



Social Media as Public Sphere: Public Deliberation on Twitter during Farmers' Protest

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Abstract

The metamorphic growth of social media has substantially expanded the scope for information sharing. Blogs, social networks, content sharing platforms, Chat rooms have created enormous space for knowledge sharing and public debate. The social media supported communication channels are not constrained by any regulatory framework as is the case with mainstream media. The participants are free to express their ideas and feelings without being subjected either to space constraints or media gatekeeping. In public deliberations, the main stream media and social media influence each other. But, by virtue of providing first-hand raw information directly from the site of the event, social media remains ahead of the mainstream media in public sphere reporting and often compels the mainstream media to follow. As such, the mainstream media no more enjoy unquestioning sway in shaping the public sphere deliberations, the social media has substantially intruded into this domain influencing the nature and quality of deliberations. This paper makes a review of the public and political deliberations in India during the Farmers' protest in 2020-21.

Keywords: Social Media, Indian Public Sphere, Public Deliberation, Farmers Protest, Twitter

Introduction

The unparalleled scope of self-expression and interactivity offered by social media has indeed created a paradoxical situation. On one hand, social progress is attained with adaptive changes in social values and beliefs. On the other, the same platform is used to spread social taboos. The rising social media platforms are used to promote social harmony, at the same time attempts are being made to spread hatred and create tension and violence. On one hand, social media lead to democratization and on the other, it also provides space for mobocracy. On one hand, social media promotes cultural

homogenization; on the other hand, it also offers space for the promotion of new cultural identities. Social media space is used for generating public and political consensus as well as engineering conflicts around issues. Farmers' protests had created a buzz on social media. The counter and encounter of statements between the government, celebrities, common people, and farmers' supporters had drawn attention worldwide. The cacophony on social media needed to explore the issues of public deliberations during farmers' protests. Against this backdrop, this paper explores the influence of social media on the contemporary Indian public sphere and its deliberations.

The study aims to identify the issues of public deliberations that revolved during the farmer's protest 2020-21. The focus of this study is to identify the contemporary public deliberations around the farmer's protest in India during 2020-21. Further, it is to identify the political deliberations around the farmer's protest. The paper shall also foreground a discussion about the impact social media makes on public sphere, and vice versa.

The study comprises of two research questions – (i) what are the contemporary issues of public and political deliberations during farmers' protests in India?, and (ii) what is the potential of social-media in the Indian public sphere? The study has its vital significance in studying the characteristics and nature of the Indian public sphere. The study will help the researchers and academicians to identify the contemporary issues of Indian public deliberations during farmers' protests 2020-21. This study will be beneficial for the social activists, government, and political leaders to understand the issues of farmers for the solution. Online activism is drawing attention all over the world; the study on the use of social platforms in farmers' protests will give an insight into how social media can be used by Indian citizens in online activism. This study will work as a conceptual framework for future studies on the role of social media in the Indian public sphere.

Concept of 'Public Sphere'

German philosopher Habermas defines the public sphere as a

“society engaged in rational-critical public debate among private persons who gather to discuss matters of common concern.” Communication scholar Gerard A. Hauser defines the public sphere as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and try to reach a common judgement” (61). The public sphere constitutes groups of people who engage in discussing, analyzing, and criticizing the issues which affect them. McKee writes about the public sphere that it is a virtual space where communication about public issues takes place (5). According to him, the ‘public sphere’ is a useful metaphor because it allows people to play role in the creation of public culture, public policy, and the running of the state (8).

According to Susen, the public sphere is composed of private individuals whose societal interconnectedness transcends the boundaries of their personal lives. It is clear that each individual of society can associate with each other and make a public forum to express his views and ideas which are relevant to them. So, each individual of society is the basic element of the public sphere. Every person has their own private sphere (i.e., having their own problems, interests, needs, and solutions) but when individuals assemble and talk about an issue of common interest and try to find out the solution, then this assembled group becomes the public sphere. The concept of the public sphere is massive; it’s not limited to such a small group. Actually, the public sphere is a collective form of small public groups or forums. Always bear in mind that a public sphere cannot be created in the absence of a democratic environment.

Freedom to assemble and to express opinions in an inclusive manner influences the public sphere. It constitutes all the points of view, the majority as well as minority and includes the public opinion formed on that. Habermas’s study confirms, “Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion, i.e., with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions, about matters of general interest” (“The Public Sphere” 49). Every person has their own private sphere (i.e. having their own problems, interests, needs, and solutions) but when such individuals assemble and talk about an issue of common interest public sphere becomes apparent. Actually, the public sphere

is a collective form of small public groups or forums, of which individuals are the basic elements.

Social Media a Tool of Transformation for the Public Sphere

The advent of the internet has opened a new door to the public sphere; the researchers have explored the potential of internet-based technologies to facilitate a new forum for public deliberation and political communication (Dahlberg; Dahlgren; Graham; Papacharissi). Habermas argues that the public sphere requires “specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it” (“Public”⁴⁹). From this perspective, social media offers the means for transmitting information, the same way newspapers; radio, and TV have been doing. The hypertext-based environment has made the users (driven by contents) search the content proximate to them. The multimedia-enabled Webspaces offers enhanced scope for visual interaction among the members of the public sphere. Beyond private life, individuals and groups engage themselves in creating content, discussing political issues, organizing events and activities, and thus building public opinion on public issues. Social media, indeed, has become a more democratic and participatory public sphere.

Social media allows to sharing of ideas and views, leading to the creation of networks and forums, which constitute a vital part of today’s public sphere. As Benkler said, “The Internet is democratic in nature as it allows all citizens to participate in the public sphere and they no longer need be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects” (272). The participatory and interactive nature of social media has empowered people to create their own ‘social sphere’ based on their choice and interest. Papacharissi describes internet-based technologies as a ‘virtual sphere’ that facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions; thus, a virtual sphere enhances democracy (2002, 11). Papacharissi writes that the public sphere presents a domain of social life in which public opinion is expressed by means of rational public deliberation and debate. Individuals gather around online spaces where they discuss political issues, spread ideas, and seek support for their views from society (2009,

232). Social networks have a democratic potential and democracy is a central aspect at all levels of society having the opportunity to share their opinions and experiences (Brandtzaeg and Luders).

According to Noelle Neumann's spiral of silence theory, people tend to remain silent due to the fear of isolation. In public sphere deliberations, majority groups remain more vocal whereas minority and marginalized groups tend to remain silent. But, social media has empowered marginalized groups to speak out. Social media allows participants to remain anonymous if they have the fear of isolation. Thus, social media encourages democratic participation of people whether they belong to majority views or minority views. Fraser noted that several special interest publics coexist and flaunt their collective identities of dissent in this virtual sphere; thus, reflecting the social dynamics of the real world (cited in Papacharissi 2002, 21). It is being noticed that the online homogenous groups of public spheres are being cherished in one kind of ideology. According to Sunstein, like-minded people engage in 'enclave deliberation' and their deliberation moves towards a more extreme point and thus tends to group polarization. These deliberative enclaves are engaged in imposing their ideology on others. It increases polarization and extremism in the public sphere. This is the reason why there is a flood of hatred messages and photographs on social media.

Social Media and Deliberation

Being actively engaged in participatory networks, people of all ages and backgrounds create and distribute messages via online and interpersonal networks at a rapid and ever-accelerating speed. Henry Jenkins characterized participatory culture as "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations with others, members who believe that their contributions matter, ...and members who feel some degree of social connection with one another" (5-6). Social media is an inexpensive tool for the citizens where they want to discuss the issues which matter to them with the people who have common beliefs.

Dahlgren worked on the interactional dimension of the public sphere, especially, on how deliberation proceeds in the online public

sphere in the contemporary environment of political communication. Halpern and Gibbs found social media as a catalyst for online deliberation and users participate in political discussion and issues which may benefit them directly or indirectly from such participation (1167). Social media provides a platform for public policy deliberations whether it is political, economic, social, or cultural. People may be mobilized if something matters much to them. For example- In April 2011, Anna Hazare started a movement against corruption. He was on hunger strike for Jan Lokpal Bill. This movement had brought people of all regions to demand the Jan Lokpal bill. Anna Hazare and his team used social media effectively. They had created a Facebook page named 'India Against Corruption (IAC)' which helped in mobilizing people on social media and then on the ground at Jantar-Mantar and Ramlila Maidan of Delhi. In the Nirbhaya rape case, thousands of people got mobilized and inspired to reach India Gate and Raisina Hill for a candle march through a social media campaign. The social media campaign generated huge candles not only in Delhi but also at Kolkata, Mumbai, Bangalore, Ahmadabad, and London too.

According to McQuail, "New media allow dialogue between politicians and active citizens and thus it provides an arena where public deliberation can take place and public opinion can be formed" (as cited in Smuts 2010). Social media based public deliberation promotes the democratic nature of the media where everyone is free to speak on any issue. This is the place where sharing of information, public discussion, debates, and deliberation are done. However, there is always a chance of polarization of views; one, in the favour of an issue, and the other, in against of an issue. However, Semaanetal. (2014,1420) concluded that social media are resilient in nature, and its users can shape them to suit their needs and interests; the users always engaged in discovering how to manipulate and integrate multiple social media platforms in order to create the information, dissemination, and discussion environments they desire.

Background of the Farmers' Protest

The Farm Bill was passed on 17th November, 2020, in the Lok Sabha and on the 20th September in the Rajya Sabha. On 27th September, the

bill was signed by the President of India and notified as a law in the Gazette of India. After the law was introduced, the farmers from Punjab and Haryana started the protest at the local level. The protest became massive on 25th November, 2020, by calling the farmers from all over India to arrive at Delhi through the movement 'Dilli Chalo'. The farmers started to march towards Delhi on 26th November even after not getting the permission from Delhi Police due to Covid-19 protocols. Due to the Farmers' continuous protest, the central government had decided to take back the Farms Act and on 29th November, 2021, the Act was revoked by both the Houses of Parliament. The Sanyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) received a signed letter from the Government of India on 9th December where in the government had accepted all the demands of the farmer unions including the withdrawal of the cases against farmers and forming a committee on MSP. After that, The SKM agreed to end the movement and announced to vacate the protest sites on 11th December, 2021.

Research Design & Methodology

To study the contemporary public and political deliberations during the Farmers' Protest 2021-22, the tweets having the hashtag **#FarmersProtest** were studied. This hashtag **#FarmersProtest** is selected for study the contemporary deliberations because it is the second most tweeted hashtag in India in the year 2021 (#OnlyOnTwitter, December 09, 2021). The top most used hashtag in

India in the year 2021 was #Covid19.



Figure1: Image from Twitter India

The time period of study is taken from 26Nov. 2020 to 30 Nov. 2021. The massive protest started on 26Nov.2020. PM Modi accepted the demands of farmers and announced the repeal of Farms Laws on 19Nov. 2021. That is why, the time period of study is taken from 26Nov. 2020 to 30Nov. 2021.

Selection of the tweets

The 'Advanced Search' filter was used in which the 'Engagement' filter was set. Only those tweets have been taken for the study which has at least a hundred people's engagement (likes & retweets). From the 'Top' section of the tweets, 50 tweets were taken randomly month-wise for the study of public deliberations during the Farmers' protest 2020-21. 'Top' tweets are the most relevant tweets based on the popularity of a tweet; top tweets are selected through an algorithm, and not manually (according to Twitter Help Center). The tweets are analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Coding

For the qualitative analysis of the tweets, the content analysis of every tweet was done, and the context and meaning of tweets were interpreted. Further, the coding of the data was done to identify the themes for categorizing the tweets. Coding is a way of indexing or categorizing the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it (Gibbs).

All the tweets were categorized into the following themes for their qualitative assessment:

- **Tweets in the support of the Farmers & against Farms Act 2020**

Under this theme, those tweets are kept which are either in the support of the farmers or against the Farms Act. Tweets which are showing love, affection and sympathy towards farmers are kept in this category. Tweets which are displaying the efforts and struggle of farmers are also got placed here.

- **Tweets against the Farmers & in support of the Farms Act2020**

This theme comprises such tweets kept for study which are either in the support of the Farms Act 2020 or against the farmers' protest.

- **Tweets in the support of Central Government**

Under this section, those tweets kept for study which are in the support of the decisions of the Central government.

- **Tweets against the Central Government**

Under this section, those tweets are kept for study which are against the decisions of the Prime Minister and the Central government.

- **Neutral/Balanced Tweets**

Under this section, those tweets are selected which are neutral and balanced in nature, like the tweets of experts & intellectuals of society.

- **Informative Tweets**

Under this category, those tweets are kept for study which were tweeted by people to inform the common citizen and officials.

Analysis of the Tweets

The tweets done with **#FarmersProtest** were analyzed month-wise. The months are denoted with ‘M’ in Table-1. The following months are considered for the study–

1.M1-26 Nov. 2020 –25 Dec. 2020

The focus of this month was on the march of the farmers towards Delhi. The tweets done are showing the marching of farmers heading from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan with their cattle and tractors, massive protest of farmers, and the oppressions of police.

2.M2 -26 Dec. 2020-25 Jan. 2021

The tweets done during this time-period had main focus on the survival of farmers in the bitter cold while few of the tweets were indicating the luxurious life of the farmers. Also, the deliberations started during the protest were the repeal of the Farm laws, hidden support of Khalistanis and other foreign support, deaths of farmers, ignorance of central government, and support of farmers from Mumbai.

3.M3–26 Jan.2021-25 Feb. 2021

Farmers Tractor-rally on Republic Day –

Farmers’ tractor rally done on 26th January 2021 towards Red Fort had flooded the twitter with the deliberations like, insult of Tiranga, violence during tractor march and clash between farmers & Police.

The other public and political deliberations included labelling protesters as terrorists, casualties during tractor-march, violation of routes by farmers, and suspension of twitter accounts of farmers supporters.

Foreign Nationals Tweets –

Till now, many Bollywood celebrities like Nasiruddin Sah, Amir Khan, Swara Bhaskar jumped into the public deliberation on Twitter. The tweets of pop singer Rihanna, environment activist Greta Thunberg, Mia Khalifa, and others had caught the eyes of the public and their tweets became the hot topics of the public deliberations. Immediately, a counter hashtag **#IndiaTogether** and **#IndiaAgainstPropaganda** was run by Ministry of External Affairs to counter back the foreign nationals showing their interests in Indian issues. Sachin Tendulkar, Akshay Kumar, Kangna Ranaut, Ajay Devgan and others have shown their solidarity on the matter of India's sovereignty.

4.M4–26 Feb.2021 -- 25 March 2021

Gun firing on farmers at Singhu Border by anonymous attacker, Toolkit Shared by Greta Thunberg, involvement of Khalistan supporters, international conspiracy, arrest and release of a farmer Ranjit Singh, arresting of women farmers & their children, Silence of PM on farmers protest, deaths of farmers, Covid-19 positive report of farmer leader Joginder Singh, and farmers Maha Panchayat were the main deliberations during this month.

5. M5–26March 2021 -- 25 April 2021

The public deliberations were got fade-up a little bit, but still supporters tried to keep posting the images of the farmers staying at protest-sites and encouraging to not give-up. On 26th March, 2021, farmer unions had called 'Bharat_Bandh' on completing our months of protest. Other public deliberations repealing the farm laws & guaranteeing MSP were started with hashtags **#ModiResignOrRepeal**, **#NoVoteTo_LiarModi**, and **#FarmerLivesMatter** by supporters of farmers. It was reported by few

media organizations that oxygen trucks were stopped by farmers while farmer unions have denied that no medical vehicle or ambulances were halted by them.

6.M6 –26 April 2021 – 25 May 2021

Repeal of farm laws, lathi-charge on farmers in Haryana, unity of farmers, pressure on Modi govt. due to farmers protest, and appeal to not to forget farmers were the issues of public deliberations. Rising Covid cases in Punjab & Haryana, and at the protest sites have also drawn the attention of the public deliberations. The gang-rape of a woman activist at Tikri border and arrest of six people were one of the most discussed issues during this month.

7.M7 –26 May 2021 -- 25 June2021

Organizing ‘Black Day’ on 26th May on the completion of six months of the farmers protest. Farmers Supporters had highlighted the death of more than 500 farmers while the government was still silent and not initiated the talk with the farmers.

8.M8 –26 June 2021 – 25 July 2021

On 26th June, farmers supporters tweeted with #SaveFarming_SaveDemocracy and demanded MSP (Minimum Selling Price) and repeal of farms laws. Few users tweeted the videos of farmers protesting on the road and hitting the vehicles. Farmers supporters tweeted the pictures and videos of protest sites to show how farmers are still staying there even in heavy rain and storm. Farmers started campaign for protesting at Parliament if the government will not listen them. Sedition charges imposed on farmers were also one of the issues of public deliberation during this month.

9.M9 –26 July 2021 – 25 Aug. 2021

Congress Leader Rahul Gandhi showed solidarity with farmers by driving tractor to Parliament on 26th July. Celebrations of farmers on shutting down the operations of Adani Logistics Ltd in Ludhiana.

Winning Olympic Gold medal by Neeraj Chopra was also celebrated by farmers by projecting him as one of farmer.

10.M10 –26Aug. 2021—25 Sept. 2021

Lathi-charge on farmers in Karnal (Haryana), Kisan Maha-panchayat in Muzaffarnagar (U.P.), and appeal to defeat the BJP & U.P. govt. in coming election were the main deliberations during the completion of 9 months of farmers protest along with NHRC notices to Delhi, Rajasthan, Haryana, U.P. Govts, and the central government asking for reports of farmer protest.

11.M11 –26 Sept.2021—25 Oct.2021

Lakhimpur Kheri Violence, Calling Bharat Bandh on 27 Sept., protest against BJP leaders, murder of Lakhbir Singh at Singhu border, and international conspiracy against India were the main deliberations during this month along with repeal of laws.

12. M12 –26 Oct. 2021 -- 30 Nov. 2021

On 19th November, PM Narendra Modi announced withdrawal of Farm laws in the winter session of parliament. On 26th November, 1 year of farmers' protest was completed, farmers labelled it the biggest protest in the history and remembered their one-year journey. The Farm Laws Repeal Bill, 2021 was passed on 29th November in both the houses and the farmer supporters celebrated it a victory day. The twitter flooded with the victory messages and celebration videos of farmers.

A total of 600 tweets have been analyzed thematically to discuss the public and political deliberations during the farmers' protest 2020-21.

S.no.	Themes of Study	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	Total No. of tweets
1	Tweets in the support of the Farmers & against Farms Act 2020	24	27	19	25	25	27	27	28	27	24	26	31	310
2	Tweets against the Farmers & in support of Farms Act 2020	10	9	11	9	11	9	7	11	9	10	9	5	110
3	Tweets in the support of Central Government	2	1	3	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	2	2	24
4	Tweets Against Central Govt.	9	9	11	10	8	6	10	7	8	6	8	3	95
5	Neutral/ Balanced Tweets	3	1	2	1	2	2	3	0	2	4	1	4	25
6	Informative Tweets	2	3	4	3	2	3	1	2	3	4	4	5	36
	Total no. of tweets analyzed	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	600

Table1- Analysis of Tweets #Farmer's protest

Findings & Discussion

After the analysis of tweets, it has been found that more than fifty percent of tweets were in the support of farmers and against the Farms Act 2020, while only eighteen percent of tweets were against the farmers & in support of Farms Act 2020. Also, almost sixteen percent of tweets were done against the central government while only four percent of tweets were in the support of the central government. The percentage of informative tweets was around six percent of total tweets. It is found that farmers and their supporters had used Twitter efficiently for their protest. Instead of depending on already established media organizations, they used Twitter for conveying their messages, images, and videos throughout the protest. On every occasion, farmers' supporters had used a new hashtag along with #FarmersProtest to open the door to new public deliberations. This protest was the largest protest against the government in the history of India in terms of the number of days.

This protest has proved that Twitter can be an alternate medium which can be used wisely by the citizen to draw the attention of the government. The frequent tweets of the farmers' supporters had

created a buzz over Twitter; it enforced mainstream media to cover their issues. It can be said that the public deliberation on Twitter had set the agenda for the common citizen as well as for political parties, and mainstream media to discuss the farmers' protest. It is noticed that the political deliberations on farmers' protests were mainly focused on the encountering of each other's statements. The ruling party was tweeting against the farmers' protest while the opposition party was tweeting in the support of farmers. The study affirms the findings of Jennings, Suzuki, & Hubbard (14) that social media has the potential to foster deliberation and participation in the political system. Social media has the potential to create new political identities too by giving the opportunity to common citizens to lead the public deliberation. The farmers' protest was not led by any established politician in the beginning; it was started and mobilized by farmers on their own flaunting their local identity, e.g., protest-march with their cattle and tractors moving towards Delhi. It is noticed that the Indian Public sphere is more conscious of its local issues and local identity, like, growing vegetables and doing langar-seva at protest-site.

Conclusion

The farmers' protest in India has shown that social media has the potential to convert the local public deliberation into international public deliberation. The protest of farmers on Farms laws fully belonged to the Indian issue, but the tweets of international personalities had made it a matter of international public sphere. This protest has proved that the common Indian citizens have now identified the potential of social media in setting the agenda of public and political deliberation. Social media has given a voice to those who have still recently considered themselves voiceless. The marginalized groups are able to create their own deliberative forums to raise their voice instead of remaining alienated. The public sphere has become dichotomous because on one hand there are attempts for content homogeneity and on the other new points of view are also seeking public attention. The conflicts among the public sphere are creating cacophony on social media. Besides this, we cannot ignore that social media is a powerful tool of transformation because it allows the public sphere to interact with geographically dispersed and

diverse participants. Also, social media based public deliberation is able to promote democracy as it provides space for everyone to speak freely on any issue. Various social media platforms can be used innovatively to create new local identities and cultures. It can be also concluded that social media based political deliberation in India have altered the dominant political alignments and given way to new political identities which are local in nature.

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