

PROTESTS IN THE TIMES OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A CASE OF FARMERS' AGITATION

**Instrumentalising
Social Media to Counter
Popular Narrative**



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May 2021

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Year of Publication: 2021

Published and Distributed by:



Digital Empowerment Foundation

Email: def@defindia.net | URL: www.defindia.org

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After multiple rounds of discussion between farmers and the government, discussions hit a stalemate with the government's unwillingness to accept the farmers' demands to repeal what they term to be the 'black laws'.

INTRODUCTION

THE ONGOING FARM agitation seems to have been fought on two fronts — against the three newly enacted farm laws and against the misrepresentation of the protest and the protestors. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi passed three new farm laws — the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act — enacted after receiving assent from the President of India, Ramnath Kovind on 27 September 2020¹. These laws state that anyone can buy agricultural produce outside the government's regulated *mandis*² at mutually agreed prices. The laws further remove stock holding limits on food grains, and allow contractual farming with limited legal recourse.

The Government is pushing the laws as a 'historic' reform but farmers believe that if big corporations are allowed unregulated space in the agricultural market that could make the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) defunct, gradually eroding the Minimum Support Price (MSP), a guaranteed minimum price by the government to sell agricultural produces³. As the protestors continue to arrive in lakhs, farmers are determined to continue their protest in and around the national capital of India — New Delhi⁴. After multiple rounds of discussion between farmers and the government, discussions hit a stalemate with the government's unwillingness to accept the farmers' demands to repeal what they term to be the 'black laws'. With regard to the farm laws, a detailed report can be read at <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/and-you->

¹ PTI. (27 September 2020). President Ram Nath Kovind Gives assent to three farm bills passed by Parliament. The Print. Retrieved from <https://theprint.in/india/president-ram-nath-kovind-gives-assent-to-three-farm-bills-passed-by-parliament/511744/> [03 March 2021].

² A government regulated market where farmers sell their agricultural produce.

³ Singh, A. (18 September 2020). PM Modi says farm reforms 'historic,' hits out at opposition. Times of India. Retrieved from http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/78185177.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst [03 March 2021].

⁴ Rajlakshmi, T. K. (01 January 2021). At ground zero: Determined farmers protest at the Delhi borders. Frontline. Retrieved from <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/ground-report-farmers-protests-at-delhi-ncr-borders-against-farm-laws-2020/article33320189.ece> [03 March 2021].

thought-its-only-about-farmers/ and

https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/farmers-big-concern-and-what-govt-could-negotiate-7073291/, as this report will focus on the protracted ecosystem of information.

As soon as the bills were tabled in Parliament on 20 September 2020, protests erupted in different parts of the country — largely in the Indian states of Haryana and Punjab — but their resistances were largely ignored by the national media. After protesting for months in their states, thousands of farmers marched to the national capital on 27 November 2020 to oppose the laws. “Police had used tear gas and water cannons against the marching farmers and ripped up highways to stop tractors and protesters moving forward,” reported the Guardian, on 30 November 2020⁵. Since then, on National Highway No. 01, Singhu, which is the last village in Delhi before Haryana, has become the epicentre of the farm agitation, with protestors occupying several miles of the highway⁶.

While the police action against protestors at the Singhu border has received international attention, the protests on the periphery of the national capital continue to remain at an impasse, in terms of resolution. However, in January 2021, the Supreme Court of India stayed the implementation of the laws and appointed a committee to resolve the ongoing standoff. But farmers are sceptical, considering all four members of the panel are on record supporting the Modi government’s position on the laws⁷. So far, the struggle has seen the deaths of 248 protestors — 202 from Punjab, 36 from Haryana, 6 from Uttar Pradesh, one each from Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand, according to the Indian Express on 22 February 2021⁸.

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⁵ Elis-Petersen, Hannah. (30 November 2020). Indian farmers march on Delhi in protest against agriculture laws. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/30/indian-farmers-march-on-delhi-in-protest-against-agriculture-laws> [03 March 2021].

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Tiwari, A., Kumar, B. (12 January 2021). Farmer protests: All four members of SC panel back new farm laws. NewsLaundry. Retrieved from <https://www.newsLaundry.com/2021/01/12/farmer-protests-all-four-members-of-sc-panel-back-new-farm-laws> [09 April 2021].

⁸ Chaba, A. A. (22 February 2021). ‘248 farmers have died during protest against three agri laws’. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/248-farmers-have-died-during-protest-against-three-agri-laws-7198797/> [09 April 2021].

‘KHALISTANI’ — SETTING THE NARRATIVE

AS SOON AS the farmers hit the borders of the national capital, they received the media’s attention, but only to be tagged as anti-social elements and ‘Khalistani’ — a term used for the Sikh separatist movement. This narrative has been used by the national media to delegitimize the protest, by implying that separatist groups of Punjab are orchestrating the farmers’ protest to fulfil their agenda of a separate homeland — Khalistan⁹. In addition to being portrayed as Khalistani agents, farmers have been described as ill-informed political agents¹⁰.

What was evident at Delhi’s borders — Singhu, Ghazipur, Tikri — was that the farmers were visibly discontented with their portrayal, often speaking out against instances of misrepresentation and delegitimization as according to the farmers, anyone speaking out against the current regime, such as students or protestors at Shaheen Bagh, have all suddenly become ‘anti-national.’ This phenomenon of negative coverage has been conceptualised by scholars as a ‘Protest Paradigm’. Briefly, this implies a type of coverage, advocating for the status quo and delegitimizing protesters or their protests that are challenging that status quo¹¹.

Farmers are furious at the mainstream media for the way their protest has been covered, for discrediting and marginalisation of their actions, on the basis of a ‘protest paradigm,’ which focuses on tactics, spectacle and dramatic actions, rather than the real underlying reasons for the protests¹². Circumstances such as these have infuriated the protestors into raising slogans against the media, referring to them as Godi Media — a

⁸ Chaba, A. A. (22 February 2021). ‘248 farmers have died during protest against three agri laws’. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/248-farmers-have-died-during-protest-against-three-agri-laws-7198797/> [09 April 2021].

⁹ Chaudhry, S. (10 December 2020). DNA: किसान आंदोलन में खालिस्तानी साजिश का नया खुलासा (DNA: Khalistani Conspiracy in Farmer Protest Exposed). Zee News. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yia-i7Lbqo> [03 March 2021].

¹⁰ Zee News Media Beuro. (08 December 2020). DNA Exclusive: Have political parties hijacked farmers’ protests? Entry of Khalistani elements exposed. Zee News. Retrieved from <https://zeenews.india.com/india/dna-exclusive-have-political-parties-hijacked-farmers-protests-entry-of-khalistani-elements-exposed-2329356.html> [09 April 2021].

¹¹ Lee, S. (2018). The Role of Social Media in Protest Participation- The Case of Candlelight Vigils in South Korea. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 1523-1540 [10 January 2021].

¹² Harlow, S., & Johanson, T. J. (2011). Overthrowing the Protest Paradigm? How The New York Times, Global Voices and Twitter Covered the Egyptian Revolution. *International Journal of Communications*, 5, 1359-1374 [10 January 2021].

term used for Indian media houses which have become lapdogs to the ruling establishment. The farmers' struggle against misrepresentation can be encapsulated in placards such as, "We are farmers not terrorists."

With every passing day, the agitation over the farm laws is intensifying, even as the government continues to touch new lows in dealing with agitating farmers, by building formidable fortifications on highways: at least three layers of iron and concrete boulders alternating with concertina wires were set up at a protest site at Ghazipur border, following the violence of 26 January 2021¹³, when farmers unions called for a tractor march, resulting in a section of the police barricade being rammed by farmers, and the Sikh flag being unfurled on the ramparts of the Red Fort¹⁴. A parallel was drawn between the Red Fort incident of 26 January 2021 and the violence on Capitol Hill, where Trump supporters stormed the historic Capitol building, while both wings of Congress, the Senate and the House of Representatives were sitting¹⁵.

"The incidents of violence and vandalism at the historic Red Fort on 26 January have evoked similar sentiments and reactions in India, as did the incidents on the Capitol Hill on 6 January and are being addressed as per our respective local laws," the External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said at a media briefing¹⁶. This narrative was propagated by the Indian mainstream media, as every farmer who was participating in the march turned violent. Though the march was conducted in a largely peaceful manner, which was not shown by the ecosystems of information. It seemed another attempt to delegitimize protesting farmers by portraying them as violent. For a moment, it seemed as though the farmers' agitation was losing steam – a fact admitted to by union leaders – but it was soon reinvented with a fresh wave of energy on the evening of 28 January 2021, after a short clip of Rakesh Tikait's emotional outbreak went viral on social media¹⁷.

The essay attempts to explore the role of social media in terms of the mobilisation of protestors, tackling dis/misinformation campaigns, propaganda and the facilitation of the entire protest. In the recent past, the protests have seen large scale physical participation. But the question remains how successfully they have challenged the popular narrative that is being pushed through the mainstream media and ecosystem of social media, thus shaping popular perception.

The ongoing farm protests have taken initiatives such as the Trolley Times, Kisan Ekta Morcha, Tractor2Twitter, along with some individual accounts that are not only trying to renegotiate with the divisive information ecosystem, but are also pushing farmers' voices and their concerns and disseminating updates to the masses. The success of people's protests against a populist government in contemporary times depends on countering popular narratives which are increasingly being woven through the ecosystem of information, especially in the context of deeper technological penetration where mis/disinformation spreads faster and covers a larger audience than ever before.

¹³ BBC. (03 February 2021). India farmer protests: 'War-like fortification' to protect Delhi. BBC. Retrieved from [bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55899754](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55899754) [03 March 2021].

¹⁴ Mohanany, A. (30 January 2021). The Delhi Police's Conduct During the Farmers' Tractor Rally Raises Many Questions. The Wire. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/politics/delhi-police-farmers-rally-conduct-questions-deep-sidhu> [03 March 2021].

¹⁵ Shashank, S. (26 January 2021). Delhi's Capitol Hill-like moment as protesting farmers go on rampage, lay siege on Red Fort. India TV. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/red-fort-capitol-hill-delhi-moment-tractor-tally-violence-protesting-farmers-go-on-rampage-latest-news-680570> [09 April 2021].

¹⁶ Mishra, A. (04 February 2021). MEA draws parallels between vandalism at Red Fort and US Capitol Hill violence. Deccan Herald. Retrieved from <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/mea-draws-parallels-between-vandalism-at-red-fort-and-us-capitol-hill-violence-947479.html> [09 April 2021].

¹⁷ Dahiya, H. (09 March 2021). The Protest Will Bear Electoral Consequences for BJP: Darshan Pal. The Quint. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqCLjgFHpMo> [09 April 2021].

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA LANDSCAPE OF THE COUNTRY

ON 30 JANUARY 2021, Mandeep Punia, a freelance journalist, was picked up by the Delhi Police from the protest site of Singhu Border. Punia had been covering the ongoing farm agitation right from its initial days. Just an hour before he was detained, Punia went live on his Facebook account, narrating what he had witnessed at the Singhu border a day earlier. He said that in the presence of policemen, a group of fifty or sixty people, claiming to be locals, pelted stones at protesters, threw a petrol bomb at them and tried to set fire to their belongings. In his Facebook Live video, Punia showed that two of the assailants were associated with the ruling establishment — the BJP¹⁸.

Though Punia was granted bail from Rohini Court on 02 February 2021, his arrest reflects a larger pattern of silencing journalists in India. Since 2010, 154 journalists have been arrested for doing their work, out of which 40 percent — 57 journalists — were arrested in 2020 alone. Since Narendra Modi's government took office, the arrest of journalists as a means to curb dissenting voices has increased sharply¹⁹. Editors have been forced to quit, tax raids have been conducted in offices, and advertisements have been cut down from news organisations for showing pro-government narratives.²⁰ According to a US-based think tank, Freedom House, free speech in India has been on a slippery slope, with India sliding from a 'free' to a 'partly free' democracy, in 2020²¹.

Along with intimidation and harassment, a number of media houses such as Republic and Zee News were managed and cultivated, only to praise the current regime²². Prime

¹⁸ Ali, S. (05 February 2021). 'Want to Be a Reporter? We'll Make You a Reporter': Mandeep Punia Recounts Day of Arrest. The Wire. Retrieved from <https://the-wire.in/media/mandeep-punia-singhu-arrest-journalist-delhi-police> [09 April 2021].

¹⁹ NL Team. (24 December 2020). 154 journalists in India arrested, interrogated in past decade; 67 cases in 2020 alone: Free Speech Collective. NewsLaundry. Retrieved from <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/12/24/154-journalists-in-india-arrested-in-interrogated-in-past-decade-67-cases-in-2020-alone-free-speech-collective> [09 April 2021].

²⁰ Ninan, S. (30 August 2019). How India's Media Landscape Changed Over Five Years. The India Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/how-indias-media-landscape-changed-over-five-years> [09 April 2021].

²¹ HT Correspondent. (04 March 2021). India downgraded from 'free' to 'partly free' in democracy report. Hindustan Times. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-downgraded-from-free-to-partly-free-in-democracy-report-101614810847391.html> [09 April 2021].

²² Ninan, S. (30 August 2019). How India's Media Landscape Changed Over Five Years. The India Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/how-indias-media-landscape-changed-over-five-years> [09 April 2021].

time shows have been designed to glorify current regime and toe populist lines, rather than cover persistent and endemic issues, such as agrarian distress, rising unemployment and collapsing law and order.²³ Ramit Varma of Peeing Human analysed 202 prime debates on news channels such as Aaj Tak, News18, Zee News and India TV, between January to October 2019. His findings were telling: there was not a single discussion on issues such as farmers' distress and unemployment.²⁴

On the periphery of the national capital, farmers argued that while they were protesting against the three farm laws in their home states — largely in Punjab and Haryana —, the mainstream media largely ignored them. When they marched towards the national capital, they received media attention, though it was largely negative. They were branded Khalistani, anti-social elements, and political agents. Even now, after hundreds of farmers have died during the movement, a large section of the media's debates still revolve around the nuances of the word Khalistani, and farmers are projected as a small number of rich farmers or middlemen whose interests are only at stake, because of these laws.

The popular narrative exemplified by the national media was reflected across three borders in the form of placards, banners, and posters, saying media houses have been sold in the country. They named some anchors such as Sudhir Chaudhri and Arnab Goswami and prominent news channels including Aaj Tak, Republic TV and Zee News. Among protesting farmers, one name that stood out at all the protest sites is NDTV's Ravish Kumar, who has done dozens of shows on the farmers' protest in his Prime Time show.²⁵ Similar incidents were recorded during the protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act, where Sudhir Chaudhry and Deepak Chaurasia were not allowed to cover Shaheen Bagh — an epicentre of the protest.²⁶

"A large section of the media has become a lapdog of the ruling establishment," said a

²³ Sabrangindia. (24 September 2020). Media coverage on Covid-19, anti-CAA protests, prejudiced: Report. Sabrangindia. Retrieved from <https://sabrangindia.in/article/media-coverage-covid-19-anti-caa-protests-prejudiced-report> [25 February 2021].

²⁴ Verma, R. (19 October 2019). Peeing Human is waging a war on 'Modia'. Here's how, and why. NewsLaundry. Retrieved from <https://www.newsLaundry.com/2019/10/29/peeing-human-is-waging-a-war-on-modia-heres-how-and-why> [03 March 2021].

²⁵ NDTV. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36ONgnD8y34> [09 April 2021].

²⁶ Grewal, K., Sharma, U., Jha, F., & Deol, T. (28 January 2020). Sudhir Chaudhary & Deepak Chaurasia visit 'Dilli Ka Kashmir' — Shaheen Bagh turns on them. The Print. Retrieved from <https://theprint.in/plugged-in/sudhir-chaudhary-deepak-chaurasia-visit-dilli-ka-kashmir-shaheen-bagh-turns-on-them/355417/> [09 April 2021].



farmer at Singhu border, adding “The government has tightened its grip over the media, in order to control information. But we will fight our battle on both fronts — the information ecosystem and black laws. After all, the struggle against the laws will only be won by taking all sections of society together. In order to do that, we have to reach out to them with our concerns regarding laws through whatever ecosystems of information we have.”



The Indian media has mastered the art of active political parallelism in recent times. Instead of covering persistent issues, the media has increasingly taken on the role of propagating hate, propaganda, and misinformation that toes the populist line.

Media’s Active Political Parallelism

IN THE 1970S, Blumler and Gurevitch introduced Political Parallelism, a conceptual framework later adopted and carried on by other scholars, most prominently by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Blumer and Gurevitch defined political parallelism as ‘a pattern or relationship where the structure of the political parties are somewhat reflected by the media organizations’. In other words, it implies a pattern of relationship in which given media organizations systematically echo the views and agenda of particular political groups. It is a topological idea, based on the premise that the structural patterns of relationships, existing in the political sphere are reproduced by the media²⁷.

The Indian media has mastered the art of active political parallelism in recent times. Instead of covering persistent issues, the media has increasingly taken on the role of

²⁷ Albuquerque, A. D. (n.d) Political Parallelism. Oxford Research Encyclopedias. Retrieved from <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-860> [06 April 2021].

propagating hate, propaganda, and misinformation that toes the populist line. When farmers reached Singhu border, Rohit Sardana of Aaj Tak on his show Dangal proclaimed, “Hangama kisano ka ya rajneeti ka, krishi kanoonon par bhadkaayenge toh vote paayenge? Sadak par kisan kab tak ghamasaan?” (who has created this ruckus? Farmers or politicians? Provoking farmers on the farm bills will fetch them votes? Till when will the farmers be on the roads?). The implication was that the farmers were being misled by the opposition parties²⁸. Similarly, on 28 November 2020, during the primetime show, DNA, Editor-in-Chief of Zee News, Sudhir Chaudhry asked, ‘Farmers’ agitation hijacked; Khalistani terrorists behind the violence during protests?’ while flashing the populist hashtag, #AndolanmeKhalistan (Khalistan is present in the protests).²⁹

Between 26 November 2020 and 15 January 2021, Zee News hosted over 20 debates on the “Khalistan infiltration.” It was not only Zee News and Aaj Tak — Republic Bharat, and TimesNow too joined in portraying farmers as Khalistani.³⁰ A narrative that has been pushed repeatedly by the mainstream media found its way to the Supreme Court of India when Attorney General KK Venugopal told the Court that ‘Khalistanis’ had ‘infiltrated’ the farmers’ protest. According to the Disinfo Lab — a team which investigates fake news and propaganda — the Khalistani conspiracy originated in Pakistan. The Lab claims that, initially, Inter-Services Public Relations, the media and PR wing of Pakistan’s armed forces, sponsored the Khalistani angle in India’s farmers’ protest, which was amplified by influencers in Pakistan³¹. The narrative was unquestioningly picked up by parts of mainstream media and the leaders of the ruling establishment of India.³²

This was not the first time that the Indian mainstream media peddled narratives to delegitimize protesting citizens. When students resisted the state’s incursion in educational institutions such as New Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University, West Bengal’s Jadavpur University and University of Hyderabad, they were called the Tukde-Tukde gang, Maoists and Anti-Nationals. Doctored videos were aired by television channels such as Zee News and Republic TV.³³ When citizens came out on the streets across the country to oppose the amendments in the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 — which excludes Muslims from neighbouring countries from fast track naturalisation in the Indian state — they were portrayed as terrorists, Pakistanis and rapists by the ruling party leaders, a narrative propagated by the mainstream media.³⁴ “In the past six years, the Indian media has deteriorated,” said Shakuntala Banaji, a media professor at the London School of Economics. “There is no semblance of truth or responsibility left in the vast majority of media reports.”³⁵

²⁸ Sardana, R. (27 November 2020). कृषि कानून के नाम पर हंगामा किसानों का या राजनीति का? देखिए दंगल में तीखी बहस (who has created this ruckus? Farmers or politicians?). Aaj Tak. Retrieved from <https://www.aajtak.in/india/politics/video/protest-against-agricultural-law-is-political-or-farmers-row-1168681-2020-11-27> [01 April 2021].

²⁹ Zee News Beuro. (28 November 2020). DNA Exclusive: Farmers’ agitation hijacked; Khalistani terrorists behind violence during protests? Zee News. Retrieved from <https://zeenews.india.com/india/dna-exclusive-farmers-agitation-hijacked-khalistani-terrorists-behind-violence-during-protests-2327127.html> [01 April 2021].

³⁰ Suresh, N. (19 January 2021). Pakistan’s ISPR made up a story of Khalistani hand in farmer protests. Indian media lapped it up. NewsLaundry. Retrieved from <https://www.newsLaundry.com/2021/01/19/pakistans-isi-made-up-a-story-of-khalistani-hand-in-farmer-protests-indian-media-lapped-it-up> [03 March 2021].

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Jha, K, M., & Jamil, G. (26 October 2018). Dismantling the public university. Indian Express. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/higher-education-india-hrd-prakash-javadekar-ugc-autonomy-of-universities-5363404/> [02 April 2021].

³⁴ Pandey, N. (28 January 2020). BJP MP says Shaheen Bagh protesters will ‘rape, kill’ as party makes it Delhi poll plank. The Print. Retrieved from <https://theprint.in/politics/bjp-mp-says-shaheen-bagh-protesters-will-rape-kill-as-party-makes-it-delhi-poll-plank/355438/> [03 April 2021].

³⁵ Goyal, V., Gettleman, J. (06 May 2020). Under Modi, India’s Press Is Not So Free Anymore. New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/world/asia/modi-india-press-media.html> [03 April 2021].

During the agitation against newly enacted three farm laws, farmers were portrayed as paid protestors. Even PM Narendra Modi went on to term protesting citizens in the Upper House of the Parliament as ‘andolan jeevi — professional protestors’ and ‘parasites’³⁶. A similar narrative was at play during the CAA protest as well. BJP’s IT Cell head Amit Malviya claimed that 500 rupees were being paid to the protestors at Shaheen Bagh — a protest site in South-East Delhi that became the template to mobilise people across the country against the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019. Malviya’s claim which was propagated by the mainstream media was investigated by independent fact-checkers and was proved to be outright false³⁷.

Ownership Patterns of Indian Media

‘THE PROPAGANDA MODEL’ is a conceptual categorization by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, to show that propaganda and systemic biases are emblematic of corporate mass media. Due to propaganda, populations are manipulated and consent for economic, social, and political policies, both foreign and domestic, is “manufactured” in the public mind. Herman and Chomsky explained that media is structured through advertising or via a concentration of media ownership or government sourcing, thus creating an inherent conflict of interest, and acting as propaganda for anti-democratic elements. It has been the case with Indian media as well, which not only manipulates the public mind through the suppression of inconvenient truths, but also, inevitably, through the bias of some media outlets which, by design, cease to be mere neutral observers.³⁸

A farmer at Tikri border explained, “Nowadays every media house is being paid by corporates like Ambani and Adani. Why will they show our story? They will not.” It reflects upon the ownership pattern of Indian media houses. To understand how the Indian media has become a mouthpiece of the government, one must look at its ownership pattern and business model. To earn revenue, news organizations hold sponsored events. To get the sponsorship they need, they request the Prime Minister or Union Ministers to speak at their events. If you displease them, they will refuse the objective. In India, mainstream news organizations are largely dependent on advertisements from the state, central government and corporates. Media houses which have been critical of the ruling party have advertisements pulled from them, compounded with the raids and defamation cases.³⁹

Moreover, in India, the majority of the news organizations in the country are owned either by political leaders or corporate houses, such as Zee News which is run by Subhash Chandra, a member of the Parliament in the Upper House. Bennett & Coleman — a group that owns Times of India also runs a massive network exercising a virtual monopoly across media. Political parties and corporate entities have a symbiotic relationship. Corporates provide parties with funds and, in return, political parties help them grow their business. Unsurprisingly, media, corporate houses and political leaders share close ties with each other in India.⁴⁰

³⁶ ANI News Official. (08 February 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjQqm mR3rwo> [05 April 2021].

³⁷ Chaudhri, P., Jha, P. (02 March 2020). Shaheen Bagh women getting paid? No, this is a video of relief distribution to Delhi riot victims. AltNews. Retrieved from <https://www.altnews.in/shaheen-bagh-women-getting-paid-no-this-is-a-video-of-relief-distribution-to-delhi-riot-victims/> [03 March 2021].

³⁸ Klahn, K. (October 2009). The Propaganda Model: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations. Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255667986_The_Propaganda_Model_Theoretical_and_Methodological_Considerations [01 April 2021].

³⁹ Ninan, S. (30 August 2019). How India’s Media Landscape Changed Over Five Years. The India Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/how-indias-media-landscape-changed-over-five-years> [09 April 2021].

⁴⁰ Nisha. (09 October 2020). What Is Cross Media Ownership And How Is It Responsible For Corruption In Indian Media?. Youth Ki Awaz. Retrieved from <https://www.youthkiawaz.com/2020/10/the-indian-media-industry/> [25 February 2021].

The Reliance group, run by the Ambani family, also has major control over media channels. Media group Network18 is owned by them; Network18 in turn owns several television news channels. Interestingly, News18 Network claimed to conduct a survey on farm agitation published on 21 December 2020, that shows that 53.6 percent stand with the new farm laws, and 56.59 percent believe the protest should be called off.⁴¹

Similarly, Gautam Chikermane, Vice President of Observer Research Foundation, an organisation funded by the Reliance Group, wrote ‘An intellectual biography of India’s new farm laws’. He wrote, “The three laws that have been enacted by Parliament attempt to take farmers towards harvesting economic gains; they have thus far been held back by outdated laws, manipulated markets and vested interests-driven corruption,” implying farmers are being misled and false narratives have been peddled against a progressive reform. Chikermane’s story was run by another Reliance-funded news organisation Firstpost. The propagation of such narratives and portraying farmers as ill-informed shows a recurring theme of corporate owned platforms.⁴²

With the increasing corporatisation of the media, the stories of farmer suicides – sometimes on an average of 28 a day – remain buried, as do the stories of rural distress that has been deepening in the recent past. “Three years ago, we learned the average national daily dedicates 0.67% of its front page to news of rural origin where 69% of the population lives. That 0.67% figure is a huge exaggeration. It is a five-year average, with an election year in between. If you take out the election year, coverage is between 0.18 to 0.24%,” pointed out P. Sainath in a podcast aired on Indian Journalism Review in 2020.⁴³

Rise of Alternate Ecosystems of Information

THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA has been often complicit in the propagation of a pro-government narrative and in the manipulation of the public mind. Information orders become more protracted when viewers are bombarded with fake news and divisive propaganda on a near constant basis from a wide range of sources, from multiple online platforms such as OpIndia and Swarajya Magazine to global platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. India, which has a population of nearly 1.4 billion, there are at least 530 million WhatsApp users, 410 million Facebook users, 175 million Twitter users and more than 400 million Youtube users.⁴⁴ Social media platforms are not only being instrumentalized but also have been complicit in targeting dissenting voices, and religious minorities. The constant misrepresentation of communities has created an inflammable social atmosphere, sometimes resulting in threats of death, rape and lynching of marginalized sections such as Muslims and Dalits.

In 2020, during the communal violence in North-East Delhi that broke out due to the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, WhatsApp was used to minutely coordinate the attacking of Muslim neighbourhoods. WhatsApp chats show how the riot was minutely planned and executed.⁴⁵ Facebook was used to incite violence during the riots against Muslims. However, the Wall Street Journal reported on 14 August 2020 that Facebook India did not take down instances of hate speech posted by a Bharatiya Janata Party leader and three other “Hindu nationalist individuals and

⁴¹ News18. (21 December 2020). News18 Farm Reform Laws Survey: 56% Say Farmers Should End Protest. News18. Retrieved from <https://www.news18.com/photogallery/india/news18-farm-reform-laws-survey-56-sayfarmers-should-end-protest-3197972.html> [25 February 2021].

⁴² Chikermane, G. (13 December 2020). Farmers’ protests: An intellectual biography of India’s new agri laws. Firstpost. Retrieved from <https://www.firstpost.com/india/farmers-protests-an-intellectual-biography-of-indias-new-agri-laws-9106441.html> [25 February 2021].

⁴³ Indian Journalism Review. (08 June 2020). J-POD || Podcast || “COVID has given us a brain scan of media thinking. National newspapers devote 0.67% of front page to 69% of India. Corporate media is the bed on which religious and market fundamentalists cohabit” || P. Sainath. Indian Journalism Review. Retrieved from <https://indianjournalism-review.com/2020/06/08/j-pod-podcast-covid-has-given-us-a-brain-scan-of-media-thinking-national-newspapers-devote-0-67-of-front-page-to-69-of-india-corporate-media-is-the-bed-on-whichreligious-and-market-fundamen/> [25 February 2021].

⁴⁴ Chakarvarti, A. (25 February 2021). Government reveals stats on social media users, WhatsApp leads while YouTube beats Facebook, Instagram. India Today. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/technology/news/story/government-reveals-stats-on-social-media-users-whatsapp-leads-while-youtube-beats-facebook-instagram-1773021-2021-02-25> [31 March 2021].

⁴⁵ Lawani, V., & Daniyal, S. (09 July 2020). From planning murder to praising Modi: WhatsApp chats offer a window into the minds of Delhi rioters. Scroll.in. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/966775/from-planning-murder-to-praising-modi-whatsapp-chats-offer-a-window-into-the-minds-of-delhi-rioters> [31 March 2021].

groups” in order to avoid colliding with the governing party.⁴⁶ Recently, Facebook invested \$5.7 billion in the Reliance Group and has been accused of being biased towards the government.⁴⁷

During the ongoing farm agitation, Facebook suspended the Kisan Ekta Morcha’s page on December 21, stating that it went “against community standards on spam.” It was restored soon after. “This is what they can do when people raise their voices,” the Morcha had posted on Twitter. “When they can’t beat us ideologically.”⁴⁸ Later, Twitter took down more than 250 social media accounts against the backdrop of farm agitation, including the Twitter handle of The Caravan and Kisan Ekta Morcha for allegedly using a controversial hashtag. The decision was taken upon the request of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. After huge public outcry, Twitter has unblocked accounts⁴⁹. It only emphasised how social media has been unnerving the ruling establishment that uses hashtags and dissemination of information leading to suspensions.

In the same period, which has seen an increasingly compliant mainstream media, unprecedented rise of misinformation, constant targeting of religious minorities, India has also witnessed significant rise in independent media such as Scroll.in, The Wire, NewsClick, most of it are online portals. A number of platforms offering specialized content such as People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI) and Gaon Connection which focuses on rural areas. Multiple digital platforms such as The News Minute have emerged which focus on regional news. India Spend has done some insightful data journalism.

Fact-checking platforms such as Alt News, Boom Live, Factly have been debunking the false narrative peddled through the information ecosystem, including mainstream media and social media. Many of these have been surviving from a new trend of corporate philanthropy funding independent media that has enabled individual journalists from the mainstream to break away and set up their own journalism ventures⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ Purnell, N. & Horwitz J. (14 August 2020). Facebook’s Hate-Speech Rules Collide With Indian Politics. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-hate-speech-india-politics-muslim-hindu-modi-zuckerberg-11597423346> [25 February 2021].

⁴⁷ BusinessToday.in. (11 July 2020). Jio receives Rs 43,574 crore from Facebook for 9.99% stake. Business Today. Retrieved from <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/corporate/jio-receives-rs-43574-crore-from-facebook-for-9-99-percent-stake/story/409210.html> [25 February 2021].

⁴⁸ India Today Web Desk. (20 December 2020). Facebook removes official page of Kisan Ekta Morcha, restores it after outrage. India Today. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/facebook-removes-official-page-of-kisan-ekta-morcha-used-for-documenting-farmers-agitation-1751437-2020-12-20> [25 February 2021].

⁴⁹ Bhardwaj, D. (01 February 2021). Twitter restores 250 accounts blocked in India for a controversial hashtag. Hindustan Times. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/twitter-restores-250-accounts-blocked-in-india-for-a-controversial-hashtag-101612195458796.html> [03 March 2021].

⁵⁰ Ninan, S. (30 August 2019). How India’s Media Landscape Changed Over Five Years. The India Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/how-indias-media-landscape-changed-over-five-years> [09 April 2021].

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING PROTESTS

IT IS OFTEN argued that because of social media, it has become possible to access real-time accounts of protest behaviour, which are documented and archived through microblogging sites like Twitter as well as through mixed mediums (texts, videos, live chats) like Facebook, Instagram.⁵¹ These ‘real-time’ actions that are supported and facilitated by the Internet are different from ‘virtual’ actions that are internet-based.⁵² Studies conducted by media scholars point towards social media’s role during movements and protests primarily in the following ways:

Facilitating exchange of information vital to the coordination of protest activities like disseminating news about transportation, turnout, police presence, violence, medical services, legal support, etc.⁵³

Lowering practical barriers by facilitating the organization and coordination of the events like demonstrations, meetings, sit-ins and (street) blockades and forming Internet based protest websites promoting social causes mobilising support for the cause.⁵⁴ These websites are created to provide space to publish and disseminate alternative viewpoints about ongoing struggles, thereby circumventing traditional or mainstream media channels.⁵⁵

Tracking political events developing throughout the agitation⁵⁶. Scholars argue that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and social

⁵¹ Jost, J. T., Barbera, P., et. al. (2018). How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks. *International Society of Political Psychology*, 39(1), 85–118. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/pops.12478> [10 January 2021].

⁵² Laer, J. V, Aelst, P. V (2010) Internet and Social movement action repertoires, *Information, Communication & Society*, 13(8), 1146–1171, Retrieved from doi: 10.1080/13691181003628307 [January 10 2021].

⁵³ Jost, J. T., Barbera, P., et. al. (2018). How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks. *International Society of Political Psychology*, 39(1), 85–118. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/pops.12478> [10 January 2021].

⁵⁴ Laer, J. V, Aelst, P. V (2010) Internet and Social movement action repertoires, *Information, Communication & Society*, 13(8), 1146–1171, Retrieved from doi: 10.1080/13691181003628307 [January 10 2021].

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Jost, J. T., Barbera, P., et. al. (2018). How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks. *International Society of Political Psychology*, 39(1), 85–118. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/pops.12478> [10 January 2021].

media provide a vehicle for efficient and often prompt channelling of information about protests as well as their political developments, thereby expediting the organisation of protest activities.⁵⁷ Or, as argued by McGarty et al. (2013), “accelerating the processes that normally occur much more slowly.”⁵⁸

Ongoing farmers’ protests at the borders of the national capital reflect a similar pattern where protesting farmers have started using social media and Information Communication Technology (ICT) tools to facilitate the exchange of information, as they believe their voices have either been ignored or misrepresented. They have formed a platform, a single source, where information related to their core demands and all related developments regarding the farmers’ protests are published and directly disseminated to the masses, under the banner of Kisan Ekta Morcha (KEM)⁵⁹. It was initially started via their Facebook page on 16 December 2020, later expanding to other platforms like Youtube, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. KEM is a team of five members hailing from three different states, Punjab (2), Haryana (2) and Rajasthan (1), including a 16 year old who is adept with Snapchat⁶⁰; which is a conscious attempt to dismantle the notion of protest just being Punjab-centric.⁶¹

This platform helps to disseminate official advisory and statements as released by farmers’ unions/leaders in a streamlined manner via social media, which acts as a reference point for media channels.⁶² KEM had 223K followers on Instagram,⁶³ 1.23 Million subscribers on YouTube⁶⁴, 3,58,307 likes and 4,71,010 followers on Facebook⁶⁵ and, 280K followers on Twitter,⁶⁶ at the time of writing this report on 1 March 2021. Social media handles have played an critical role in lowering the practical barriers necessary for facilitating the organization and coordination of the protest, by organically creating a web of volunteers present at the protest site who arranged equipment like smartphones, internet dongle, tripod and laptops to present the voices of the farmers’ leaders in a streamlined manner directly to concerned audiences, without any sort of interpretation by the media.⁶⁷ They have also voluntarily composed WhatsApp messages and circulated them across their respective WhatsApp groups.⁶⁸

Baljeet Singh Sandhu, head of KEM IT cell says, “Our strategy is simple. As the movement progresses, our work is to capture all the developments happening daily. So, as and when information comes, we keep posting them. For example, as people sat on hunger strike, our volunteers have been sitting among them and getting their voices. Whoever comes to us – leaders and protestors – we make them sit on this chair with our banner at the back and go live from our phone”.⁶⁹

While arguing for the importance of a platform run entirely by protestors with content consisting primarily of live videos, press conferences and addresses by individual farmer leaders, Sandhu said, “We couldn’t trust an external marketing company, because they could be hijacked by the government and be pressurised or bought.”⁷⁰

Ashutosh, spokesperson for the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), further shed light on KEM’s importance, “The agenda is simple – to be able to effectively communicate their (protesters’) message and counter the waves of misinformation floating in sections of mainstream media and by the government’s

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Sircar, S. (26 December 2020). How farmers set up their own IT cell to counter hate & fake news. The Quint. Retrieved from <https://www.thequint.com/cyber/kisan-ekta-morcha-how-protesting-farmers-created-their-own-it-cell-hate-fake-news#read-more> [10 January 2021].

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Kisan Ekta Morch. <https://www.instagram.com/kisanektamorcha/?hl=en> [01 March 2021].

⁶⁴ Kisan Ekta Morch. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4mGFTV86AR8VeJmusu1QWQ> [01 March 2021].

⁶⁵ Kisan Ekta Morch. <https://www.facebook.com/kisanektamorcha/> [01 March 2021].

⁶⁶ Kisan Ekta Morch. <https://twitter.com/kisanektamorcha?lang=en> [01 March 2021].

⁶⁷ Sircar, S. (26 December 2020). How farmers set up their own it cell to counter hate & fake news. The Quint. Retrieved from <https://www.thequint.com/cyber/kisan-ekta-morcha-how-protesting-farmers-created-their-own-it-cell-hate-fake-news#read-more> [10 January 2021].

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid

massive propaganda machinery.”⁷¹

Similarly, the Kisan Social Army (KSA), another social media team initially started by merely four people has now swollen to 272, and is working towards a similar cause at the farmers’ protests at Tikri border.⁷² “We started a parallel media system,” said Anoop Singh, one of the core team members explaining how they have initiated this, the networking style they are following and the issues they are addressing. “And for that we started taking [contact] numbers trolley-wise and made Whatsapp groups. Each group would add their people, including people back in their villages. This is how we created a huge platform where information or announcements like Bharat Band and repeal of farm laws is trickling down to people.”

“Each type of information is being disseminated accurately to the people concerned and we are even tackling misinformation, including the ration or ingredients that are required at the protest site. We plan the distribution of the ration that is coming from the villages through this channel. People message us regarding any kind of relief material that they need. Mishaps with anyone are being duly addressed through this channel, or if they are in need of ambulance services, everything is being managed through social media,”⁷³ added Singh.

Singh explains how even though they have the phone numbers of almost all the people participating in the protest and have added them to WhatsApp groups, the team of KSA is also in touch with KEM and have proposed the idea of walkie-talkies that can be given to volunteers for better coordination, given that the protest site stretches for several kilometres. Such instruments will help to tackle anti-social elements that may enter the protest site to disrupt the protest.⁷⁴

This is similar to Jost et al’s argument, according to which “as the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.”⁷⁵

Protestors are not trying to disseminate in the virtual space, but have also started a bi-weekly multilingual (Gurmukhi, Hindi and English) community-run newspaper — The Trolley Times. The home page of the website reads, “Newsletter dedicated to farmers’ protest. Reporting from the protest, and for the protest.”⁷⁶ It further says, “A newspaper run by volunteers without any political or monitory pressure, delivering trustworthy and latest updates straight from ground zero.”⁷⁷

One of the founding members of the Trolley Times, Gurdeep Dhaliwal explains the reasoning behind such an initiative, “The main stage is very far from several locations on the protest site and we felt a need for in-group communication among different groups to further strengthen the movement. It was important to connect different borders and consistently inform people participating in the protest about the developments of the movement, the future vision of the leaders and stories within the protest. For such a vast movement, being on the same page is crucial.”⁷⁸

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Newslaundry. (08 February 2021). <https://twitter.com/newslaundry/status/1358747408625262593> [10 February 2021].

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Jost, J. T., Barbera, P., et. al. (2018). How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks. *International Society of Political Psychology*, 39(1), 85–118. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/doi: 10.1111/pops.12478> [10 January 2021].

⁷⁶ The Trolley Times. <https://www.trolley-times.online/> [10 January 2021].

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Shrivastav, A. (25 December 2020). Trolley times: The birth of a newspaper at Singhu border. *Indian Cultural Forum*. Retrieved from <https://indianculturalforum.in/2020/12/25/trolley-times-the-birth-of-a-newspaper-at-singhu-border/> [10 January 2021].



Impact of Emotionally Triggering Events

ON THE BASIS of research in social and political psychology, scholars have noted the impact of the exchange of 'emotional and motivational contents in support of and opposition to protest activity', apart from substantial information regarding requisite materials and political developments of the protests necessary for movement's flow.⁷⁹

Triggering event(s) have been found to be crucial for the protests to transform a 'latent form of identification into a highly salient and explicit one.'⁸⁰ This is a two-fold argument, each of which has a bearing on the other: first, with 'increasing salience and strength of group identification, the possibility of participating in collective action on behalf of that group grows'; second, as the participation in collective action increases, it positively impacts the salience and strength of the group identity that was being addressed in the collective action.⁸¹

The ongoing farmers' agitation also witnessed an emotional trigger in the form of Rakesh Tikait, the national spokesperson of Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) and a prominent face at the Ghazipur border site of the protests, when the video of his emotional outburst went viral on social media. After the violence at the Red Fort, the farmers' protest seemed to be losing its energy. The evening of 28 January 2021 was an emotionally intense episode for the movement. Amidst whispers of the protests being taken off by mainstream channels, Ghazipur border in Delhi witnessed heavy deployment of security personnel after the Uttar Pradesh (UP) Chief Minister's Office ordered police

⁷⁹ Jost, J. T., Barbera, P., et. al. (2018). How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks. *International Society of Political Psychology*, 39(1), 85–118. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/pops.12478> [10 January 2021].

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

to remove the farmers from the site.⁸²

With farmers returning home, due to the fear of police action, Tikait alleged that the BJP was conspiring against the farmers. Speaking to national media, Tikait warned against increasing police deployment, saying, "Police officials are here to take us away and a BJP MLA is waiting with supporters to attack and kill the farmers. I will hang myself but won't call off the protest until the farm laws are repealed."⁸³ He requested farmers to come back to the protests and appealed to bring him water from their villages, as the police had cut the water supply at the Ghazipur border.⁸⁴

Tikait's emotional outburst sent waves through people across Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. His video clip reached them via social media and cell phones.⁸⁵ As more videos started pouring in, people prepared to leave for the Ghazipur protest site, right in the middle of the night.⁸⁶ As emergency meetings took place in villages across northern India, within two hours of the speech, Ghazipur site swelled with protestors.⁸⁷ Soon, the number of farmers increased from 500 to 5,000 at midnight and in the morning, it swelled up to 10,000.⁸⁸

Sandeep Singh, an independent journalist reported how Tikait's speech led to greater mass mobilisation to Ghazipur protest site.⁸⁹ "We were all awake, watching Tikait ji crying. Some were glued to TV sets, others on mobile phones, and we all felt restless. I was moved to tears too, and women too got emotional. His tears touched a chord with everyone and made them connect stronger to the movement," said Pankaj Pradhan, 52, head of Charaura village in UP's Bulandshahr.⁹⁰

The identity that Rakesh Tikait carries has its own role in the protest that dates back to his father, Mahendra Tikait, who was one of the tallest farmer leaders in post-independent India. In 1988, Mahendra Tikait forced the then PM Rajiv Gandhi to bend to the farmers' demand, when thousands of farmers camped outside the Boat Club and its lawns near Parliament, situated in central Delhi.⁹¹ This historical trajectory of the Tikait

⁸² Kajal, K. (29 January 2021). Why Tikait's tear drops were enough to overpower massive Police deployment. The Federal. Retrieved from <https://thefederal.com/news/why-tears-of-rakesh-tikait-outweighed-a-massive-police-deployment/> [31 January 2021].

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Singh, S. (29 January 2021). Tikait revives the Farmers Protest. Baaz News. Retrieved from <https://www.baaznews.org/p/sandeep-singh-tikait-revives-the> [31 January 2021].

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Kajal, K. (29 January 2021). Why Tikait's tear drops were enough to overpower massive Police deployment. The Federal. Retrieved from <https://thefederal.com/news/why-tears-of-rakesh-tikait-outweighed-a-massive-police-deployment/> [31 January 2021].

⁸⁹ Singh, S. (29 January 2021). Tikait revives the Farmers Protest. Baaz News. Retrieved from <https://www.baaznews.org/p/sandeep-singh-tikait-revives-the> [31 January 2021].

⁹⁰ PTI. (30 January 2021). People in villages cried, couldn't sleep when Rakesh Tikait wept: Farmers. The New Indian Express. Retrieved from <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/jan/30/people-in-villages-cried-couldnt-sleep-when-rakesh-tikait-wept-farmers-2257251.html> [31 January 2021].

⁹¹ Sinha, R. (06 December 2020). Thirty-two winters ago, The hookah, The Hukumat. The Indian Express. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/farmers-protest-mahendra-singh-tikait-rajiv-gandhi-7093241/> [02 March 2021].





family has been etched in people's minds. It is not only the goodwill of Rakesh Tikait that has been passed on from his father, but also the historicity of the farmer identity which has passed on from generation to generation.

While showing the WhatsApp chats of the village group, Indresh, a resident of UP's Baghpat district said, "We saw the video on YouTube of Baba Rakesh Tikait crying and then we contacted each other on the village's WhatsApp group. We held a panchayat in the village around 12 AM. Senior citizens said they will come in the morning, and youngsters were told to leave for the protest site during the night. Around 7 youngsters left for the protest site and within an hour we were here (at Chazipur Border). We plan to stay here till our Baba wants us to protest."⁹²

The state's actions, resulting in the overflow of Rakesh Tikait's emotions, evoked the legacy of Mahendra Tikait, which in turn created a sense of solidarity among the protesters. "He is the son of Baba Mahendra Singh Tikait and he cried because of the atrocities of the government. We cannot tolerate this and if the farmers can help a government come to power, then farmers will force the government to withdraw these black laws as well." Atul Pradhan, a Samajwadi Party functionary, told the Phalauda town in Meerut district's *mahapanchayat*.⁹³

Similarly, a farmer from UP's Sisauli, Rajbeer Singh said, "My father and I have known the Tikaits for ages. My father participated in the protests with Mahendra ji in the 1980s. I won't let the BJP insult my brother. We are ready to go to Delhi. We are anyway against these farm laws. Tikait has been fighting alone for two months now. We won't let him go down."⁹⁴

Tikait's emotional episode, when seen against the backdrop of his father's legacy, reflects a social psychological model, based on moral outrage, social identification,⁹⁵ and group efficacy. This tends to highlight two factors that are likely to affect the motivation or desire to participate in any protest: first, anger or indignation directed at injustice, as perceived by the community; second, a strong sense of belonging to any group or having certain shared interests, i.e. 'social identification.' The second factor is crucial in the current farmers' protests as all the Mahapanchayats held in Rajasthan's borders, touching Punjab and Haryana, and in the Jat strongholds of the state, indicate the support of multiple communities for the protests as opposed to the popular narrative which are trying to portray that the protests are limited to the Punjab and Haryana.

⁹² Singh, S. (29 January 2021). Tikait revives the Farmers Protest. Baaz News. Retrieved from <https://www.baaznews.org/p/sandeep-singh-tikait-revives-the> [31 January 2021].

⁹³ Sharma, S. (19 February 2021). Farm laws: How much sway do Mahapanchayats and Khaps hold in Jatland politics. News-Click. Retrieved from <https://www.news-click.in/farm-laws-much-sway-mahapanchayats-khaphs-hold-jatland-politics> [01 March 2021].

⁹⁴ Sinha, J. (30 January 2021). Away from Ghazipur, support pours in for Tikait at Muzaffarnagar Event. The Indian Express. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/away-from-ghazipur-support-pours-in-for-tikait-at-muzaffarnagar-event-7167230/> [31 January 2021].

⁹⁵ Jost, J. T., Barbera, P., et. al. (2018). How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks. *International Society of Political Psychology*, 39(1), 85–118. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/pops.12478> [10 January 2021].

Delegitimizing Protesters/Protests That Are Challenging The Status Quo

THIS BRINGS US to another thematic focus of the report, i.e., political environment and the role of traditional media played out during contemporary social movements and agitation. It is observed that the traditional or mainstream media's coverage being limited to either to a total ignoring or marginalising of the protest activities, by using a "protest paradigm"⁹⁶, tends to push protestors often to social media in order to bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media and to create and disseminate their own messages.⁹⁷

By playing out the protest paradigm, the mainstream media can not only discredit the protest actions, but also shift focus on tactics, spectacles and dramatic actions, completely ignoring the underlying causes and reasons for the protest.⁹⁸ But since protestors require media to reach the public and policymakers and to combat the negative portrayals of protestors, social movements and activists often turn to alternate media outlets or create their own media platforms and mediums.⁹⁹

This kind of protest paradigm was also reflected in the current farmers' protests, as initially on 26 November 2020, when the protesting farmers arrived at the Singhu border; the traditional and mainstream media ignored it, as expressed by the agitated farmers, "Why is the national media not taking notice of us? Do they not see the road blocks? Do they not care about farmers?"¹⁰⁰ But, on 28 November, while the media did start covering the protests, they aimed to pose certain rhetorical questions like 'when the three farm laws have been applied across India, why are only farmers from Punjab worried about them and protesting against them?', with a hashtag #AndolanmeinKhalistan flashing on the screen.¹⁰¹

Therefore, within four days,¹⁰² the media completely shifted their focus to an alleged 'Khalistani angle'¹⁰³, totally marginalising the farmers and their cause. This alleged Khalistani angle popped up on when Zee News aired a hashtag- #AndolanmeinKhalistan on 28 November 2020 as well as an "exclusive" video clip of a tractor from the Singhu protest with a sticker - "Khalistan Zindabad" (translation: long live Khalistan) on 30 November 2020, initiating a demonisation campaign against the farmers, claiming that the farmers had malicious motives and that they were being misled by opposition parties like Indian National Congress or Nationalist Congress Party. The rest of the media channels quickly followed up this trail.¹⁰⁴

Soon, the protesting farmers took it upon themselves to spread the word and use social media to tackle misinformation and debunk the narrative of Khalistani infiltration, as woven by the mainstream media. Twitter became a prominent social media platform which gave rise to Tractor2twitr- a Twitter account launched with the aim to encourage youngsters in Punjab to join the

⁹⁶ Protest Paradigm has been defined as a type of coverage advocating the status quo and delegitimising the protestors or protests that are challenging that status quo. See, Chan, J. Lee, C.C (1984).

⁹⁷ Lee, S. (2018). The Role of Social Media in Protest Participation- The Case of Candlelight Vigils in South Korea. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 1523-1540 [10 January 2021].

⁹⁸ Harlow, S., & Johanson, T. J. (2011). Overthrowing the Protest Paradigm? How TheNew York Times, Global Voices and Twitter Covered the Egyptian Revolution. *International Journal of Communications*, 5, 1359-1374 [10 January 2021].

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ Suresh, N. (01 December 2020). 'Media has lost our trust': Why protesting farmers are angry with 'godi media'. Newslandry. Retrieved from <https://www.newslandry.com/2020/12/01/media-has-lost-our-trust-why-are-protesting-farmers-angry-with-godi-media> [10 January 2021].

¹⁰¹ Priyadarshini, A. (28 November 2020). 'Misled', 'brainwashed', 'instigated': How primetime tv covered farmer protests. Newslandry. Retrieved from <https://www.newslandry.com/2020/11/28/misled-brainwashed-instigated-how-primetime-tv-covered-farmer-protests> [31 January 2021].

¹⁰² Suresh, N. (01 December 2020). 'Media has lost our trust': Why protesting farmers are angry with 'godi media'. Newslandry. Retrieved from <https://www.newslandry.com/2020/12/01/media-has-lost-our-trust-why-are-protesting-farmers-angry-with-godi-media> [10 January 2021].

¹⁰³ Iqubbal, A. (15 January 2021). Reclaiming the narrative: What Farmer protests and Trolley Times tell us about the media's systemic failure. Newslandry. Retrieved from <https://www.newslandry.com/2021/01/15/reclaiming-the-narrative-what-farmer-protests-and-trolley-times-tell-us-about-the-medias-systemic-failure> [31 January 2021].

¹⁰⁴ Kumar, A. (30 December 2020). Looking back, 2020: When Citizens visibly showed their distrust of TV media. Newslandry. Retrieved from <https://www.newslandry.com/2020/12/30/looking-back-2020-when-citizens-visibly-showed-their-distrust-of-tv-media> [10 January 2021].

social media platform and use it to support the protests.¹⁰⁵ Bhavjeet Singh, 38, a techie from Ludhiana, who along with his friends created this account, said, “In our country, the narrative is set either by primetime television or by Twitter trends. As we all know, TV news has no interest in covering the problems of common people such as farmers and migrants. So, we are amplifying their voices with the help of hashtags.”¹⁰⁶

In times when mainstream news media lack the trust of the common citizen, social media plays a crucial role in the circulation of protest-related information. Social media allows for the creation of information hubs, leading to greater chances of engagement



and expression.¹⁰⁷ This has become the basis for scholars to conclude that social media usage has had a positive impact on protest participation.¹⁰⁸ What follows is the scrutiny of media coverage and whether the protest paradigm has been followed, for adhering to this paradigm by emphasizing the spectacle and quoting official sources, would raise questions on the credibility of the movement and dwindle the perceptions of the public about the protestors and protests.¹⁰⁹

The perception of the public is often shaped under certain frames which construct messages through a mode that is often selective and exclusive and, whilst identifying problems and establishing their causes, ‘frames’ tend to offer moral judgments and sol-

The perception of the public is often shaped under certain frames which construct messages through a mode that is often selective and exclusive and, whilst identifying problems and establishing their causes, ‘frames’ tend to offer moral judgments and solutions, i.e. telling the audiences how to think about something. This ‘narrative structure or framing’ has been found to have a strong correlation with the shaping of the public’s choices such as whom to blame for social, political, and economic problems.

¹⁰⁵ Pandey, A. (04 December 2020). How Punjabi youth are using social media to back up farmers protests, and counter ‘Godi Media’. NewsLaundry. Retrieved from <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/12/04/how-punjabi-youth-are-using-social-media-to-back-up-farmer-protests-and-counter-godi-media> [10 January 2021].

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Lee, S. (2018). The Role of Social Media in Protest Participation- The Case of Candlelight Vigils in South Korea. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 1523-1540 [10 January 2021].

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Harlow, S., & Johanson, T. J. (2011). Overthrowing the Protest Paradigm? How TheNew York Times, Global Voices and Twitter Covered the Egyptian Revolution. *International Journal of Communications*, 5, 1359-1374 [10 January 2021].

utions, i.e. telling the audiences how to think about something.¹¹⁰ This ‘narrative structure or framing’¹¹¹ has been found to have a strong correlation with the shaping of the public’s choices such as whom to blame for social, political, and economic problems.¹¹² The perception is likely to revolve around the demonization of the protesters, as it focuses on the spectacle of the protest, by highlighting sensational details such as violence, visible drama, and deviant or strange behaviour.¹¹³

Similar patterns were observed after the protesting farmers’ tractor rally for Republic Day on 26 January, when lakhs of farmers reached the national capital, but a group of farmers stormed the Red Fort, leading to clashes with police in parts of Delhi. Mainstream media houses covered the violence and also peddled misinformation, regarding the hoisting of the Khalistani flag atop Red Fort, when factually it was the Nishan Sahib flag.¹¹⁴

However, the rally was largely conducted in a peaceful manner, videos of which were circulated on social media.¹¹⁵ These videos were often captioned as ‘why are these views not being shown on media?’¹¹⁶ As a significant part of the agricultural sector, women also participated in the rally, but their role was missed out by the mainstream media, and highlighted only on social media.¹¹⁷ On 26 December 2020, Trolley Times launched a special edition of its newspaper focusing on women protestors and participation.¹¹⁸

Even in the case of the Red Fort episode, videos of a large number of protestors who didn’t agree with the act were spotted appealing to the other protestors to climb down from the ramparts.¹¹⁹ These videos were also shared on social media. Half-sided coverage which largely focused on the violence changed the public perception and sympathy for the farmers, as it soon was fixed on the farmers not being actual farmers, but violent elements.¹²⁰

Therefore, the narrative framing of the six hours of farmers’ tractor rally clouded out the life- long Indian agrarian crisis,¹²¹ as well as the months-long protests and several deaths of the farmers. Joyjeet Das wrote in Down To Earth magazine, “Logic demands the opposite: What happened on January 26, 2021 underscores the problems faced by millions of agricultural labourers, farmers, traders – the entire primary sector that is the foundation of India’s economy.”¹²²

¹¹¹ Narrative structures, or frames, are derived from Goffman’s (1974) concept of “schemas,” heuristic tools allowing individuals to process and understand new information.

¹¹² Harlow, S., & Johanson, T. J. (2011). Overthrowing the Protest Paradigm? How TheNew York Times, Global Voices and Twitter Covered the Egyptian Revolution. *International Journal of Communications*, 5, 1359-1374 [10 January 2021].

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Goel, K., & Chandra, D. (29 January 2021). Fact-check: Flag hoisted atop red fort by farmers not khalistan’s. *The Quint*. Retrieved from <https://www.thequint.com/news/webqoof/khalistan-flag-hoisted-stop-red-fort-farmers-protest-fact-check> [31 January 2021].

¹¹⁵ Quint Neon. (27 January 2021). Protest clips from farmers’ tractor rally you missed on tv news. *The Quint*. Retrieved from <https://www.thequint.com/neon/social-buzz/protest-clips-from-farmers-rally-you-missed-on-tv-news#read-more> [31 January 2021].

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ The Trolley Times. (26 December 2020). <https://twitter.com/TimesTrolley/status/1342695096853155843> [10 February 2021].

¹¹⁹ Quint Neon. (27 January 2021). Protest clips from farmers’ tractor rally you missed on tv news. *The Quint*. Retrieved from <https://www.thequint.com/neon/social-buzz/protest-clips-from-farmers-rally-you-missed-on-tv-news#read-more> [31 January 2021].

¹²⁰ Sehgal, M. (28 January 2021). Republic day violence: Did khalistani elements hijack Farmer protest in Delhi? *IndiaToday*. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/republic-day-violence-did-khalistani-elements-hijack-farmer-protest-in-delhi-1763681-2021-01-28> [31 January 2021].

¹²¹ Das, J. (27 January 2021). Republic’s task cut out: Back India’s farmers, don’t go after them. *Down To Earth*. Retrieved from <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/agriculture/republic-s-task-cut-out-back-india-s-farmers-don-t-go-after-them-75217> [31 January 2021].

¹²² Ibid

INSIGHTS FROM THE GROUND — DISTRUST AND SUSPICION

THERE WAS SUSPICION, distrust and questioning amongst the protestors about who they were; from where they have come, and if a particular channel was asking whether they had identity cards or organisational affiliation, then which channel did they speak to? One of the protesters warned us: “Be careful while covering the agitation as there is enough frustration against a number of news channels.”

Apart from protestors’ unwillingness to speak to news channels like Zee News, Republic etc., whom they termed Godi Media, such questioning is a reflection of the cautious preparation for almost everything that may be thrown at them, implying the development of protest with each passing day. “We [protestors] are better prepared to handle and similar things go for the media as well. Initially no one was prepared how to give statements. Words used to be put in protestors’ mouths. They used to be asked certain questions, answers of which were used in a different manner so at this point everybody is prepared for everything”, said Amaan Bali, author and entrepreneur active on Twitter, posting updates regarding the current protest.

This preparation dates back to when the mainstream media succumbed to the ‘protest paradigm’ as they initially chose to ignore the early protests in Punjab and Haryana and when the protestors marched towards India’s capital — New Delhi, the media covered the protests with a focus to capture spectacles and deviant behaviour. Such coverage led to the delegitimization of the protests, and the labelling of the protestors as ‘Khalistanis’, which angered the farmers. They often countered such claims by insisting that

“We [protestors] are better prepared to handle and similar things go for the media as well. Initially no one was prepared how to give statements. Words used to be put in protestors’ mouths. They used to be asked certain questions, answers of which were used in a different manner so at this point everybody is prepared for everything”, said Amaan Bali, author and entrepreneur active on Twitter, posting updates regarding the current protest

their sons were serving in the Indian Army and that they have stood up whenever the nation needed them — be it war or any humanitarian crisis. One protestor challenged, “When we came to demand our rights, suddenly we became anti-social. Can you spot a single anti-social element here?” On the question as to why they feel the media is not giving them fair coverage, multiple farmers said that the media was being paid, especially since it was owned by corporates and political leaders. They argued, “Why they will show the reality? They will propagate what they have been told by their bosses.”

Sukhwinder Singh Sabhra, General Secretary of KMEM said, “We are not against any reporters. They are our sons, they are our daughters. They will speak up, sooner or later, for us when they understand what we are fighting for. We are sleeping in the bitter cold to secure their futures.” He added, “We are against the corporate houses that control the media. We would not have been able to reach the rest of the country, if social media channels had not been instrumentalized. They provided us with a much-needed voice.”

This trust deficit between protesting citizens and the media has had consequences for the media as well. This was elaborated by Aman Pal Natt, Co-Founder of the bi-weekly newspaper — Trolley Times, “Now they [media channels] have removed logos from the mics just to cover the negativity of the protest. If they do not show us at all, they will lose TRP, they have to run their business after all”.

Protestors who spoke for this report often referred to similar agitations against the government under Narendra Modi in Shaheen Bagh (Southeast Delhi). When Muslim women protested against the CAA-NRC, they were demonised constantly as prostitutes and terrorists. “They were just peacefully protesting against a law, which they believed is discriminatory. They were doing what is constitutional — protesting peacefully”.

While problematizing the phenomenon of delegitimization of the protests and protesting citizens, Navkiran Natt, co-founder of the Trolley Times said, “The kind of politics has been unleashed in the country in recent years, the anger has been growing against the current regime. Marginal sections have been constantly demonised through the hatred which has been propagated by the mainstream media.” She added, “When students were protesting in universities, they were called ‘anti-national’. During the citizenship law protests, the media called the protesters ‘terrorists’. When the media portrayed these farmers as ‘Khalistani’, we were not surprised. But what’s important is to debunk those narratives.”

Moreover, protestors also drew comparisons between the current protests and movements under previous regimes, such as Anna Hazare’s anti-corruption movement of 2011. “Media diligently covered Anna Hazare’s Anti-Corruption movement, every little detail was broadcast. What happened to them now? Why is the media not covering our protest in a similar fashion?” Hazare’s campaign played a critical role in bringing corruption at the centre stage during the 2014 general elections. The issue was capitalised by the then opposition party Bharatiya Janata Party, and brought Indian National Congress (INC) its lowest parliamentary performance.

While arguing for the importance of a platform run entirely by protestors with content consisting primarily of live videos, press conferences and addresses by individual farmer leaders, Sandhu said, “We couldn’t trust an external marketing company, because they could be hijacked by the government and be pressurised or bought.”

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Paradigm Shift In The News Consumption

“WE DO NOT watch these Godi Media channels anymore. They show all wrong things, spread hatred. They do not show reality at all. Now, we only watch YouTube channels, they show the situations as they are,” These are the sentiments that echo across all protest sites — Singhu, Tikri and Chazipur. The most common question that was asked was whether we have come from any YouTube channel, which implied that along with a distrust and suspicion of the media channels, there was a trust in the YouTube channels and local news organizations, irrespective of their scale/reach.

Navkiran Natta: Co-Founder, The Trolley Times

One of the protesting farmers at Tikri Border getting his news from some Youtube video (below)



Probably this was the reason that one could spot numerous YouTube and local channels' anchors with mere lapel microphone and smartphones, capturing protests and taking interviews. During an interaction with one of the Youtubers from Haryana on the Singhu Border protest site, he informed us, "Since people have been sitting here over the past 30+ days and since they are being demonised by the media houses, a kind of frustration and suspicion has built around."

One of the protesting farmers at Ghazipur Border giving interview to a local news channel.



One of the protesting farmers at Singhu Border giving interview to a local news channel.



One of the protesting farmers at Ghazipur Border giving interview to a local news channel.



One of the protesting farmers at Ghazipur Border giving interview to a local news channel.

One of the stalls situated at the Tikri border, by the name of ‘Rang Punjab,’ is a YouTube channel broadcasting uncensored perspectives of the protest from Tikri, especially to the people in Punjab. On entering the makeshift stall, there were numerous posters of slogans about repealing the anti-farm bills, farmers’ unity and quotes by Shaheed Bhagat Singh, which they believe help to counter popular narratives in multiple languages like Gurmukhi-Punjabi, English, Hindi and Urdu.



Sukhbeer Singh, one of the founders of the channel, said, “We run it voluntarily. We have made a special WhatsApp number, circulated it amongst the protestors, and we urge them to send photographic or video graphic footage of the protests.”

Aman Natt of the Trolley Times sheds light on the importance of social media, “There is significant potential of the virtual space which should be utilised properly to propagate our own voices. We have seen the impact of social media in this protest. Initially, the media ignored us, those who covered, covered us in a bad light. Some of them twisted the narrative and some of them were against us. Social media helped us to reach out to the masses. Our suffering was heard by International community first, not the Indian media. Later, Indian media felt obliged to cover us. People started to boycott them [Indian Media]”.

Headquarter of Rang Punjab Youtube channel at Tikri Border.

Aman Natt: Co-Founder, The Trolley Times (below)



Countering Popular Narrative

ON INTERACTING WITH protesting farmers about their usage and utilisation of social media, they often answered in the affirmative, adding that they post ‘just regular’ content, while trying to shed light on the ‘real side of the protest’, which they elaborated as a struggle for survival. When asked about the exact types of content that they might post about the protest, they said, “We only post good things about the protest, and upload stories on Instagram. We come here twice a week, so we just post this. We make live videos from here and show that this is what is happening today. When our neighbours see our posts, they too volunteer to come down to the protests’ sites.”

Though these answers were not well articulated, one could observe that there was an absence of language on the part of protestors to say that they use their social media platforms to tackle the mainstream media’s attack on them. Rather, these were a sub-conscious attempt to revolt at the narrative framing of the farmers as terrorists, ‘Khalistanis’ or anti-India elements. The respondents were subtly being a part of counter-narrativization without often realising.

Moreover, the latent function of such social media posts is explained by Aman Natt of the Trolley Times, “Those who have not been able to come at the protest sites, they rely more on social media than mainstream media for the updates. Somebody always tries to do live videos from the protest site so they, who are in the village, get regular updates. Most of them use social media only to see what exactly is happening in and around borders”.

Tractor2Twitter — a Twitter based campaign supporting the protesting farmers on social media against the farm bills — argued that the parallel running of social media is necessary, “Whenever there is a movement, it is fought on multiple fronts. Our family members are protesting, so we people who are sitting outside India want to contribute, and help them to challenge popular narrative propagated by the mainstream media. So, teams from India, especially the youth, started joining us in this Twitter campaign”.

Aman Natt explained the trajectory of how official social media platforms like Kisan Ekta Morcha (KEM) — official handle of farmers were born out of the success of the individual platforms that were once voluntarily initiated for the dissemination and debunking of information around farmers’ protests, “We pushed for the KEM, as we feel that there should be a single source of dissemination of information. So, everyone can get authentic information. Interestingly, earlier it was managed voluntarily. Some of the prominent handles who were active during the protest started to counter IT Cells of the ruling establishment in their own individual capacity.”

Aman continued: “Later, this spread like a chain reaction and was hence organised and a group was formed to strategize to counter the popular narrative. Now, there are 2-3 big (WhatsApp) groups constantly working on strategies. I am a part of one of them. We decide hashtags and start trending on social media platforms. The hashtags depend on the popular narrative that is being peddled on that day. Recently, they questioned the fundings of Khalsa Aid, we counter them with our hashtags”.

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He adds, “It has become a people’s movement. Initially, farmers leaders were little hesitant to start any sort of the Cell in the virtual space. They were of the opinion that morcha [protest] is going strong, and there is no need for it. Later, they did realise its importance, and we started Kisan Ekta Morch [Farmers Unity Front], which is functioning very well”.

While interacting with protesting farmers, one would easily realise that contrary to the mainstream media’s portrayal of farmers not having read the bills or being misled, the farmers are well-versed with not only the bills, but also the grave consequences they would lead to. If anyone is really interested in understanding for farmers with regards to the three laws, farmers were always ready to decipher the nuances of each bill and the intentions of the government behind passing these in a hurry as one of the repetitive arguments stated against the farm laws was the example of Bihar as these same 3 farm bills were introduced back in 2006. In Bihar, it has led to the deterioration of farmers, driving them to migrate to Punjab, where they have been working as daily wage labourers.

There was a deliberate attempt to prove that farmers read, which was reflected in the types of banners and posters present at the protest sites — ‘kisaan padh rahe hain, aagey badh rahe hain’ [trans: farmers are reading and progressing], ‘udhta nahin, padhta Punjab’ [trans: not high Punjab, rather educated Punjab]. Farmers believe that they are fighting on behalf of every citizen, as if agriculture starts getting controlled by big corporations, it will affect the vulnerable sections most.

Farmers believe social media platforms have helped in countering popular narratives propagated by the mainstream media. Amaan Bali explains social media’s role in fur-

**Team of
Tractor2Twitter and
NRIs Chalo Dilli.**

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thering the movement: “Social media platforms have been successful in debunking media’s narratives. And this is the reason that a lot of campaigns by the media have failed. If you look at the campaign that this is a rich farmers’ protest, these people (Tractor2Twitter, The Trolley Times) have been highly successful in countering it. But, at the same time intellectuals too have played a major role in countering economists’ arguments in favour of the bills. I, for that matter, have written numerous rebuttals”.

Describing the importance of Kisaan Ekta Morcha (KEM) in disseminating authentic information right from the ground, he said, “KEM was the need of the hour. What was happening was that the farmers’ leaders voices were being turned into something else. The statements that were never made, or were made out to be theirs and debates and primetime shows were run on its basis”.

One of the narratives that was constantly being propagated by the farmers was that they are not only fighting for their survival, but for the survival of every citizen. Farmers explained that the corporations will control the supply-chain of the agriculture products, henceforth the prices will affect every citizen. Initially, protests started in Punjab followed by Haryana, and now every part of the society has started to understand the repercussions of the three farm laws. They often refer to social media posts, which explain how the rates change from farmers to the corporation. One of the farmers said, “We sell carrot at 1-2 rupees kg at the mandi, but people buy those carrots at 30-40 rupees per kg. This profit making from agriculture is only going to escalate after the laws will come into full effect.” Farmers strongly believe that they have been able to reach the rest of the country with their narrative. Every section of the society of the county has started to support this agitation.

Tractor2Twitter, which is also a part of the community called ‘NRIs chalo Dilli’ ex-

Navkiran of Trolley Times said: “Protest will only be bigger in the coming days. They [Mainstream Media] say that protestors are not farmers. They are right. Every section of the society is protesting including the middle class and women.” She adds: “I am a landless woman, and I am here to support farmers, as we must. The law is going to affect everyone.”

Balweer Kaur (second from right) with her family.



plained how the laws are going to affect the farmers, “Their main strategy is vertical integration of the farmers, so they can buy directly from the farmers, process it and sell it in the market. In India, organised retail is only 2 percent of the total produce while in the USA or the West, 99 percent is organised; only 1 percent is unorganised. They want to take the entire control in their hands, end to end. In order to do that, they are bringing in these laws. It’s all connected. Adani Group is already in this segment. They are taking apples from Himachal Pradesh at the cost of 20-30 rupees per kg, while selling them at Rs 250 per kg. They have enough storage capacity – why are they not regulated? They show happy farmers in the photos, one should ask them how happy they actually are!”

Despite constant demonisation, farmers are showing no intention of going back. “We are here to protect our land. They call us Khalistani and everything, let them say,” said Balweer Kaur, who came to Singhu all the way from Amritsar. “They do not know anything about Punjab. One of my sons is in the army, another in government service. We will not be deterred by these propagandas. We will not go back until these black laws are repealed.”

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Online To Offline Trickling Impacts

THE HASHTAGS ON Twitter have been playing an important role in upstreaming the voices and particular issues of farmers in mainstream media and grabbing attention of even politicians. Tractor2Twitter — a Twitter based campaign — explains how their trending hashtags have been successfully translated to offline actions, “One month earlier, no one knew much about Twitter. If they knew, they were not aware about its potential, like what is a hashtag. Hashtag is rather like a message. When the farmers’ agitation started, teams across the global began mobilising and then this initiative Tractor2Twitter was formed and we are proudly a part of this initiative”.

They explained the on-ground impacts of Twitter campaigning, one of them being #Dushyant_kisan_ya_kursi, “We act as a team, not individually and nor do we attach ourselves to the farmers. We work on social media by their sides and let the protesting farmers do their job on the ground. So, we run it every night and we always try and push positive messages through Twitter. So, whatever narrative that BJP IT cell pushes, we try and counter it positively so that the voices of farmers always surpass that. And we have been successful in that to a large extent. We ran a hashtag #Dushyant_kisan_ya_kursi, and a day after this, Dushyant Chautala had to come forward and talk about MSP’s guarantee”.

Another achievement was the downfall of the music app owned by Ambani group —

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JioSaavan, “After that, we also ran a hashtag campaign #BoycottJioSaavan, which again impacted Reliance a lot. Jio faced a downfall in its SIM card holders. Singers came forward and said that they have taken down their songs from Saavan. The immediate impact of all this was that the Reliance shifted the blame for this downfall on its competitors like Airtel and Vodafone. But we know that these competitors have always been there, attracting customers, but why is it that this time Reliance faced such a crisis? So, we know we have impacted them and it has hurt them.”

Politics of Symbolism

THE WAY PROTESTING farmers are relying on social media for propagating their voices and opinions as well as countering mis/disinformation implies their heavy engagement with social media and the consumption of news, updates and anything that revolves around the ongoing farm agitation. One of the prominent examples of this was Bollywood actor Kangana Ranaut’s tweets that were aimed at slandering the women



Kangana Ranaut @KanganaTeam · 6m
Ha ha ha she is the same dadi who featured in Time magazine for being the most powerful Indian.... And she is available in 100 rupees. Pakistani jurno’s have hijacked international PR for India in an embarrassing way. We need our own people to speak for us internationally.



अधिवक्ता गौतम यादव @Gautam43... · 3h

1. Dadi at Shaheen Bagh
2. Dadi as Farmer?

Dadi available for hire on per day basis.
Food, cloth, award and pocket money e...



101

281

1,358



One of the prominent examples of this was Bollywood actor Kangana Ranaut’s tweets that were aimed at slandering the women protestors at the protesting sites.

protestors at the protesting sites. On venturing to the protest sites, one could easily spot various posters around Ranaut often marked with a cross across her face. As the anti-farm laws protests intensified and witnessed high mobilisation of farmers in and around the national capital, Kangana Ranaut shared a picture on Twitter which claimed that the ‘Shaheen Bagh Dadi’ — Bilkis Bano, a 82-year-old woman who became the face of the last year’s anti-CAA-NRC protests at Shaheen Bagh and also featured in the TIME’s ‘100 Women of 2020’ — was also present at the protests and is available for hire.¹²³ Ranaut not only shared the fake news, but also built upon it, claiming that the Daadi (grandmother) was available for 100 rupees.¹²⁴

This tweet was initially posted with much confidence and without any fact-check, and was later taken down by Ranaut herself. Netizens (an active participant in the online community of the Internet) like Diljit Dosanjh, a prominent Punjabi singer and actor, slammed her for slinging mud at the old woman, which led to a spat between Ranaut and Dosanjh. This tweet and the argument reached every nook and corner of the three protest sites. The protesting farmers were angered by Ranaut’s tweet and it triggered an emotional wave amongst the protestors which they manifested into posters often cross-marked across her face with the word ‘boycott’ written over it. Upon being asked, one of the protesting farmers said, “She finds us bought? How can she say such petty things about our mothers and sisters!”

Aman Natt explained the pent-up anger that the tweets triggered and the reactions thus received, “Ladies came forward rather more enthusiastically. ‘Who has gotten 200 rupees!? We have come here to save our homes, lands and children’s future. You should feel ashamed while making such statements’. I have heard this from common female protestors. We have properly covered their stories. ‘I lost my husband and children to suicide, despite that I came here. Disrespecting all such struggles she claimed that women have got 200 rupees for protesting’. Such statements about an 80 year old woman, who lost all her family members to the agrarian crisis are bound to make people angry”.

One of the protesting farmers, Rajendra Singh- an octogenarian from Mohali, Punjab- had come all alone with an effigy which had blackened faces of ministers, singers and actors including Ranaut with criticism written under it. When being asked what has caused him anger, he replied that Ranaut had insulted the women protestors by labelling them with 100 rupees. He insisted that Ranaut should spend one full day in the biting cold of Delhi to realise how wrong she has been.

Aman Natt explained the unintentional positive impact that the tweets had had on the mobilisation and the turnout of the protests. What was actually intended to vilify the movement, only spurred the youth to participate even more in the protests. “The outreach of the protest increased because the elite section of the society, the youth of the cosmopolitan areas, found it difficult to relate with the farmers’ protests. They often think along the lines that some farmers from Punjab-Haryana have difficulty with the laws but we are sitting in Bangalore or Mumbai, so what we have to do with this. But, when some celebrity jumps in it, then their curiosity increases. They feel that there must be something that we must know about. That, I think, is a big positive impact”.

¹²³ 123. Web Desk. (28 November 2020). Kangana slammed for claiming ‘Shaheen bagh dadi’ was at farmers’ protest. The Week. Retrieved from <https://www.the-week.in/news/entertainment/2020/11/29/kangana-slammed-for-claiming-shaheen-bagh-dadi-was-at-farmers-protest.html> [31 January 2021].

¹²⁴ Ibid.

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Kangana Ranaut compared the women of ongoing farm agitation with the women of Shaheen Bagh, where Muslim women led the protests against CAA/NRC, and Bilkis Bano become a symbolic figure of the protest. Since the Narendra Modi government came to office in 2014, the marginalised sections of society including women, minorities, tribals and Dalits have been at the forefront of the resistance to the majoritarian march. Shaheen Bagh was one of the largest mobilisation of women on any non-gender issue since independence.

Interestingly, the politics of symbolism around Kangana's comparison of the two old ladies, Bano and Kaur, was explained by Amaan Bali, "Mahinder Kaur ji, the lady from that picture, I want you guys to listen to this very closely. Kangana Ranaut actually mentioned about a lady comparing her to another lady from Shaheen Bagh. So immediately when she compared with Shaheen Bagh, the intent was not just to compare her to an old lady from Shaheen Bagh, but to slander the lady from Shaheen Bagh. Even though, that lady from Shaheen Bagh has been projected in Time Magazine, the intent of the right-wing is very clear: to project her as the symbol of criminality, terrorism, wrongness."

"In propaganda language, it is called symbolism. Ranaut and everyone use the symbolism of Bilkis, so they are saying that that old lady is a symbol of something which is anti-national. So, they have actually managed to create a symbol of anti-national in that old lady. So the comparison that was to put against this one was actually a mirror image of that one. It is very important to understand that these things are very deep. Symbolism propaganda works really deeply and they have been using it," he concluded.

'Who has gotten 200 rupees!? We have come here to save our homes, lands and children's future. You should feel ashamed while making such statements'

SOCIAL MEDIA HELPED THE PROTEST GET INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION

A TWEET BY Rihanna — a pop singer — led to commotion on Twitter, as well as in the government's Ministry of External Affairs. Rihanna tweeted a news article on CNN, 'India cuts the Internet around New Delhi as protesting farmers clash with police' captioned as 'Why aren't we talking about this?! #FarmersProtest. The tweet of the pop star to her 101 million followers on Twitter sent her name to the top of Indian social media trends. Her tweet grabbed eyeballs of the international community towards the ongoing farm protest.¹²⁵

Just after Rihanna's tweet, Greta Thunberg — a Swedish environmental activist — also tweeted the same article's link, with the words, 'We stand in solidarity with #Farmers Protest in India.' Meena Harris — lawyer and niece of the newly elected Vice President of the United States of America, Kamala Harris — also tweeted, "It's no coincidence that the world's oldest democracy was attacked not even a month ago, and as we speak, the most populous democracy is under assault. This is related. We ALL should be outraged by India's Internet shutdowns and paramilitary violence against farmer protesters."¹²⁶

Internet Shutdown — Muzzling Free Speech

THE CNN NEWS story, tweeted by both Rihanna and Greta Thunberg, was on the suspension of Internet services in Punjab and Haryana, in the wake of the ongoing

In India, Internet suspension has become a pathological response to the maintenance of law and order. The Indian government has suspended the Internet more than 400 times in the last four years, including in Jammu and Kashmir – which has turned out to be one of the longest suspension of the Internet in any democracy.

¹²⁵ BBC. (03 February 2021). Farmers' protest: Rihanna tweet angers Indian government. BBC. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55914858> [03 March 2021].

¹²⁶ Ibid

Areas affected by internet shutdowns in Delhi and Haryana since January 26, 2020		
Date	Areas affected in Delhi	Areas affected in Haryana
January 26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Singhu, Ghazipur, Tikri, Mukarba Chowk, Nangloi and adjoining areas Speed throttled to 2G (64 kbps) in Delhi Circle 	Sonapat, Palwal, Jhajjar
January 27		Sonapat, Palwal, Jhajjar
January 28		Sonapat, Palwal, Jhajjar*
January 29		17 districts— Sonapat, Jhajjar, Palwal, Ambala, Yamunanagar, Kurukshetra, Karnal, Kaithal, Panipat, Hisar, Jind, Rohtak, Bhiwani, Charkhi Dadri, Rewari, Fatehabad, Sirsa*
January 30	Singhu, Ghazipur, Tikri, and adjoining areas	17 districts— Sonapat, Jhajjar, Palwal, Ambala, Yamunanagar, Kurukshetra, Karnal, Kaithal, Panipat, Hisar, Jind, Rohtak, Bhiwani, Charkhi Dadri, Rewari, Fatehabad, Sirsa*
January 31	Singhu, Ghazipur, Tikri, and adjoining areas	14 districts—Sonapat, Jhajjar, Rohtak, Kaithal, Jind, Panipat, Charkhi Dadri, Ambala, Kurukshetra, Karnal, Hisar, Bhiwani, Sirsa, Fatehabad*
February 1	Singhu, Ghazipur, Tikri, and adjoining areas	7 districts—Sonapat, Jhajjar, Rohtak, Kaithal, Jind, Panipat, Charkhi Dadri*
February 2	Singhu, Ghazipur, Tikri, and adjoining areas	7 districts—Sonapat, Jhajjar, Rohtak, Kaithal, Jind, Panipat, Charkhi Dadri*
February 3		5 districts—Sonapat, Jhajjar, Rohtak, Kaithal, Jind*
February 4		2 districts—Sonapat, Jhajjar*
February 5		2 districts—Sonapat, Jhajjar

*Orders valid until 5 pm the next day

SOURCE Union Ministry of Home Affairs, Haryana Government

farmers' agitation. Both states border the national capital. As the largest democracy in the world, India ironically also holds the record of the most number of Internet suspensions in 2019, according to data from Access Now — an advocacy group which tracks Internet freedom.¹²⁷

The Internet suspension came in the wake of clashes that broke out on 26 January 2021 — Republic Day — in New Delhi. Farmer unions called for a tractor rally, 'Kissan Parade,' on the anniversary of the enactment of the country's Constitution to register their protest against the laws which they believe are against the interest of the farmers. The demonstration was largely peaceful, but in some parts of the national capital, clashes broke out between protestors and police and a group of farmers stormed the historic Red Fort. In the clash, police personnel and protestors were injured and one protester died.¹²⁸

In yet another tweet, Thunberg shared a 'toolkit', providing a number of ways in which the farmers' protests could be supported. The toolkit attracted huge controversies, leading to the arrest of another climate activist and founder of Friday for Future India, Disha Ravi. Ravi was arrested for sedition, reflecting a larger pattern of silencing dissenters. The arrest was criticised heavily, nationally and internationally, on the grounds of curtailing free speech in the country.¹²⁹

Against the backdrop of the agitation, the authorities suspended and restricted the In-

¹²⁷ Mitra, E., & Hollingsworth. (03 February 2021). India cuts internet around New Delhi as protesting farmers clash with police. CNN. Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/01/asia/india-internet-cut-farmers-intl-hnk/index.html> [03 March 2021].

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ghoshal, D. (16 February 2021). Explainer: Why Indian police arrested Disha Ravi, a 21-year-old climate activist. Live Mint. Retrieved from <https://www.live-mint.com/news/india/explainer-why-indian-police-arrested-disha-ravi-a-22-yr-old-climate-activist-11613468790546.html> [04 April 2021].

ternet in New Delhi and later in parts of Haryana, saying that it was “in the interest of maintaining public safety and averting public emergency.” In India, Internet suspension has become a pathological response to the maintenance of law and order. The Indian government has suspended the Internet more than 400 times in the last four years, including in Jammu and Kashmir – which has turned out to be one of the longest suspension of the Internet in any democracy. In 2019, when citizens hit the streets in lakhs to oppose the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, the central government suspended Internet services in multiple parts of the country, including for the first time in New Delhi.¹³⁰

However, farmer leaders called the shutting down of the communication medium is ‘undemocratic.’ “The government does not want real facts to reach protesting farmers, nor their peaceful conduct to reach the world,” Dr Darshna Pal — a leader of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha [United Farmers Front] — said in a statement. “It wants to spread its false spin around farmers. It is also fearful of the coordinated work of the farmers’ unions across different protest sites and is trying to cut off communication means between them,” added Pal.¹³¹

Internet shutdowns have led to a restricted and muzzled flow of information, as many journalists complained that they were not able to send stories, contact the newsroom, and even upload footages on social media handles. “At the Singhu border itself, a lot of people told me about speeches that were uploaded the previous night, on Monday [January 25] night. I wanted to check on these things on the ground [to gain context about the situation], but even that was an issue,” said Asmit Nandy of The Quint, who has reported from Singhu and Ghazipur.

A Tweet Unnerved Indian Authorities and Celebrities

AFTER RIHANNA’S TWEET over farmers’ protests and Internet shutdowns, the Indian External Affairs Ministry promptly responded, “Before rushing to comment on such matters, we would urge that the facts be ascertained, and a proper understanding of the issues at hand be undertaken.” The press statement of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) added, “The temptation of sensationalist social media hashtags and comments, especially when resorted to by celebrities and others, is neither accurate nor responsible.”

As farmers show no sign of backing off, the Narendra Modi-led government is facing one of the biggest political challenges, since being elected to office in 2014. The MEA statement reveals that the government has failed to control the international narrative around the farmers’ protest. After the MEA statement, a number of celebrities including cricketers and actors took social media to promote the pro-government narrative with a hashtag used by the MEA spokesperson — #IndiaTogether.

Farmers from different parts of the country have been protesting for a month, braving adversities from the biting cold to sprays from water cannons and tear gas shells from the police, but not many celebrities have tweeted on the farm agitation. Interestingly,

¹³⁰ Mitra, E., & Hollingsworth. (03 February 2021). India cuts internet around New Delhi as protesting farmers clash with police. CNN. Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/01/asia/india-internet-cut-farmers-intl-hnk/index.html> [03 March 2021].

¹³¹ Ibid.

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soon after Rihanna's tweet, followed by the MEA statement, Sachin Tendulkar tweeted, "India's sovereignty cannot be compromised. External forces can be spectators but not participants. Indians know India and should decide for India. Let's remain united as a nation. #IndiaTogether #IndiaAgainstPropaganda".

Kangana Ranaut alleged that the protesting farmers were terrorists and that the on-going farmers' agitation is a Chinese conspiracy. She retweeted Rihanna's tweet saying: "No one is talking about it because they are not farmers they are terrorists who are trying to divide India, so that China can take over our vulnerable broken nation and make it a Chinese colony much like USA... Sit down you fool, we are not selling our nation like you dummies." In another tweet she wrote: "She is a singer much like Sunidhi Chauhan or Neha Kakkar. She can shake her bum cheeks and expose her a * * crack right into the camera lens while singing. Ya that's all. Nothing else."¹³²

The language used by Ranaut was nothing but the language of faceless trolls. It only showed that just one tweet of Rihanna was enough to rattle not only Indian celebrities and the government, but whole right wing troll armies, which have been consistent in delegitimizing the farm agitation by using the term 'Khalistani.' Rihanna's history of surviving abuse in 2009 has been dug out and she was trolled on social media. Misogynist minds commented on her — "She must have done something to deserve it," "Women must be beaten if they get out of control," and "She was beaten because she was immoral" and this has only exposed the mindset of the right wing trolls.

However, Internet shutdowns have come in the wake of growing censorship against journalists, activists, and union leaders, making the flow of information rather more difficult. An FIR was lodged against Rajdeep Sardesai, a primetime news anchor with India Today, Siddharth Vardharajan, Founding Editor of The Wire, along with INC politician Dr. Shashi Tharoor. The FIR, in all three cases, was lodged for 'misreporting' and 'spreading misharmony' on Republic Day, and also has the name of the Executive Editor of the Caravan Magazine, Vinod K. Jose.¹³³ The National Investigation Agency (NIA) summoned 40 people, including farmer union leaders and activists for questioning in seditious cases, in relation to the Republic Day violence.¹³⁴

The tweet from Rihanna has sparked solidarity, witnessed on Twitter as being far beyond the realm of the conventional. The chain of unfolding events triggered by Rihanna's tweet has revealed unexpected strength, especially with regard to shifting and sharing power. Human rights are not within the purview of the state's boundaries. The effectiveness of this sort of virtual solidarity is inspiring, when seen against the backdrop of suffocating censorship.

From micro-blogging sites, Rihanna's tweet translated into international newspapers. According to the New York Times, "The efforts have drawn growing international condemnation, from human rights groups and Internet personalities alike. A tweet by the pop star Rihanna in support of the farmers dominated Indian social media on Wednesday, prompting a response from pro-Modi entertainers in India urging unity and denouncing outsider voices as trying to divide the country."¹³⁵ Meanwhile, according to The Washington Post, "India hits back at Rihanna, Greta Thunberg and other celebrities after they support farmer protests."¹³⁶

¹³² HT Entertainment Desk. (05 February 2021). Kangana Ranaut attacks Rihanna again, says singer must have charged 'at least ₹100 crore' for tweet. Hindustan Times. Retrieved from [https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/kangana-ranaut-attacks-rihanna-again-says-singer-must-have-charged-at-least-100-crore-for-tweet-about-farmers-protest-101612512977084.html#:~:text=She%20hinted%20at%20Rihanna's%20tweet,r%20esponded%20to%20a%20few%20people%20\[03%20March%202021\].](https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/kangana-ranaut-attacks-rihanna-again-says-singer-must-have-charged-at-least-100-crore-for-tweet-about-farmers-protest-101612512977084.html#:~:text=She%20hinted%20at%20Rihanna's%20tweet,r%20esponded%20to%20a%20few%20people%20[03%20March%202021].)

¹³³ The Wire Staff. (03 February 2021). Farmers' Rally: Shashi Tharoor, Rajdeep Sardesai, Others Move SC Against Multiple FIR. The Wire. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/law/shashi-tharoor-journalists-firs-farmers-rally> [03 March 2021].

¹³⁴ Surjit, S. (16 January 2021). NIA summons farm union leader Baldev Singh Sirsa, Sikh activists for questioning in sedition case. Hindustan Times. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/nia-summons-farm-union-leader-baldev-singh-sirsa-sikh-activists-for-questioning-in-sedition-case-101610795269310.html> [03 March 2021].

¹³⁵ Mashal, M., & Yasir, S. (08 February 2021). Modi's Response to Farmer Protests in India Stirs Fears of a Pattern. New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/world/asia/india-modi-farmer-protest-censorship.html> [03 March 2021].

¹³⁶ Masih, N. (03 February 2021). India hits back at Rihanna, Greta Thunberg and other celebrities after they support farmer protests. Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/india-farmers-protests-rihanna-greta/2021/02/03/619eb456-6606-11eb-bab8-707f8769d785_story.html [03 March 2021].

CONCLUSION

THE TRAJECTORY OF the protests that have risen against the status quo of the current regime's actions and laws reflects certain commonalities and patterns. Protestors against the CAA-NRC were tagged as terrorists and students were tagged as 'tukde-tukde gang'. As Amaan Bali had explained, "People might think that the delegitimization of the protests is organic or spontaneous, but it has a standard playbook for all the protestors. Dissent is not being liked by the current government, be it Shaheen Bagh or any protest".

Far from the gleaming lights of big cities, farmers have been struggling with a number of structural problems, such as electricity, irrigation and fair prices of the agricultural produce compounded with natural calamities, such as floods and droughts. The crisis has pushed farmers towards committing suicides in their thousands every year. But, their suffering, struggles and the poor intervention from the state has been ignored by the mainstream media. When the three farm laws were passed, farmers saw it as a last nail in the coffin. They hit the streets — initially in Punjab and Haryana — but the protest has now spread across multiple states, such as Rajasthan. They have encircled the national capital in lakhs, for the past four months. When the mainstream media finally paid attention when they hit the border of Delhi on 27 November 2020, it was only to tag them as Khalistani and anti-social elements. In the recent past, the media has demonised the protestors and marginalised sections of the society such as students, Muslim, and Dalit.

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Social media and the current regime's IT cell has been implicit in normalising the delegitimization of dissenting citizens, which often focus on one event rather than the structural issues that Indian society must deal with. Since social media is where current discourses are being set and discussed and where hatred is being spread, it becomes imperative for protestors to use the same tool to instrumentalise and counter popular narratives. Therefore, we have tried to establish how social media platforms like KEM, Tractor2Twitter and The Trolley Times have been successful in tackling narrative-framing such as 'Khalistani' and 'anti-social'. The protesting farmers are active on social media platforms doing every bit to counter the pro-government line.

As Aman Natt of The Trolley Times said, "I think that from the day it [KEM] has started, it has been for the first time since BJP came into power that its IT cell has been on the back-foot and they have been unable to understand what move to play next. Because on one hand, there are paid workers of the ruling party, and on the other hand, there are volunteers who are fighting an existential struggle. So, the IT cell has not been able to understand how to counter this spontaneous reaction from the people. With 24*7 counters, they are left behind. Every story propagated by them [IT cell] has failed to stand for more than a day".

The virtual spaces which were once dominated by right wing content are now seeing the protests as a physical method to renegotiate that space. Unlike the traditional media landscape, the government has struggled to control or propagate narratives in virtual space. In the height of a pandemic, in 2020, in order to control information on virtual platforms, the central government headed by Narendra Modi prepared a report on government communication published by a Group of Ministers (GoM), comprising five cabinet ministers and four ministers of state including Ravi Shankar Prasad and Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi. Prominent folks from the mainstream media fraternity attended the meeting¹³⁷.

Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi raised the core concern of the meeting, "We should have a strategy to neutralise the people who are writing against the Government without facts and setting false narratives/spread fake news¹³⁸." Interestingly, the ministers did not define what is 'fake news.' In tandem with the report, the government notified a rule that will regulate social media entities, online news platforms, and streaming services which raises the question of censorship and surveillance¹³⁹.

The rule will not only empower government executives to censor speech on virtual platforms but social media entities will decide what is unlawful. In any democratic society, what is unlawful should be decided by an independent judiciary with clear due legislation, not private entities. The decision of monitoring speeches on virtual spaces will fundamentally shape the experience of users on the Internet and future of free speech in India. Hence, the information order and Indian democracy alike have been on a slippery slope in recent years, and the future of both remains to be seen¹⁴⁰.

Information order and Indian democracy alike have been on a slippery slope in recent years, and the future of both remains to be seen.

¹³⁷ Bal, S. H., (04 March 2021). Paranoia about digital coverage led ministers to propose media clampdown, monitoring "negative influencers". The Caravan. Retrieved from <https://caravan-magazine.in/politics/paranoia-about-digital-coverage-led-gom-propose-media-clampdown-monitoring-negative-influencers> [09 April 2021].

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Internet Freedom Foundation. (27 February 2021). Explainer: Why India's new rules for social media, news sites.

¹⁴⁰ HT Correspondent. (04 March 2021). India downgraded from 'free' to 'partly free' in democracy report. Hindustan Times. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-downgraded-from-free-to-partly-free-in-democracy-report-101614810847391.html> [09 April 2021].

PROTESTS IN THE TIMES OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A CASE OF FARMERS' AGITATION

**Instrumentalising
Social Media to Counter
Popular Narrative**

