

Protest as Secessionist at the Heart, Disrupting Urban Life

The Farmer's Protests began in India in September 2020 as a response to three new farm laws that were passed by the parliament in September 27, 2020.

The laws were seen as liberalizing farming: government appointed price negotiators would be done away with, big companies would be able to buy produce directly from farmers at prices set by them. The protesters made their stance clear – they wanted the laws to be repealed completely. Such was their determination that they found support in international icons such as Rihanna, activist Greta Thunberg, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, actor John Cusack and writer Rupri Kaur (Chabba, 2021).

However, they failed to garner support from their national mainstream media.

The protest coverage was supporting the state at best and incendiary at worst. "Initially, farmers faced a number of unfounded allegations: they were called secessionists and paid protesters, and were accused of being misled by opposition parties," (Chabba, 2021). They were linked to Khalistaani secessionists, blamed for disrupting urban life and given superficial coverage on most news media (Anand & Sharma, 2022). Independent Journalism and social media campaigns fared better in their coverage, but the protest had all but vanished from the mainstream within three months (Lalwani, 2020). For perspective, the government agreed to repeal the laws after the protest had gone on for the better part of a year.

As stated by A R Vasavi in her opinion piece in The Indian Express, "Barring a few newspapers and television channels, the mainstream media has not only blocked out news and updates of the movement but has resorted to spreading disinformation and calumny against the movement," (Vasavi, 2021).

So why has this happened? The concentration of media ownership, political affiliations, dependence on advertising and the disciplining of media have all played a role (Herman & Chomsky, 1994).

Research conducted by the Media Ownership Monitor revealed that "most of the leading media companies are owned by large conglomerates that are still controlled by the founding families and that invest in a vast array of industries other than media," (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2019)

The political and business affiliations represent two filters of the propaganda model – it means that reportage related to a protest against conglomerates and the state's policies wasn't going to be unbiased or supportive of the protesters.

Indian media is also highly dependent on advertisements (state or conglomerate) to fund themselves. "As expected, the government has not missed the opportunity to milk this dependency and has led many media organisations to indulge in self-censorship and push the government agenda forward, particularly during the Covid pandemic when government advertising has increased," (Sharma, 2021). Journalists and media organisations have been asked to refrain from criticizing the government and not following the rules has decidedly caused them to face a lot of flak.

In January 2021, six Indian journalists, knowing for their critical stance against the government were booked for sedition, criminal conspiracy and promoting enmity, due to their reportage of the death of a protestor at the hands of the Delhi Police (Sharma, 2021). As Herman and

Chomsky state (1994), “The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print.”

In the Indian case, all that is left after the filtering is to discredit protestors by terming them successionists and disruptors of urban life.

Bibliography

Anand, A. & Sharma, P., 2022. How India's mainstream media report on the farmers' protest. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 14(1), pp. 129-133.

Chabba, S., 2021. India: Independent journalism rises from farmers' protests. *Deutsche Welle*, 16 March.

Herman, E. S. & Chomsky, N., 1994. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Vintage.

Lalwani, V., 2020. ‘Shame on the media’: Why protesting farmers are angry with the news coverage. *Scroll.in*, 01 December.

Reporters Sans Frontières, 2019. Media Ownership Monitor: Who owns the media in India?. 29 May.

Sharma, S., 2021. How farmers' protests in India are being used to silence the media. *Index on Censorship*, 4 February.

Vasavi, A. R., 2021. Ten months on, what lessons have we learnt from the farmers’ movement?. *The Indian Express*, 30 September.