune* did not highlight the same issues

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