



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Sociology

**FROM DELHI TO GLOBAL HEADLINES:
EXAMINING THE MEDIA COVERAGE AND
INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE FARMERS'
PROTESTS**

KEY WORDS: Indian Government, Modi, media, farmers, protests, riots, social media

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ABSTRACT

The metamorphosis growth of social media platforms has helped to expand the information-sharing capabilities of people. People can share information and communicate more freely. The importance of social media in the farmer's protest of 2020-2021 has been shown within the present research. The study has shed light on the problems which led to the eventual riots and protests across the country, the role of both domestic and international news sources has also been presented in the study. The manipulation of mainstream media by the Indian government has been the most important factor studied in the research. The research emphasizes how the farmers found refuge in social media for support when the national media had failed them, their posts became viral on social platforms drawing the attention of other countries and making the protest international.

INTRODUCTION

The farm laws which were passed in India in 2020 caused immense uproar among the farming communities of the country. Despite the government promoting the bills as a historical step towards liberating the farmers and providing them with more power, the farmers saw the policies catering to wholesale agents and large organisations. They viewed bills as a death to the different farmer markets and impoverished them in the long run. During the protests, the influence of the Indian government on the mainstream media coverage of the event has been highly criticised. The people have been labelled as Khalistanis, terrorists among many other harmful labels. Many protesters have been injured by the police forces, and some of the journalists and politicians who chose to support the movement were arrested and jailed. The mainstream news sources were known to cause disharmony and misreporting, as a result, many of the younger farmers took to social media to show the real picture to the world. The reputation of the Indian government in the international sphere deteriorated as other countries shamed the country for torturing poor farmers who were peacefully protesting for their beliefs. The present research dives deeper into these issues the problems which the mainstream media had and the impact of the farmer's protests on the globe.

Indian Farmer Protest 2020-2021

The Indian farmer protest which took place in India in late 2020 was a result of farm laws that the Indian parliament passed in September 2020. The Indian government has introduced many neoliberal economic policies which have contributed to shifting the agrarian economy of India to non-farm occupations. The protests of 2020-21, therefore, acted as a device for farmers to revive their identities, the protests removed the divide among citizens and contributed to people from different classes, castes, genders and religions coming together and protesting against the government. In June 2020 the cabinet of Prime Minister Modi introduced a bill that would have allowed more freedom to the farmers and sell their produce directly to buyers across the country and trading houses (Reuters, 2021). While the intention was to help farmers increase their profit margins, the government failed to realize how this would severely reduce the bargaining power of the farmers.

The farmer movement lasted for more than a year and continues to be one of the biggest protests faced in India. The event was a demonstration of resistance to neoliberalism within the country's agricultural sector. Hundreds of thousands of farmers from all across India marched to Delhi and camped on the streets of India's capital until the government was ready to repeal the laws. The farmers argued that the end goal of the policies was to benefit the big corporations and bring them more profit rather than the farmers (The Hindu, 2022). The act of pushing back the

government not only helped the farmers find new courage but also drew more attention from the political parties of India and led them to reconsider their political standpoint because the impact on the farmers altered the results of legislative elections across five states of the country. Even though farmers from all parts of India criticized the movement, it was the Punjabi farmers who started the march to Delhi, and more farmers from other parts of India followed the movement soon after. The winter months did not make the march any easier, the farmers had to brave themselves against the bitter cold and live in tents and trolleys.

The government had made several attempts to break down the protests, on the night of January 27, 2021, the BJP government forcibly tried to remove the protesters from the borders of Delhi which only strengthened the alliance between the farmers and brought in more heat towards the ruling party (Kumar, 2022). The brutality that the police demonstrated, made locals question the ability of the Modi government. For the first time in many years, Hindu and Muslim farmers stood next to each other with a shared identity of "Kisan" or farmers. The Hindu fundamentalist identity which the farmers had assumed previously was challenged as it revolutionised the agrarian politics in rural India and revived the identity of farmers, they understood that changes cannot be brought through division. The farmer's movement continues to be an inspiring act as it motivated millions of people struggling to establish their identity and dignity.

The policies pushed by the BJP government generated fear among the people, the people saw through the charade of the government and their preferences for bigger corporations over the farmers. The participation of young rural men in the protest shows the shift in farmer politics which has previously not been seen, it led the farmers to understand the importance of a shared farmer identity over a Hindu identity. The rise of communalism in India after the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots was highlighted, and the tearful image of Rakesh Tikait who led the nonviolent movement consumed the people of India and drew sympathy from people of all social classes. Both Hindu and Muslim farmers learned to work together and bring down the tyrannical government policies set against them.

Social media served as a major tool during these protests because the farmers were able to show the world how the government had been treating them. Young farmers used platforms such as Facebook, Tik Tok, Whatsapp and YouTube to connect with other farmers and the greater Indian audience to share their suffering (Kumar, 2022). The social media posts also connected the farmers with the Jat diaspora spread across the world, with support drawn from global government bodies, pressurizing the Modi government to revert the policies and bring justice for the struggling farmers.

National Media Coverage of the Farmer Protest in Delhi

During the initial days of the protest, the Indian media was blamed for not portraying the full impact of the protest, the Indian citizens were misinformed about the protests. Media plays an important role within a country in important critical incidents but they can also harm movements by not reporting and ignoring the incidents. The government had taken actions to prevent the movement from happening right from the beginning, the protestors have shared how road dividers in Punjab and Haryana were fortified with cement. In Karnal, on the other hand, 150 driverless cars were parked to prevent the farmers who were coming with their tractors from driving safely (Scroll, 2020). Near Panipat and Snipat, trenches were dug to slow down the protestors and the media failed to acknowledge or represent these incidents altogether. The hurt protestors remarked that the Indian media called them Khalistanis when they only wanted to peacefully protest. The protestors remarked that the national media had not been with them, they continued to be parked near the borders of Delhi which was remarked as an open jail. The news media portrayed the peaceful protestors as terrorists, by not showcasing the real reasons behind their protests.

The Delhi-based national media made negative coverage of the protests, which further circulated throughout India by regional news sources. However, it has been seen that after Republic Day, many of the mainstream media switched sides and chose to support the large gathering of people (Newslaundry, 2021). Social media on the other hand served as a major tool for the protestors to share their side of the story. They knew even after they gained the support of the mainstream media, the reporting would be lukewarm, so they took the social media platforms to share their perils. Many of the mainstream media not only shut down updates on the movement but spread false information to confuse the civilians. Using social media for open communication was a democratic movement, it showed the power of the social platforms in today's time and its ability to even through the mainstream media. Since the arrival of Modi and the BJP as the dominative power of India, a change has been observed in the news media of India, these issues were fleshed out further with the help of this farmer's revolt.

During the initial start of the revolt in late November 2020, tens of thousands of farmers marched to New Delhi, through around 250 million people supported the movement, the coverage of the protest from the national media has been heavily divided. The main culprits were news organisations such as Zee News, RepublicTV, and ABP News, all of these news sources actively tried to twist the motives of the poor farmers and manipulated the coverage to rile up people against the movement instead of doing their job as unbiased journalists (Dangarwala, 2023). The Hindu-Muslim divide in India was already prevalent, and the consequences of such divisions led to the mainstream media marking the movement as Khalistanis and violent mobs. The SKM (Samyukta Kisan Morcha) wanted to conduct a tractor rally on Republic Day near the outskirts of Delhi.

When a different group of people tried to hoist a Sikh community flag on the historic Red Fort, 40 security personnel were injured, and 200 other farmers were detained. The mainstream media did not bother to check the sources and continued to compare the peaceful protestors as violent on different TV and news channels (Behl, 2022). Researchers have suggested that public intellectuals, judicial independence and media outlets have all helped in spreading the antisecular vision of the Modi government. The cracks in the Modi government were shown through the farmer's protests, when the mainstream media failed to provide them the right support, they took to the streets and used social media to gain sympathy and support from both the citizens of India and international supporters. Many of the local and national media have close ties with the government

of India and are run by organisations that in general control and run by corporations that run the media. Due to these factors, only a handful of news outlets were able to successfully report on the incidents.

International Coverage of Indian Farmer Protest

Following the Republic Day incident, the Modi government turned off electricity, and cut out water and internet connections for the protestors. The use of social media showed the violence that the Indian government had been pouring on the peaceful protestors. Human rights organisations around the world condemned the steps taken by the Modi government to stop this movement. Amnesty International supported the movement by saying that the government should stop crushing the protests of the villagers. The International Commission of the Jurists also showed their support by stating "suppression of peaceful protests has become a pattern", the image of India on a global platform continued to deteriorate. Many of the global celebrities such as Rihanna, Greta Thunberg and Amanda Cerny tweeted against the tyranny of the Indian government (One Young World, 2021). The Indian government's response against these tweets have also been problematic, the government called these celebrities "sensationalist" trying to intervene in internal matters that need to be handled by India.

The support from the international figures led to the media taking notice and even though the outcry had slowed down, the protests continued to rage on. The poor farmers gained more support from Indians and this helped in pushing the movement further. HRW (2021) shared how eight journalists who tried to report unbiased representation of the protest have been facing baseless criminal charges in India. The decision of the government to shut down internet services has been shunned by many human rights groups, as the government intentionally prevented the free flow of information peacefully to take away the right to protest of people. The Indian government is obliged to maintain international standards for shutting down of internet services, the misuse of it was done to curtail information access by people the Human Rights Watch shared. The international media in the initial days did not cover the march but after a 46 second video of thousands of poor farmers became famous on the social media platforms, the protest was vieweed and covered by news sources everywhere. Marches took place on state of India, the silent march in Mumbai due to final exams taking place, won the hearts of people and led to them supporting the farmers movement against the Indian government.

When the local news sources failed the poor farmers, many smaller news sources and international news channels showed the innovative methods taken by the Indian government to stop the farmers from reaching Delhi (Krishnan, 2022). Huge steel spikes were laid on the streets to disrupt mobilisation, the state had also spread barbed wires to disconnect the people, and the prime minister of India was also seen mocking the protestors by calling them "andolanjeevis" or people who make a living by protesting. Under the Modi government, the national news media branded the protestors as terrorists, anti-nationals, and Khalistanis, some even went as far as calling them Pakistani and Chinese agents. The horrors of the state were constantly being shared by protestors on social media, the government used the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) as a way to clamp down on the poor protesting farmers (Narula, 2022). The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and many other media bodies globally came together to protest the activities of the Indian government and this has only been made possible by the farmers streaming, sharing and tweeting about the incident on Twitter. In the end, the power of the farmers became too strong for the government to keep opposing and they had to revert back the policies.

DISCUSSION

The passing of three different farmer bills by the Indian parliament launched a series of protests all across India. After protesting locally when the farmers saw that no significant changes were being made, they took to the streets with the slogan “Dilli Chalo (Let’s go to Delhi)”, it was the farmers and labourers from Punjab and Haryana who led the movement but soon many other farmers from other parts of India joined the movement (Bainiwal, 2022). The rise of social media allowed the protestors to show the problems that they were facing for their peaceful protests, the leaders jumping onto police water trucks and then back to their tractors became essentially viral. Media became the most important fighting tool to combat the pro-government narrative. As most of the national news channels are based in Delhi, the findings of the research have shown how the government of India have tried to use their influence to control the footage that was being circulated across the country. One of the news sources that continued to show the real picture was “The World Sikh News”, this news source was established in 1984 after the attacks at Amritsar.

The Indian government spiralled its narrative to show the protest in a negative light, the study has shown that despite not getting any form of support from the media, the people used social media platforms to stand up for themselves. The hypocrisy and bias of the Modi media were severely criticized later on by the people of India, who were kept in the dark about the real problems that were taking place in Delhi. Research on the social media impacts of the issue shows that people who were unable to be physically present at the protestation site, supported the farmers with their virtual support and financial backing (Siwach, 2020). For the entire duration of the protest, the Delhi media had spurned lies to prevent Indians from supporting the movement any further.

The social media posts reached out to the diaspora of Sikhs and Indians living abroad, this drew the attention of several human rights activists and celebrities as well. The dominant narrative of the state can no longer work in the 21st century, the internet provided the upper edge to the farmers and allowed them to show the wretched conditions they were living in. Despite government-led media trying to mislead people, the social media posts on the grounds spread more quickly, social media became a battlefield between the elites who supported the government in suppressing the farmers. It should be mentioned that in the modern era, celebrities have a bigger platform and reach compared to politicians the Punjabi artists shared the compelling stories of those protesting on the front lines, which helped in making the information spread more quickly. Protests against the Indian government were led in the UK, USA, Canada, Austria and Australia. In the end, the farmers’ protests brought millions of Indians together regardless of their caste or religion, and it led to farmers finding a shared identity, both Hindu and Muslim farmers fought side by side to acquire their freedom against the Indian government.

CONCLUSION

As concluding remarks for the research, the dominant role of social media in converting and influencing people has been presented. While the protests were fully done by the poor farmers of the nation, the tweets and posts made by celebrities made the issue international. Social media gave these farmers a voice, taught them how to work together and put behind their religious and cultural beliefs to fight for the shared goal.

The conflicts between the Indian government and the general population of India show the strength which people of India still possess. Social media was used to fight for democracy when the government itself was trying to manipulate the media to present the farmers and their fight against the farming laws in a negative way. The triumph of the farmers in

the end serves as a warning for the politicians of India to not underestimate the capabilities of the grassroots level people of the country.

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