

Voices of the Fields: Media Framing and the Indian Farmers' Protest

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ABSTRACT

The Indian farmers' protest, which began in 2020, emerged as a significant socio-political movement in response to controversial agricultural reforms. This paper critically examines the role of media in shaping public perception and political discourse surrounding the protest. Emphasis is placed on the contrasting narratives presented by mainstream media, often referred to as "Godi media," and regional or independent platforms, particularly within Punjabi social media spaces. Drawing from a wide array of media sources, including newspapers, television, and social media, the study explores how these narratives influenced public sentiment, mobilization, and international awareness. Overall, the study seeks to elaborate on the more general consequences of media portrayals on the general public and the overall influence on society perspectives.

Keywords: *Agricultural Protest, Godi Media, Indian Farmers Protest, Media Influence, Media Portrayal*

Media has long played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and societal trends. With the advent of digital communication and the internet, its influence has expanded dramatically. The 24-hour news cycle and widespread access to diverse sources have enabled rapid dissemination of information, yet have also fragmented audiences (Dahlgren, 2009). According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), the media significantly affects public perceptions and the framing of social movements. The way movements are portrayed can either amplify their legitimacy or marginalize their demands (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993).

Empirical studies have shown that media attention can bolster social movements by mobilizing support and resources (McPhail & Smith, 1996). However, media portrayals are not neutral; they often reflect underlying power dynamics and political agendas (Gitlin, 1980). The rise of digital platforms has further complicated this landscape, introducing both opportunities and challenges in public communication (Turkle, 2011).

Agriculture remains the backbone of India's economy, employing over half of its workforce. According to the Government of India (2011), among 263 million agricultural workers, approximately 45% are land-owning cultivators, while 55% are landless labourers. Small

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Voices of the Fields: Media Framing and the Indian Farmers' Protest

and marginal farmers, who own less than two hectares of land, constitute 84% of this population.

Punjab's rural economy heavily relies on food grain cultivation, with wheat and paddy occupying about 90% of the state's agricultural land (Mann, 2017). These crops form a critical part of India's national grain output. Despite their essential contributions, Indian farmers have faced increasing economic and institutional neglect.

The political climate under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has seen growing concerns about democratic erosion, with allegations of press suppression, judicial weakening, and authoritarian governance (Ganguly, 2019). The introduction of three agricultural laws without adequate legislative consultation intensified this sentiment. These laws deregulated agricultural markets, removed restrictions on stockpiling, and promoted private contract farming without offering legal safeguards to farmers (Jebaraj, 2021; Dubal & Gill, 2020).

While the government claimed these reforms would empower farmers, critics feared the dismantling of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system and the emergence of corporate monopolies. The reforms, if implemented unchecked, could lead to the loss of livelihoods for millions of small farmers, pushing them deeper into debt and displacement (Swaminathan, 2006).

Massive mobilization followed, including a nationwide strike involving 250 million people (Joy, 2020) and the Delhi Chalo March. Protesters faced aggressive policing but established long-term sit-ins at Delhi's borders. The government's response included censorship, arrests, and attempts to delegitimize the movement (BBC, 2021; Roy & Purnell, 2021).

Media framing plays a crucial role in shaping public perception (Entman, 1993). In this case, mainstream Indian media, often aligned with corporate and governmental interests, frequently delegitimized the protests. Protesters were branded as anti-national or linked to extremist ideologies without evidence (Menon, 2021). Calls for parliamentary transparency and procedural accountability were largely ignored by the press (Daniyal, 2020).

However, some domestic media outlets and numerous regional and social media platforms provided more balanced and empathetic coverage (The Hindu, 2021). These sources documented the scale of the movement, the socioeconomic conditions of the farmers, and the implications of the new laws. Journalists like Sandeep Singh and Mandeep Punia played instrumental roles in highlighting the realities on the ground.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies have underscored how mainstream Indian media contributed to a polarized understanding of the farmers' protest. A significant number of media outlets appeared to mirror the government's stance, often branding the protestors with inflammatory and politically sensitive labels such as "Khalistanis" and "urban Naxals"—allegations that lacked substantiated proof (Sekar et al., 2020; Menon, 2021). Simultaneously, authorities employed sedition laws and tightened IT regulations to suppress dissenting media voices, while encouraging narratives that cast doubt on the legitimacy of the protest (Anand & Sharma, 2022).

In contrast, regional outlets and grassroots platforms—most notably *Trolley Times*—focused on sharing factual information and fostering cultural solidarity. These independent sources

Voices of the Fields: Media Framing and the Indian Farmers' Protest

emphasized the lived experiences of protestors and utilized creative forms like poetry and references to Punjab's resistance history to strengthen a shared identity and counter state-aligned messaging (Mishra & Bhardwaj, 2021).

Social media platforms emerged as pivotal tools for both advocacy and opposition. According to Sekar et al. (2020), hashtags such as #FarmersProtest and #IStandWithFarmers gained widespread international visibility, often surpassing mainstream narratives in reach and engagement. These platforms enabled protestors to communicate directly with the public, circulate on-the-ground footage, and dismantle misinformation through real-time fact-checking. Visual media from Instagram and YouTube further democratized the flow of information, offering a counterbalance to editorially controlled networks.

Sen (2021) introduces the concept of “media nationalism,” where allegiance to the nation-state is often conflated with support for the ruling government. This dynamic led many media houses to frame the farmers' movement not as a socioeconomic struggle, but as an orchestrated threat to national unity. The use of emotionally charged visuals—like images of clashes or national symbols—served to intensify public sentiment and shift attention away from the protestors' actual demands.

International coverage provided a more balanced perspective. Outlets such as *The Guardian*, *BBC*, and *The New York Times* presented the protests as a democratic movement, often spotlighting the Indian state's heavy-handed response. Berger (2021) argues that such coverage played a crucial role in galvanizing support from the Indian diaspora and prompting international watchdogs to monitor the situation more closely.

The involvement of celebrities further broadened global awareness. For instance, Rihanna's tweet questioning the lack of media coverage—“Why aren't we talking about this?!”—brought the issue to notice of a massive international audience (@rihanna, 2021). This was echoed by Diljit Dosanjh, who defended the protestors through a series of tweets countering negative narratives (@diljitdosanjh, 2020). These high-profile interventions drew mainstream global attention to the cause.

Moreover, Anand and Sharma (2022) noted a strategic absence of comprehensive coverage from many mainstream Indian newsrooms. When covered at all, reporting often centred on disruptions rather than the protest's underlying grievances. This selective focus diverted the discourse toward law and order issues. On the other hand, independent reporters like Mandeep Punia and Sandeep Singh delivered firsthand accounts that were later cited by international media outlets, contributing to a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of the movement.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

1. To analyse the impact of media in shaping the portrayal of large-scale social movements.
2. To understand how media narratives influenced public engagement and sentiment during the Indian farmers' protest.

Procedure

The study employed qualitative content analysis of mainstream and independent media sources. Data were collected from newspaper articles, televised news coverage, social media

posts, and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2022. Focus was placed on media framing, narrative construction, and audience reception.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 2020–2021 farmers' protest stands as a vital example of how media can shape public opinion, drive collective action, and influence political discourse. Throughout the movement, various media outlets played dual roles—either amplifying the voices of the protestors or contributing to their marginalization. This duality reflects established theories about the media's power not only to construct narratives but also to evoke psychological and emotional responses during times of political unrest.

Mainstream Indian media, often seen as aligned with state and corporate interests, predominantly framed the protestors as threats to national stability. Rather than portraying the protest as an economic struggle, coverage often delegitimized it by casting participants in a negative light. This approach aligns with framing theory (Entman, 1993), which suggests that how news is structured directly shapes how the public understands events. In this context, such media portrayals likely dampened public empathy and distracted attention from the farmers' actual concerns.

In contrast, independent and local journalists offered an alternative narrative. By reporting directly from protest sites and focusing on the lived experiences of the farmers—particularly in Punjabi regions—they created emotionally resonant stories. These narratives provided a platform for communities that are often underrepresented, embodying a bottom-up approach to communication that helped build a sense of shared purpose and identity.

From a media psychology viewpoint, continual exposure to divisive and emotionally charged news may have influenced how audiences processed information. Psychological phenomena like confirmation bias and the hostile media effect—where individuals perceive even neutral reporting as biased—may have been amplified, especially as public confidence in mainstream news declined. Research also indicates that emotionally intense or fear-based reporting can heighten stress levels and reduce one's ability to think critically (Lang, 2000; Nabi, 2003).

On the other hand, digital platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram gave voice to citizen journalism and participatory storytelling. Hashtags like #FarmersProtest did more than trend—they unified users around a cause. These interactive platforms allowed individuals, regardless of geographic distance, to feel part of the movement. This reflects the uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), which emphasizes how people actively use media to fulfil emotional, social, and informational needs.

International news organizations added another layer to the conversation by offering relatively unbiased and detailed reporting. Their coverage not only legitimized the movement on the world stage but also encouraged activism among global diaspora communities. This form of external support acted as a psychological booster for many protestors, helping sustain morale during prolonged demonstrations.

Ultimately, the farmers' protest sheds light on the intricate relationship between media influence, political messaging, and audience psychology. While legacy media often reinforced the official narrative, independent and global platforms created room for resistance and dialogue. These observations highlight the need for media literacy and critical

engagement, especially in politically sensitive contexts, to safeguard democratic participation and informed public discourse.

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Conflict of Interest

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