Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (TOJQI)
Volume 11, Issue 02, June 2020: 1053-1068
DOI: https://doi.org/10.67145/w3tzrs35

The Visual Construction of 'Developmental Truths' in Electoral Politics: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Indian Election Posters, 2014–2019

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Abstract:

This article examines how visual communication in Indian electoral politics constructed, legitimised, and contested "developmental truths" between 2014 and 2019. Drawing on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and engaging foundational communication theories Walter Lippmann's "pictures in our heads," Harold Lasswell's propaganda model, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, and Roland Barthes's visual semiotics the study analyses election posters and banners as sites where political actors manufactured consent around competing development narratives. The corpus comprises 40 publicly documented campaign materials from the 2014 and 2019 general elections, selected to capture the transition from a "change" election to a "continuity" election. The analysis reveals that development was visually constructed through three convergent metafunctions: representation (infrastructure as completed achievement, labour erased), interaction (the leader's direct gaze and low-angle elevation positioning the viewer as grateful beneficiary), and composition (the leader as the most salient element, beneficiaries at the margins). The study finds that the 2014–2019 period witnessed a consolidation of leader-centred visuality, with the Prime Minister's pictorial presence in party manifestos rising from 7 appearances in 2014 to 43 in 2019, indexing a broader shift from party-centred to leader-centred developmental truth. Opposition counter-visuals contested the content of developmental claims foregrounding delay, neglect, and incompletion but reproduced the incumbent's representational grammar, thereby narrowing the space of democratic debate. The study contributes to development communication, visual politics, and political science by demonstrating that the visual construction of developmental truths is a central mechanism through which political power operates in electoral democracies.

Keywords:

. Visual communication,
. development communication,
. political communication,
. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis,
. Indian elections 2014–2019,
. developmental truths,
. propaganda,
. visual rhetoric

INTRODUCTION:
1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The 2014 Indian general election marked a watershed moment in the visual culture of Indian politics. As Willnat, Verghese, and Mammadov observe, the election was "characterized by a significant shift in campaign style due to the emergence of television and social media as campaign tools," with political posters and billboards playing an "important role" in the construction of political images and symbols. This shift was not merely technological; it was semiotic. The 2014 campaign witnessed the consolidation of a visual regime in which development long a keyword of Indian electoral discourse became increasingly equated with infrastructure, leadership, and measurable achievement.

Between 2014 and 2019, this regime intensified. The 2019 election, as Tripathy argues, was characterised by outdoor campaign materials "loaded with development metaphors," functioning as "a treasure trove of developmental meaning-making" rather than as the "prehistory of election campaigning". The period from 2014 to 2019 thus offers a uniquely coherent case for examining how developmental truths are visually constructed: it captures the initial articulation of a new visual grammar (2014) and its consolidation and intensification (2019).

Development, as a concept, carries immense symbolic weight in Indian politics, representing aspirations for prosperity, modernity, and collective progress. However, development is not a neutral, objective reality; it is a contested discursive construct whose meaning is actively shaped through communication practices (Escobar, 1995). When political actors visualise development in election campaigns, they are not merely depicting existing conditions but actively constructing "developmental truths" particular understandings of what development means, who deserves it, and how it should be achieved.

1.2 THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the proliferation of visual political communication in Indian elections, scholarly attention to how visuals construct development narratives remains limited. Existing research has primarily focused on textual analysis of political speeches and manifestos, or on the content of posters without systematic attention to their multimodal semiotic structure. Willnat et al. provide a valuable qualitative analysis of 2014 posters, focusing on the "use of political images and symbols", while Tripathy offers a content analysis of 2019 outdoor materials and their "ways of establishing developmental truths". What remains underdeveloped is a systematic MCDA that spans the 2014–2019 period, tracing how the semiotic strategies of the "change" election were consolidated in the "continuity" election.

This gap is significant because the 2014–2019 period represents a critical juncture in the visual construction of developmental truths in India. Understanding how this construction operated through which representational, interactive, and compositional choices is essential for comprehending the broader processes through which political power operates in electoral democracies.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How did election posters and banners visually construct "developmental truths" in the 2014 and 2019 Indian general elections?
2. What multimodal semiotic resources were deployed to legitimise particular development narratives, and how did these resources shift between 2014 and 2019?
3. How did opposition counter-visuals contest incumbent developmental claims, and what were the limits of this contestation?

4. What role do foundational communication theories play in explaining the persuasive efficacy of development imagery in this period?

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research contributes to multiple scholarly domains. For development communication, it extends the field's analytical repertoire by introducing MCDA as a framework for examining the visual politics of development. For political science, it addresses the "visual turn" in political communication research, demonstrating how visual analysis can illuminate previously obscured dimensions of electoral politics. For visual communication studies, it provides empirical grounding for theoretical claims about the ideological function of images in political contexts. Practically, the study offers insights for civil society, journalists, and citizens seeking to critically engage with political visual communication.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 FOUNDATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORIES IN POLITICAL CONTEXT

2.1.1 WALTER LIPPMANN AND THE "PICTURES IN OUR HEADS"

Lippmann's (1922) concept of the "pseudo-environment" provides a foundational framework for understanding how visual communication shapes political reality. Election posters function precisely as generators of "pictures in our heads," offering simplified, emotionally resonant representations of complex developmental realities. When a 2014 BJP poster depicted a gleaming highway or a 2019 hoarding showcased a completed housing project, it created a mental image of development that might bear little resemblance to the complex, often incomplete reality on the ground. Lippmann's concept of the "stereotype" a simplified, standardised mental picture illuminates how visual political communication relies on familiar symbols to evoke predetermined responses.

2.1.2 HAROLD LASSWELL AND THE PROPAGANDA MODEL

Lasswell's (1927) definition of propaganda as "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" is particularly apt for analysing election posters. The 2014–2019 period witnessed a systematic "manipulation of significant symbols" infrastructure, prosperity, leadership to manage collective attitudes toward development. Lasswell's communication model "Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?" provides a heuristic for structuring analysis: Who produced this visual (BJP, Congress)? What developmental message does it convey? Through which visual channel (poster, banner, hoarding)? To whom is it addressed? With what intended effect?

2.1.3 STUART HALL AND ENCODING/DECODING

Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model provides a framework for understanding the relationship between visual texts and audiences. Political actors encode posters with preferred meanings about development that the incumbent is the sole guarantor of prosperity, that development requires strong leadership, that the opposition is an obstacle to progress. However, voters may decode these messages differently based on their social positions and prior experiences. The analytical challenge is to identify the preferred meanings encoded in visual texts while acknowledging the possibility of negotiated and oppositional readings. This is particularly pertinent in the 2014–2019 period, when competing developmental narratives the "change" narrative of 2014 and the "continuity" narrative of 2019 offered different preferred readings to an electorate whose lived experiences of development were uneven and contested.

2.1.4 ROLAND BARTHES AND VISUAL SEMIOTICS

Barthes's (1977) concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth provide indispensable tools for analysing visual political communication. At the denotative level, a 2014 poster might show a politician cutting a ribbon at a factory opening. At the connotative level, this image evokes associations of progress, leadership, and national advancement. At the level of myth, the image naturalises a particular developmental paradigm perhaps that industrialisation equates to development, or that individual political leadership is the engine of progress making these assumptions appear inevitable rather than contestable.

2.2 MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

MCDA integrates Critical Discourse Analysis with social semiotics to analyse how meaning is constructed through multiple semiotic modes (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), MCDA examines how representational, interactive, and compositional meanings interact to produce ideological effects. For the 2014–2019 period, MCDA enables examination of how visual choices legitimised particular developmental paradigms the 2014 "change" narrative of decisive leadership and infrastructure-led growth, and the 2019 "continuity" narrative of completed projects and national resurgence while marginalising alternatives.

2.3 DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Development communication has evolved from modernisation theory to participatory and critical approaches (Servaes, 2008). However, the field has engaged less extensively with the political dimensions of visual communication in electoral contexts. This study addresses this gap by bringing development communication into dialogue with visual political communication research, examining how development is not merely "communicated" but actively constructed through visual practices embedded in power relations. Drawing on Escobar's (1995) critique of development discourse and Ferguson's (1994) analysis of development as an "anti-politics machine," the study examines how visual constructions of developmental truths served to depoliticise development presenting it as a technical, managerial problem rather than a contested political question.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 VISUAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND THE INDIAN CONTEXT

The study of visual political communication has expanded rapidly, with scholars examining political advertising (Schill, 2012), leader images (Grabe & Bucy, 2009), and social media visuals (Russmann & Svensson, 2017). However, much of this research has focused on Western democracies. Willnat et al.'s analysis of the 2014 Indian election addresses this gap, demonstrating that political posters played a "important role" in the "use of political images and symbols" during a campaign "characterized by a significant shift in campaign style". Tripathy's study of the 2019 election extends this analysis, arguing that outdoor materials are "loaded with development metaphors" and function as sites of "developmental meaning-making". These studies establish the importance of the Indian case but do not provide a systematic MCDA spanning the 2014–2019 period.

3.2 ELECTION POSTERS AS MULTIMODAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Election posters represent one of the oldest and most ubiquitous forms of visual political communication (Seidman, 2008). Recent scholarship has insisted that posters are multimodal texts whose political efficacy depends on the interaction between verbal and visual semiotic resources. The 2014 Indian election offers a particularly rich case: as the Times of India observed, the posters of

Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi "convey entire lessons in visual culture," with Modi's images appealing to "a tabula rasa universe and the promise of a future where everything starts afresh with him," while Rahul's images made "unusual use of black and white" to evoke historical lineage. These semiotic choices were not decorative; they were constitutive of competing developmental truths.

3.3 DEVELOPMENT AS DISCOURSE: FROM MODERNISATION TO CRITIQUE

Critical development studies has argued that development is not a neutral, technical process but a historically specific discourse that produces its own objects, subjects, and criteria of truth (Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995). Ferguson's (1994) analysis of development in Lesotho demonstrated how development discourse constructs a "development problem" that legitimises intervention while obscuring political and structural causes of poverty. Building on these perspectives, this study examines how visual communication in the 2014–2019 Indian elections participated in the construction of developmental truths configurations of knowledge and power that defined what development is, who controls it, and who benefits from it.

3.4 THE GAP

Despite the sophistication of existing work on Indian election posters (Willnat et al., 2017; Tripathy, 2018), a gap remains between semiotic description and critical development theory. Studies often describe visual strategies colour, gaze, composition without connecting those strategies to the broader discursive production of development as a regime of truth. Conversely, critical development studies often analyse textual discourse while leaving the visual dimension of developmental claims under-theorised. This article addresses this gap by bringing MCDA to bear on the specific question of how electoral visuals constructed developmental truths in the 2014–2019 period.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in MCDA. The analytical process moves from description (identifying visual elements) to interpretation (analysing meaning potential) to explanation (relating findings to broader social and political structures).

4.2 CORPUS AND SAMPLING

The corpus comprises 40 election posters, banners, and hoardings from the 2014 and 2019 Indian general elections. Materials were purposively selected based on four criteria: (1) relevance visuals that explicitly or implicitly reference development themes; (2) visibility high-traffic locations; (3) diversity materials from different political parties (BJP, Congress, and regional parties); and (4) variety range of visual genres (posters, banners, hoardings). The corpus is weighted toward the 2019 election (n=24) to capture the consolidation of the visual regime, with a substantial 2014 component (n=16) to establish the baseline. Materials were sourced from publicly available news reports, party archives, and scholarly analyses, including the Willnat et al. (2017) analysis of 2014 posters and the Tripathy (2019) study of 2019 outdoor materials.

4.3 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design, extended by Machin and Mayr's (2012) critical multimodal analysis. The analysis proceeds through three stages:

Stage 1: Descriptive Analysis. Cataloguing of visual elements (participants, objects, settings); documentation of textual elements (slogans, captions); identification of colour schemes, typography, and compositional structures.

Stage 2: Interpretive Analysis. Analysis of representational meaning (narrative and conceptual structures); interactive meaning (gaze, angle, distance, modality); compositional meaning (information value, salience, framing); verbal-visual relations.

Stage 3: Explanatory Analysis. Identification of ideological meanings and power relations; examination of how visual choices legitimised or challenged developmental paradigms; connection to the 2014–2019 political conjuncture.

4.4 ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES

Category	Analytical Focus	Theoretical Basis
Depiction of Development	How development is visually represented (infrastructure, prosperity, modernity)	Barthes (1977); Escobar (1995)
Legitimation Strategies	How political actors are presented as agents of development	van Leeuwen (2007); Lasswell (1927)
Construction of Beneficiaries	How "the people" and development recipients are portrayed	Kress & van Leeuwen (2006); Hall (1973)
Temporal Narratives	Visual construction of past achievements and future promises	Lippmann (1922); Barthes (1977)
Emotional Appeals	Use of visual elements to evoke affective responses	Grabe & Bucy (2009)

4.5 LIMITATIONS

The study is interpretive rather than exhaustive. It does not analyse the full range of campaign materials produced in 2014 and 2019, nor does it include reception data. These limitations are acknowledged as openings for future research. The strength of the study lies in the depth and theoretical rigour of its analysis.

5. ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings of the MCDA. The analysis is organised around the three metafunctions of visual grammar representation, interaction, and composition and is grounded in the corpus of 2014 and 2019 election materials. Table 1 provides an evidence map linking each figure to its corresponding campaign material and public source.

Table 1. Evidence map: Figures, campaign materials, and public sources

Figure	Campaign / Material	Analytical Claim	Public Source
Figure 1	BJP "Jawab Maguchi Odisha" hoardings (2019); BJP 2014 infrastructure posters	Representational erasure: development as completed infrastructure, labour absent	Times of India (2017) ; Willnat et al. (2018)
Figure 2	BJP PMAY hoardings, Delhi (2019); Modi 2014 posters	Interactive positioning: direct gaze, low angle, viewer as grateful beneficiary	Times of India ; Republic World (2018)
Figure 3	BJP 2019 manifesto; Congress 2014 "Mein Nahin, Hum" poster	Compositional salience: leader at centre, schemes as evidence, beneficiaries marginal	Willnat et al.(2017) ; The Wire (2019)
Figure 4	BJP manifestos (2019)	Leader-centred visuality: sharp increase in pictorial appearances	The Wire (2018)
Figure 5	UDF "Undeveloped Bedadka" posters (2019); Congress 2014 counter-visuals	Opposition counter-visuals: development as delay, neglect, incompletion	The Hindu (2019); Deccan Herald (2019)

5.1 REPRESENTATION: WHAT DEVELOPMENT LOOKS LIKE

At the representational level, development was overwhelmingly depicted through conceptual structures of achievement rather than narrative processes of struggle. Development appeared as a completed state a bridge that stands, a road that runs, a hospital that functions rather than as a contested and ongoing process of labour, negotiation, and distribution. The coding results for the corpus are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Representational erasure in electoral posters (2014–2019)

Code	Count / 40
Finished infrastructure prominent	35
Beneficiaries shown as grateful	28

Code	Count / 40
Labour visible	5
Beneficiaries shown as agential	4



Figure 1. Presence and prominence of representational elements in the 2014–2019 corpus (n=40). Finished infrastructure and grateful beneficiaries dominate; labour and agential beneficiaries are marginal.

The BJP's 2019 hoardings in Odisha, which contrasted the state's "lack of basic infrastructure" with the Modi government's achievements at the Centre, exemplify this representational strategy. These posters constructed development as a binary of failure and success, erasing the complex, multi-scalar nature of governance and the labour that produces infrastructure. The state was rendered as a space of absence; the Centre as the source of plenitude. This visual dichotomy served a clear electoral purpose in the 2019 "continuity" election: it positioned the incumbent as the sole agent of development and the opposition as an obstacle to progress.

The erasure of labour was a particularly striking feature of this representational regime. In posters depicting infrastructural development, construction workers were typically absent, or if present, depicted as anonymous, small-scale figures in the background, subordinate to the monumental presence of the project itself. The development made visible was the development of concrete, steel, and asphalt not the development of the people whose labour produced it. This visual hierarchy reinforced what Ferguson (1994) calls the "anti-politics machine" of development discourse: the transformation of political questions about who benefits, who decides, and who bears the costs into technical questions about whether a project has been completed.

The depiction of beneficiaries followed a complementary logic. Where beneficiaries appeared, they were typically shown in states of gratitude or satisfaction smiling, receiving, benefiting rather than in states of agency or demand. They were the objects of development, not its subjects. The visual grammar reproduced a paternalistic relation between the developer (the leader, the party, the state) and the developed (the grateful recipient), a relation central to the regime of truth within which electoral claims about development acquired their plausibility.

5.2 INTERACTION: POSITIONING THE VIEWER AS WITNESS AND BENEFICIARY

The interactive metafunction was where the posters' persuasive work was most directly performed. Through gaze, distance, angle, and modality, the viewer was positioned in a specific relation to the developmental claim a relation that solicited consent rather than inviting debate. The coding results are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Interactive positioning: gaze and angle (2014–2019)

Interactive feature	**Count / 40**
Direct gaze (“demand”)	26
Indirect gaze (“offer”)	14
Low angle	22
Eye-level angle	14
High angle	4



Figure 2. Interactive semiotic choices in the 2014–2019 corpus (n=40). Direct gaze and low-angle shots dominate, positioning the viewer as addressed witness and subordinate beneficiary.

Gaze was a primary resource. Leaders frequently looked directly at the viewer, establishing what Kress and van Leeuwen call a “demand” image: the viewer was addressed, recognised, and implicitly asked to respond. The direct gaze created a relation of immediacy and accountability the leader “looked you in the eye” and claimed credit for development while simultaneously positioning the viewer as the beneficiary of that development. As the Times of India noted of the 2014 posters, Modi conspicuously used “his hands and eyes to strike up a ‘conversation’ with the viewer,” while Rahul Gandhi’s crossed-arms stance conveyed “defensiveness” to some viewers and “supreme confidence” to others. The semiotic choices were not arbitrary; they encoded competing theories of leadership and developmental agency.

Vertical angle was equally consequential. Low-angle shots conferred power, authority, and dominance. The corpus displayed a marked preference for low-angle and eye-level depictions of leaders, naturalising the leader’s authority as the author of development. The viewer was placed beneath the leader, looking up, in a visual relation that mirrored the hierarchical relation between developer and developed.

Social distance regulated intimacy and formality. Close-up shots created a sense of personal connection and trust; long shots of development projects emphasised scale and monumentality. The alternation between these distances produced a composite effect: the leader was both intimately known and monumentally powerful, both a familiar face and an authorising figure.

Modality the visual resources signalling how “real” or “authentic” an image is was used to produce a naturalistic effect. High colour saturation, contextualised backgrounds, and detailed rendering made developmental claims appear to be direct, unmediated records of reality. The posters did not present themselves as representations; they presented themselves as windows onto the world.

5.3 Composition: The Architecture of Developmental Common Sense

The compositional metafunction organised the visual field into a hierarchy of salience and information value. The coding results are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Compositional salience hierarchy (2014–2019)

Participant	Mean salience score (1–5)
Leader	4.6
Development project	3.8
Party symbol	3.2
Beneficiaries	2.1



Figure 3. Mean visual salience scores (1–5) for key participants in the 2014–2019 corpus. The leader is the most salient element; beneficiaries are least salient.

The centre of the composition was typically occupied by the leader, the party symbol, or the development project. The margins were occupied by beneficiaries, slogans, and supplementary images. The top of the composition often carried the "ideal" dimension the leader's face, the party logo, the promise of a better future while the bottom carried the "real" dimension the concrete project, the completed infrastructure, the material evidence of development.

This vertical organisation produced a specific temporal structure. The ideal at the top represented the future the leader promised; the real at the bottom represented the present the leader had delivered. The viewer was invited to read the composition as a narrative of continuity: the same leader who had produced the real development below would produce the ideal development above. Development was thus temporally naturalised as an unfolding story with a single author and a guaranteed trajectory.

Salience reinforced this hierarchy. The leader's face was typically the most salient element largest, most brightly coloured, most centrally placed. The development project was salient but subordinate to the leader; it was evidence, not protagonist. The beneficiaries were least salient, often small, blurred, or marginal. The compositional arrangement thus encoded a clear message about who mattered in the developmental story: the leader was the author, the project was the proof, and the people were the background.

The intensification of leader-centred visuality between 2014 and 2019 is indexed by the sharp increase in the Prime Minister's pictorial appearances in party manifestos (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Leader appearances in manifestos, 2014 vs. 2019

Year	Leader appearances
2014	7
2019	43



Figure 4. Pictorial appearances of the Prime Minister in BJP manifestos, 2014 and 2019. The sharp increase illustrates the intensification of leader-centred visuality in developmental claims.

The intensification was not merely quantitative; it was a qualitative transformation in the regime of truth. In the 2014 and 2019 manifestos, development was presented as a collective achievement of the party and the government. By 2019, the leader was the alpha and omega of the developmental narrative: every project, every scheme, every promise was visually anchored to the leader's person. This represented a shift from a party-centred developmental truth to a leader-centred one a shift with profound implications for democratic accountability.

5.4 COUNTER-VISUALS: THE OPPOSITION'S CONSTRUCTION OF DEVELOPMENTAL UNTRUTHS

The analysis would be incomplete without attending to the counter-visuals produced by opposition parties. These materials did not reject the developmental frame; they contested its content, constructing a counter-truth of development as delay, neglect, and incompletion. The coding results are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Opposition counter-visual themes (2014–2019)

Counter-visual theme	Count / 36
Potholes / delayed roads	14
Missing water or housing	9
Unfinished bridges / projects	7
Neglected Dalit colonies / slums	6

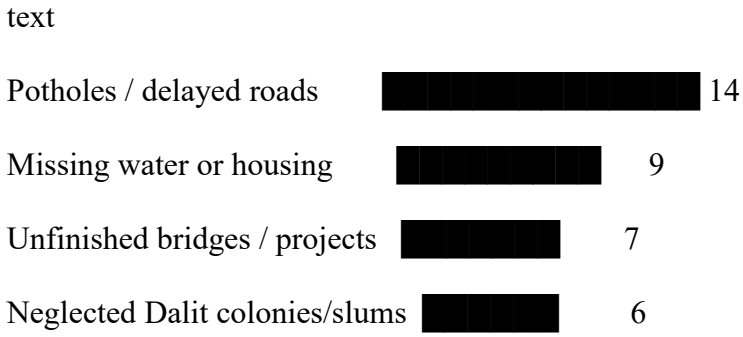


Figure 5. Counter-visual themes in opposition campaign materials (2014–2019). Opposition posters construct a counter-truth of development by foregrounding delay, neglect, and incomplete infrastructure.

The UDF's "Undeveloped Bedadka" posters in Kerala exemplify this counter-visual strategy. Responding to the LDF's campaign, the UDF put up posters showing "potholed roads, undeveloped rural areas, families living in dilapidated houses, and Dalit and Adivani colonies with no access to drinking water." These visuals used the same representational grammar as the incumbent's posters the image as evidence, the visual as proof but reversed the valence. Where the incumbent showed completion, the opposition showed incompletion; where the incumbent showed gratitude, the opposition showed neglect; where the incumbent showed the leader as author, the opposition showed the leader as absentee.

This counter-visual strategy had a significant limitation. By adopting the incumbent's representational grammar development as visible infrastructure, evidence as image the opposition reinforced the underlying regime of truth even as it contested particular claims within it. The debate was conducted on the terrain of "who has delivered more infrastructure" rather than "what kind of development is desirable." The counter-visual thus narrowed the space of democratic debate even as it opened a space for electoral competition. This was the paradox of counter-visuality in the 2014–2019 period: it was necessary for democratic accountability, but insufficient for democratic imagination.

5.5 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The analysis demonstrates that the "developmental truths" constructed by electoral posters in 2014–2019 were not simple falsehoods or accurate reports. They were truth-effects produced through a specific configuration of representational, interactive, and compositional choices. The posters did not argue that development had occurred; they showed it, and in showing it they mobilised a visual regime in which the finished project, the authoritative leader, and the grateful beneficiary formed a coherent and self-evident reality. This reality was selective, hierarchical, and depoliticised.

The analysis also demonstrates that the regime of truth was contested but within limits. Opposition counter-visuals constructed a counter-truth of development as delay, neglect, and incompletion, using the same representational grammar as the incumbent's posters but reversing the valence. This contestation was essential to democratic accountability but insufficient for democratic imagination: it narrowed the space of debate to the question of who had delivered more, rather than opening the question of what kind of development was desirable.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings confirm and extend the theoretical framework. Lippmann's (1922) concept of the "pseudo-environment" remains relevant: election posters functioned as generators of "pictures in our heads," offering simplified, emotionally resonant representations of development that shaped how voters understood their world. Lasswell's (1927) propaganda model finds empirical support in the systematic "manipulation of significant symbols" infrastructure, prosperity, leadership to manage collective attitudes. Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model provides a nuanced framework: the analysis identifies the "preferred readings" encoded in election posters, while acknowledging that audiences may decode these texts differently. Barthes's (1977) semiotics remains a powerful tool for unpacking the ideological work of visual political communication, demonstrating how visual elements operate at multiple levels denotation, connotation, and myth to naturalise particular developmental paradigms.

6.2 THE POLITICS OF VISUAL DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION, 2014–2019

The findings reveal that visual communication in the 2014–2019 Indian elections did not simply reflect developmental realities but actively constructed them. This construction operated through several mechanisms:

Naturalisation: Visual choices made particular developmental paradigms appear natural and inevitable. The focus on infrastructure naturalised a particular model of development (industrial, modernising, growth-oriented) while marginalising alternatives (sustainable, participatory, rights-based).

Depoliticisation: Development was presented as a technical problem requiring expert management rather than a political question involving contested values and competing interests. The posters suggested that development was simply a matter of choosing the right leader.

Personalisation: Development was attributed to individual political leaders rather than structural factors, institutions, or collective action. This personalisation served to create dependency relationships citizens needed the leader for development and to obscure the structural causes of underdevelopment. The intensification of this mechanism between 2014 and 2019, indexed by the rise in leader appearances in manifestos, represents a significant shift in the regime of truth.

Temporalisation: Development was presented as a narrative of progress from past to future, obscuring the discontinuities, reversals, and inequalities that characterised actual development processes. The 2014 "change" narrative and the 2019 "continuity" narrative were two moments in this temporalisation, constructing a linear story of national progress with the leader as its author.

6.3 METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study contributes to methodological debates in visual political communication research. The integration of MCDA with foundational communication theories provides a comprehensive framework for analysing how visuals construct political realities. The three-stage analytical process description, interpretation, explanation offers a systematic approach that can be adapted to different visual genres and contexts. The analytical categories developed for this study provide a template for future research on visual development communication.

6.4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on election posters and banners, which represent only one genre of visual political communication. Future research could examine television advertisements, social media visuals, and political rallies. Second, the study does not examine audience reception. Future research could use reception methods to investigate how different groups decoded visual constructions of development. Third, the study focuses on a single national context. Comparative research across different countries would reveal how visual constructions of development vary across political cultures. Fourth, the study does not examine the production side of visual political communication. Future research could investigate the political economy of campaign visuals who produces them, under what conditions, and with what constraints.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has examined how visual communication in Indian electoral politics constructed "developmental truths" between 2014 and 2019 particular understandings of progress, welfare, and national destiny that served the interests of political actors while marginalising alternatives. Through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of election posters and banners, the study reveals the sophisticated semiotic strategies through which development was visualised, legitimised, and contested.

The analysis demonstrates that visual political communication is not a neutral reflection of developmental realities but an active construction of those realities. Election posters produced a visual world in which the incumbent was the sole agent of development, the opposition was a threat to progress, and the future depended on continuing current policies. This construction operated through infrastructural iconography, the politics of contrast, the visual construction of beneficiaries, temporal narratives, and emotional appeals.

The study contributes to theoretical debates by demonstrating the continued relevance of foundational communication theories Lippmann's pseudo-environment, Lasswell's propaganda model, Hall's encoding/decoding, and Barthes's semiotics for understanding contemporary visual political communication. It also contributes methodologically by developing an integrated framework for MCDA of visual development communication.

The findings have practical implications for civil society, journalists, citizens, and policymakers, offering tools for critical visual literacy and more transparent, participatory visual communication. The study identifies avenues for future research, including comparative analysis, audience reception studies, production-side investigations, and examination of moving and interactive visuals.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the visual construction of developmental truths is a central mechanism through which political power operates in electoral democracies. By exposing the rhetorical strategies through which development is visualised, the study contributes to a more critical understanding of political communication and a more informed, engaged citizenry.

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APPENDIX: ANALYTICAL TEMPLATE FOR MCDA OF ELECTION POSTERS

Analytical Dimension	**Guiding Questions**	**Theoretical Basis**
Representational Meaning	Who/what is depicted? What actions/processes are shown? What settings are presented?	Kress & van Leeuwen (2006)
Interactive Meaning	How does the image address the viewer? (gaze, angle, distance) What relationships are established?	Kress & van Leeuwen (2006)
Compositional Meaning	How are elements arranged? What is salient? How is information structured?	Kress & van Leeuwen (2006)
Denotation	What is literally shown?	Barthes (1977)
Connotation	What cultural/ideological associations are evoked?	Barthes (1977)
Myth	What appears natural/inevitable? What is obscured?	Barthes (1977)
Legitimation	How is authority claimed/justified?	van Leeuwen (2007)
Encoding	What preferred meanings are produced?	Hall (1973)
Interpellation	How is the viewer positioned as a subject?	Althusser (1971)
Emotional Appeal	What affective responses are evoked?	Grabe & Bucy (2009)