



Research Paper

The Role of Humour in Cultural Narratives: A Case Study of the Paite Comic *Zokhankhual*

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the role of humor in cultural narratives through an analysis of a Paite comic that has been in circulation since 1983. The comic, which portrays the history and societal conditions of the Paite people, is characterized by its use of conversational Paite language, satire, and social criticism. The central figure, *Zokhankhual*, whose name translates to 'a person determined for the welfare of the Zo,' symbolizes the resilience and communal spirit of the Paite people. By employing humour, the comic not only entertains but also critiques social norms and highlights cultural values. This paper explores how humour serves as a vehicle for cultural expression and resistance, providing insights into the collective identity and social dynamics of the Paite community. Through a close reading of selected episodes, the study reveals the intricate ways in which humour is woven into the fabric of the narrative, offering a nuanced understanding of its significance in Paite culture. The findings suggest that humour in this context is a powerful tool for both reflecting and shaping societal attitudes, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared identity among the Paite people. This research contributes to broader discussions on the interplay between humour and cultural narratives, underscoring the importance of examining indigenous forms of expression in understanding cultural resilience and transformation.

KEYWORDS: Paite Comic, *Zokhankhual*, Humour, Cultural Narratives, Satire

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I. INTRODUCTION

The power of humour in cultural narratives lies in its ability to critique, entertain, and reflect societal norms in a manner that is accessible and engaging. This article examines the role of humour in the Paite comic, a significant cultural artifact in the northeastern region of India. Circulating since 1982, this comic not only entertains but also provides critical social commentary on the Paite community's history and societal conditions. Central to this narrative is the hero *Zokhankhual*, whose name translates to "a person determined for the welfare of the Zo," reflecting his role as a champion of the hill people. The *Zokhankhual* comic has roughly 250-300 volumes which was first published in 1982 and lasted till 2015. It was during the 1980s that there were developments of "Zomi consciousness" among the Paite. Even though Zomi which translates to "people of the hill" where "mi" stands for "people", it was not exclusive to the Paite community but includes linguistically, and ethnically related people. The comic has been produced on the wake of such consciousness of the society. The comic was published monthly and later on at a few months interval since the author being the only one working on the illustrations and the dialogues himself. At the initial stage of its production, there were few readers. Even though it gained popularity and increase in the number of readerships in the community, the comic still could not reach every nook and corner of the community. This means that not everyone in the community is familiar with the comic. The comic has faced some difficulties in the marketing department as well since there were not many who bought the original copies of the books but rather it was bought by just a handful of people who then shared and passed it around among friends and families. In spite of such problems the comics continued and lasted well over three decades.

II. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Paite History and Societal Context

The Paite people are an indigenous community residing primarily in the northeastern states of India, particularly in Manipur and Mizoram. They are dominant in Lamka Town of Churachandpur in the state of Manipur. Their population size is estimated to be 70 thousand plus while 50 thousand plus (Census of India 2011)

are concentrated in Churachandpur. Their history is rich with stories of resilience, adaptation, and cultural pride. The community has traditionally relied on oral storytelling, folk songs, and dances to preserve their history and pass it on to future generations. However, with the advent of written forms of expression, comics have emerged as a popular medium for storytelling.

The Paite comic, which began circulating in 1982, captures the essence of Paite life, intertwining historical events with everyday experiences. It uses conversational Paite language, making it relatable to its readers. This comic has become an important cultural touchstone, reflecting the values, struggles, and aspirations of the Paite people.

2.2 Role of Comics in Paite Society

Comics have a unique place in Paite society, serving as both entertainment and education. They bridge the gap between traditional oral narratives and modern written forms, providing a visual and textual representation of cultural stories. The Paite comic, in particular, has been instrumental in preserving the language and stories of the community, while also addressing contemporary social issues through humour and satire.

III. SATIRE AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE COMIC

3.1 Examples of Satirical Elements

Satire is the use of humour, irony, exaggeration or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues. According to Leonard Feignberg "Satire is such an amorphous genre that no two scholars define it in the same words. The term "satire" is derived from Latin *Satura*, which means "a mixture of food". Samuel Johnson defined satire as "a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured". It is clear that satires often employ arguments and are intended to persuade either their readers or even the target of their criticism.

The *Zokhankhual* is rich with satirical elements that critique various aspects of Paite society. One notable example is its portrayal of political figures and bureaucrats. These characters are often depicted in exaggerated, humorous ways, highlighting their flaws and incompetencies. This satire serves as a form of social commentary, subtly encouraging readers to question authority and reflect on the state of governance.

The comic reflects how leadership is perceived from both societal and group perspectives. The character *Zokhankhual* embodies the virtues and qualities that an ideal leader should possess. Through *Zokhankhual*, the comic showcases attributes such as integrity, empathy, and a strong sense of duty towards the community. In one of the comic's volumes and issues from 2015, a period marked by significant turmoil in the tribal districts of Manipur, these leadership qualities were particularly emphasised. This was a time when the tribals in Manipur, especially in the tribal districts, faced widespread unrest due to the perceived failures of their leaders. The populace believed that their leaders had abandoned them, leaving them feeling helpless and disenfranchised.

The comic took this real-world issue and created a powerful satire about the ineffectual leaders who could not or would not help their people. Instead of providing support and guidance, these leaders were depicted as abandoning their responsibilities. This critique was especially pointed given the context of the Manipur Land Reform Act, which had caused considerable dissatisfaction and unrest among the tribal population. The Act was seen as a direct threat to their traditional land rights and autonomy, exacerbating the sense of betrayal and abandonment. By highlighting these issues through satire, the *Zokhankhual* comic not only entertained its readers but also provoked critical thinking and dialogue about leadership and governance. It encouraged the Paite people to reflect on the qualities they valued in their leaders and to demand better representation and accountability from those in power.

3.2 Social Criticism Through Humour

Humour in the Paite comic is not merely for entertainment; it is a tool for social criticism. The comic uses humour to address serious issues such as corruption, gender inequality, and social injustice. For instance, episodes featuring corrupt officials are laden with witty dialogues and humorous situations that expose the absurdity and immorality of corruption. This approach allows readers to engage with these issues without feeling overwhelmed by their gravity. Sometimes the main characters themselves become or represent the corrupt leaders and the injustices faced by the society. This created a sense of relatability and the readers can easily grasp such incidences from a point of view that they might not have considered before.

Another example is the depiction of social customs and traditions. The comic humorously critiques outdated practices and superstitions, advocating for progressive change while respecting cultural heritage. By using humour, the comic makes these critiques more palatable and thought-provoking. In essence, the Paite comic is more than just a source of entertainment; it is a cultural artifact that captures the spirit of the people and their way of life. Through its clever use of satire and humour, it offers a mirror to society, reflecting both its strengths and flaws, and inspiring change through laughter and reflection. The characters' journeys, filled with wit and

wisdom, continue to inspire and entertain, making the comic an invaluable part of Paite literature and cultural expression.

3.3 Analysis of Characters in Zokhankhual

There are four main characters in the comic whose names are Zokhankhual, Aristokap, Gekpu, and Thuammuih. These four characters each depict the different eccentric people we see in a society. The character of Zokhankhual who is usually referred to by others as Khual or Ukhual is the hero and leader of the group. He decides on serious matters and takes the final decision. He is often depicted as the one possessing leadership quality and is admired by his friends. Aristokap is someone who is closest to Zokhankhual. He is someone who looks into things realistically and someone who is rational among the group. Although he sometimes quarrels with Gekpu and has his differences with the others, he still is a loyal friend among the group. Gekpu is usually the butt of jokes and often comes in as a comic relief whenever the group encounters serious circumstances. He is the oldest among the group but not the wisest nor the most confident. Thuammuih is a retired serviceman (Ex-serviceman) who would not stop bragging about his glory days in the army. He would often start his conversation with his experiences in the army which sometimes are not the most admirable ones but to his perspective he is the most experienced as he is the only one among his friends who goes outside of his hometown to work in different parts of the country. This reminiscing and storytelling is not always appreciated by the group.

The comic brings out their characters as relatable in such a way that they go through the same hardships and circumstances as a normal person would go through in a society. Some of the characters show us some new perspectives and humorous ways in dealing with such circumstances. This blend of humour and satire not only entertains but also subtly educates the readers about the societal norms and issues prevalent in Paite society. The comic's ability to balance light-hearted comedy with poignant social commentary makes it an effective medium for reflection and change. By laughing at the exaggerated flaws and antics of characters like Gekpu and Thuammuih, readers are invited to consider their own society's imperfections and the need for progress, all while enjoying a good story.

3.4 Humorous Traits

The characters in the comic are characters rich in humour and wit. The name *Zokhankhual*, meaning "a person determined for the welfare of the Zo," positions the characters as guardians of the community. However, Zokhankhual the protagonist is not portrayed as a flawless hero; rather, his humorous traits make him relatable and endearing. He often finds himself in comical situations, using his quick wit and cleverness to navigate challenges. His humour is a means of connecting with the audience, making his character's actions and messages more impactful.

Zokhankhual symbolizes the ideal Paite citizen – brave, intelligent, and committed to the welfare of his people. His character embodies the community's values and aspirations, while also serving as a vehicle for satire. Through his actions and experiences, the comic critiques societal flaws and encourages readers to aspire to higher ideals. Zokhankhual's humorous encounters with various societal elements serve as a mirror, reflecting both the strengths and weaknesses of the Paite community.

IV. CONVERSATIONAL PAITE LANGUAGE

The use of conversational Paite language is a defining feature of the comic, adding authenticity and relatability to its narratives. This linguistic choice ensures that the comic resonates deeply with its readers, as it mirrors their everyday speech and expressions. The humour is often rooted in the nuances of the Paite language, with wordplay, idioms, and cultural references that enhance the comedic effect. This use of language not only entertains but also preserves and promotes the Paite language, which is crucial for maintaining cultural identity.

Furthermore, the comic frequently incorporates borrowed words from English and Hindi, demonstrating the society's global interconnectedness. This linguistic blend showcases the Paite community's adaptation and integration into a broader cultural context. There are notable instances where popular Hindi serials from the 2000s are mentioned like *Kasauti Zindagi Ki* and *KumKum* as one of the most popular ones, with characters like Anurag, Perna, and Komolika becoming household names. These references indicate how deeply these shows have permeated daily life and conversations within the Paite community, reflecting their engagement with national entertainment trends and cultural phenomena.

The comic cleverly uses these references not just to highlight cultural assimilation but also to critique societal behaviors. For example, it satirizes the obsession some housewives have with these serials, illustrating how their addiction to the drama and intrigue of television can lead to the neglect of their household responsibilities. This portrayal serves as a humorous yet pointed commentary on how media consumption can influence personal and family dynamics, sometimes to the detriment of traditional roles and duties.

By incorporating these elements, the comic underscores the dual nature of cultural influences: while they connect the Paite people to a larger national and global narrative, they also bring new challenges and criticisms.

This nuanced depiction helps readers understand the complex interplay between global trends and local traditions, and how these influences shape, and sometimes disrupt, everyday life in Paite society. Through its satirical lens, *Zokhankhual* invites readers to reflect on these cultural dynamics and consider their impact on their own lives and communities.

V. CONCLUSION

The Paite comic stands as a testament to the power of humour in cultural narratives. Through its use of satire, social criticism, and authentic language, it provides a compelling and entertaining reflection of Paite society. The character of Zokhankhual, with his humorous traits and symbolic significance, embodies the community's values and aspirations. This comic not only entertains but also educates, critiques, and preserves the cultural heritage of the Paite people. As a cultural artifact, it highlights the importance of humour in addressing societal issues and fostering a sense of identity and community.

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