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### **3. Examining Mainstream Media Channels' Coverage of the Indian Farmer's Protest and the Influence of Partisan Reporting**

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#### **Abstract**

*This research paper analyzes how partisan media influences the discourse on the Indian farmer's protest through a review of mainstream media coverage. It assesses media alignment with political ideologies and its impact on protest reporting, focusing on framing, tone, and content. The study uncovers media bias's influence on public perception and broader sociopolitical implications, contributing to the understanding of media's role in Indian politics and social movements.*

**Keywords:** Discourse, Farmer Protest, India, Mainstream Media, Media Coverage, Partisan Media, Political Discourse,

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In the age of digital communication, media has become one of the most widely used ways for local governments to reach citizens directly and disclose a large amount of information. As increasingly more people now have access to the Internet and the average time spent on social media increases (Global Web Index, 2020b), public authorities have seized on this trend and have intensified their presence on social media in the past several years, particularly in the context of many national initiatives to promote e-government (Twizyimana & Andersson, 2019).

Digital media have become an integral part of individual citizens' political lives as a growing number of people around the world use digital media technologies for information and communication. Digital media provide people with news and mobilizing information and allow them to exchange their opinions with many others, motivating them to engage in public activities (Shmargad & Klar, 2019). In addition, digital media content can be quickly updated without expending a significant amount of time, money and physical effort, which enables digital media users to easily pursue their communication goals through different activities online (Montgomery & Xenos, 2008). Collectively, digital media have also constituted an important platform that people can use to coordinate and mobilize among like-minded individuals. Nevertheless, while distributing informative and mobilizing messages, digital media also facilitate socio-political factors that raise concern over the dissemination of misinformation, information divides and political polarization.



Digital media can play a significant role in the development of democracy. In recent years, digital media have swiftly unified different functions and affordances, it is important to revisit the different ways that they have been utilized to understand how the influence of these different applications may vary across platforms, practices and connections to explore new modalities of political engagement and civic practices. It is also crucial to investigate how these new political communication modalities, which are sustained through digitally networked media, may have converged to open an era of an unedited public sphere (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019).

### **FARMER PROTEST 2021**

Farmer protests in India begins due to the three farm laws mainly the Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act which were introduced in the parliament on 20th June 2020. Subsequently, these farm reform acts were passed by the two houses of parliament on 17th and 20th September 2020 and got the President's assent on 27th September 2020 (Narayanan, Understanding Farmer Protests in India, 2021).

Farmers of various farmer unions including Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) as well as farmers of 30 farmer unions from Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and other parts of our country protested against these three farm bills for almost a year.

<b>Farmers' Union</b>	<b>Year Founded</b>	<b>Region of Influence</b>	<b>Key Leadership</b>	<b>Primary Focus</b>
<b>All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)</b>	1936	Maharashtra, Kerala	Ashok Dhawale, Hannan Mollah	Land rights, debt relief, agricultural reforms
<b>Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU)</b>	1987	Uttar Pradesh	Rakesh Tikait, Naresh Tikait	Minimum support prices, farm laws opposition
<b>Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee (KMSC)</b>	2002	Punjab	Satnam Singh Pannu	Repeal of farm laws, electricity subsidies
<b>All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC)</b>	2017	Nationwide	Yudhvir Singh, Raju Shetty	Broad coalition focusing on farm policy reforms
<b>Haryana State Farmers' Union (HSFU)</b>	2001	Haryana	Gurnam Singh Chaduni	Opposition to farm laws, support for MSP system



<b>Tamil Nadu Farmers' Association (TNFA)</b>	1989	Tamil Nadu	P. R. Pandian, S. Palanisamy	State-specific agricultural issues, farmer welfare
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**Table 1: List of Farmers Union participated in the Protest**

Farmers believe that these three laws are designed to best facilitate corporates who can easily purchase, stock and contract for produce without any restrictions (Narayanan, Understanding Farmer's Protest in India, 2021). Farmers are also afraid to do away with the 'mandi system' and end the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and procurement. Despite the government's assurances and Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar's promise that the MSP system would remain in place and the market system would not be removed, the farmers are good enough to keep their demands high, i.e. repeal of all three farm laws (Jyoti Prakash Sahoo et al., 2020).

As thousands of farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and other parts of the country, sat for a year-long peaceful protest, also called by many 'the world's largest protest', along the borders of the National capital against three agricultural laws passed almost autocratically by the Parliament, the Indian media took to glorifying the laws counting their myriad benefits to the farmers, turning a blind eye to the many hardships the protesting farmers faced during the period. Battling heat, cold, rain, police action, water cannons, tear gas and government apathy the farmers protested the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; the Farmers Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and farm Services Act 2020 and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020- the three agricultural laws also dubbed the black laws by the farmers. The Indian media on the other hand catered heavily to the decrees of the government and crony capitalists, deliberately and shamelessly blocking out any anti-government news from the protest sites. While the protests received massive international coverage, the Indian media seldom seemed to empathize with the protesting farmers. The media resorted to disseminating disinformation failing miserably as the oft-touted fourth pillar of democracy.

Certain media organizations attempted to portray the protests as being led by anti-national elements with vested interests. A section of the media also dubbed protestors as 'Khalistanis' and terrorists in the garb of farmers. In one instance a TV channel even went so far ahead as to criticize farmers for having pizza at the protest site and endeavoured to dismiss the entire protest as a mere 'pizza party' for farmers.

Such high handedness and lack of responsibility on part of the media continued throughout the protest wherein the media seldom spoke about the plight of the farmers and focused more on the benign intentions of the government and corporations in guiding the farmers, who did not understand the state's plan for a better tomorrow. Whereas the media-politics nexus is not new and it is a known fact that media persons and politicians are no strange bedfellows, the current level of politicization of media has never been witnessed before. Whether it has been the reportage and follow up on the gang-rape cases of Hathras, Unnao, and Delhi communal violence of 2021



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among many others, or the rising violence and harassment of journalists criticizing state actions by pressing falsified criminal charges including those of sedition, promotion of communal disharmony and others, against journalists who dare to dissent, the mainstream media has repeatedly failed to present an objective picture of reality. Interestingly even during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the public raised the hue and cry, the media barely reported any deaths due to lack of oxygen.

As per a report by the Human Rights Watch, the Delhi police filed cases of 'rioting, attempted murder, and criminal conspiracy against as many as 37 farmers' union leaders and activists alleging involvement in violence and incitement to violence. Journalists Dharmender Singh and Mandeep Punia were held for allegedly misbehaving with the police at the farmer protest site on trumped-up charges.

Most of the Indian media served as a Public relations agency for the state, trying to justify the farm laws, delving elaborately into the ignorance of the farmers who did not understand their good, and sometimes even going to the extent of demonizing the protesting farmers. The media, for instance, spotlighted the violence on Republic day in an otherwise long-drawn peaceful protest trying to stir public outrage against the protesting farmers. The tone of the narrative unmistakably indicated where the loyalties of Indian media lay when it came to the farm laws. Farmers on the contrary relied less and less on mainstream media platforms to share their side of the story and took to various social media platforms to keep the public abreast of developments at the protest site.

### REASON OF CONFLICT

The Indian government's passage of three controversial farmer bills in September 2020 triggered extensive protests and opposition from the farming community. These bills aimed to bring about substantial transformations in the agricultural sector, particularly in how agricultural products are cultivated, traded, and commercialized. These bills are:

Bill Name	Year Introduced	Key Provisions	Reasons for Opposition
<b>Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill</b>	2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allows farmers to sell their produce outside of traditional APMC mandis.</li><li>• Promotes electronic trading platforms.</li><li>• Removes barriers to inter-state trade.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Farmers fear the dismantling of APMC mandis may lead to the end of Minimum Support Price (MSP) support.</li><li>• Concerns about exploitation by corporate buyers.</li><li>• Lack of assured income and price security.</li></ul>



<b>Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill</b>	2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enables contract farming agreements between farmers and buyers.</li> <li>• Provides a legal framework for contract farming.</li> <li>• Allows farmers to negotiate prices and terms.  </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apprehensions that large corporations could dominate and exploit farmers.</li> <li>• Lack of safeguards to protect farmers' interests in contracts.</li> <li>• Potential for disputes and legal complexities.</li> </ul>
<b>Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill</b>	2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deregulates the stock limits for agricultural produce, including cereals, pulses, and oilseeds.</li> <li>• Encourages private sector investments in cold storage and supply chain infrastructure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerns about hoarding and price manipulation by private entities.</li> <li>• Potential for food insecurity and price volatility.</li> <li>• Belief that farmers' interests are not adequately protected.</li> </ul>

**Table 2: List of Three Farmers Law passed by the Government**

For the mentioned reasons, the farmers vehemently opposed these three bills, fearing that they would undermine their livelihoods, diminish income stability, and subject them to market uncertainties. Concentrated mainly in northern India, the protests gained significant momentum and ultimately resulted in the bills being repealed in November 2021.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of reviewing the literature, the researcher has conducted an analysis of research publications pertaining to the Indian farmer protests within the past three years.

Study Title & Authors	Publication Year	Research Objectives & Methods	Key Findings & Contributions
<b>"Media Bias and the Indian Farmer's Protest: An Analysis of Mainstream News"</b>	2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To Analyzed media coverage of the Indian farmer's protest by major</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Found evidence of partisan media coverage with some channels favoring the government's</li> </ul>



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<p><b>Channels" by Singh, A. et al.</b></p>		<p>Indian mainstream news channels.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employed content analysis to identify patterns of bias and framing in news reporting.</li> </ul>	<p>perspective while others were more sympathetic to the farmers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identified recurring frames, such as portraying farmers as 'agitators' or 'saviors of agriculture.'</li> <li>• Contributed to the understanding of media bias in the context of the protests</li> </ul>
<p><b>Media Framing of Indian Farmer Protests: A Comparative Analysis" by Singh, R. et al.</b></p>	<p>2023</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigates how mainstream media outlets framed the Indian farmer protests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifies biased narratives and partisan reporting in the coverage.</li> <li>• Discusses the implications of media framing on public perception</li> </ul>
<p><b>"Media and Political Polarization: A Case Study of Indian Farmer Protests" by Patel, S. et al.</b></p>	<p>2022</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzes how different media channels portrayed the protests.</li> <li>• Examines the role of media in exacerbating political polarization during the farmer protests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggests strategies for mitigating polarization through responsible journalism.</li> </ul>
<p><b>"Political Affiliation and News Framing in Indian Farmer Protests" by Sharma, R. et al.</b></p>	<p>2022</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigated the relationship between the political affiliation of media channels and their framing of the farmer's protest.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrated a strong correlation between the political alignment of media outlets and the framing of the protests.</li> <li>• Highlighted how media ownership and political</li> </ul>



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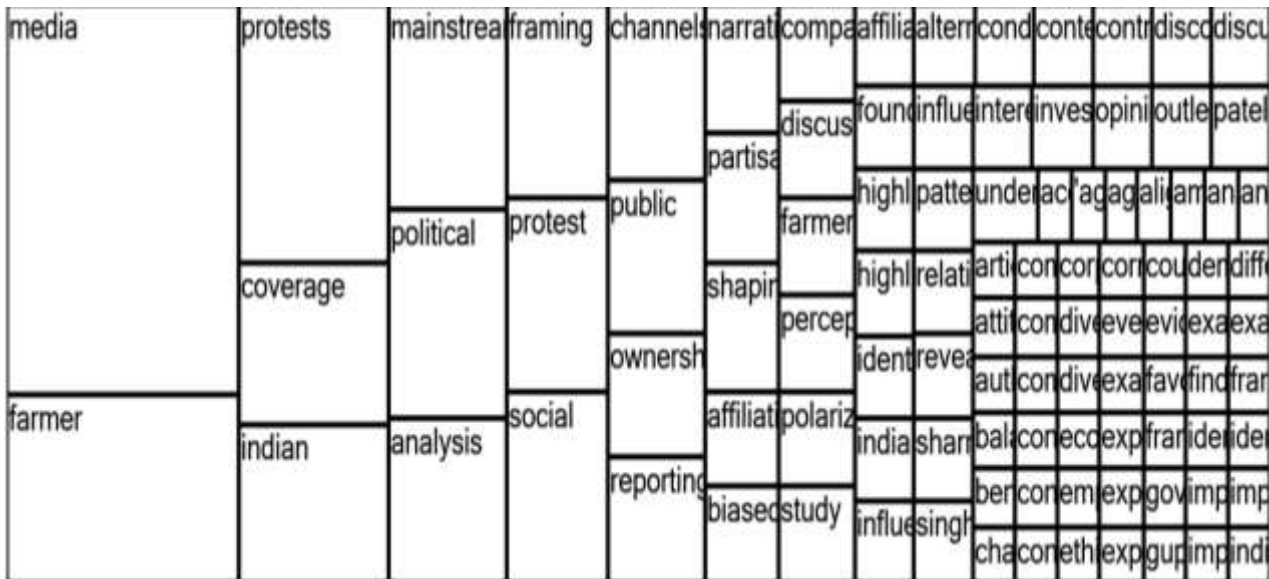
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conducted a quantitative content analysis of news articles.   -</li> </ul>	<p>interests influenced news narratives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offered insights into the role of media in shaping public opinion during the protests</li> </ul>
<p><b>Media Ownership, Political Affiliation, and News Framing: A Study of Farmer Protests in India"   Verma, P</b></p>	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investigates the influence of media ownership and political affiliations on the framing of farmer protests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifies patterns of biased reporting and partisan coverage.</li> <li>Raises questions about media ethics and accountability.</li> </ul>
<p><b>"Social Media and the Indian Farmer's Protest: A Comparative Analysis with Mainstream News" by Patel, S. et al.</b></p>	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compared social media discussions related to the farmer's protest with mainstream news coverage.</li> <li>Used sentiment analysis and network analysis to examine online discourse.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Found that social media discussions were more diverse and often diverged from mainstream news narratives.</li> <li>Revealed the role of social media in amplifying alternative viewpoints and countering mainstream media bias.</li> <li>Contributed to understanding the complex media landscape during the protests.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Political Economy of News Media and the Farmer Protests in India"   Sharma, A.</b></p>	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explores the relationship between media ownership, political affiliations, and coverage of the farmer protests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highlights the impact of media ownership on partisan reporting.</li> <li>Discusses the role of corporate interests in shaping media narratives.</li> </ul>





**Fig 2: Tree Map Analysis**

### **"THE DYNAMICS OF 'LITTLE BROTHER' AND 'BIG BROTHER' IN FARMER PROTESTS**

Kjetil Selvik expanded upon the concept of the 'Little Brother' and 'Big Brother' effects within the realm of social media, employing a metaphor that characterizes how social media is intertwined with and influences the structures of authority. The 'Little Brother effect' of social media is to facilitate the rise of new actors and undermine established authorities. Starting with the media sphere, the impact and potential of digital platforms present challenges to mainstream media and journalism. As new players enter the field, audiences become more polarized, and it is harder for media professionals accustomed to driving debates to influence public opinion. In politics, digital media populism undermines the traditional ruling majority, making the political landscape more fragmented and unstable. For authoritarian rulers, the digital turn is a huge source of concern because it provides regime opponents with multiple opportunities to connect and organize protests. Social media is deeply intertwined with contemporary social movements. During the Indian farmer protests, this "Little Brother" effect was significant, as it allowed protesters to share their perspectives and counter mainstream media narratives. It also played a role in mobilizing support and garnering international attention for the protests. While, the 'Big Brother effect' of digitalization is to enable surveillance and repression, which has the opposite implications for the power of the state. Governments take advantage of communication over the Internet to crack down on political opposition. Social media platforms offer free communication in exchange for extracting useful information. They collect unprecedented amounts of data that are sold to advertisers and can be used by states to monitor citizens. The development and proliferation of digital surveillance tools are happening rapidly in authoritarian states. Technological innovations enable intelligence agencies to track down civilians and suppress dissent before it erupts. Such preventive repression threatens to eliminate the online arena as a free space for coordinating



collective action. During the farmer protests, some mainstream media outlets faced criticism for their coverage, with accusations of sensationalism or bias, which in turn affected how the protests were portrayed to the wider public.

In the context of farmer protest the phenomenon of the "Little Brother" effect emphasizes the decentralized and democratizing influence of social media and citizen journalism, enabling protesters to mold the narrative of the farmer protests. In contrast, the "Big Brother" effect underscores the scrutiny of established media organizations in shaping and conveying news, particularly in the context of this pivotal socio-political movement.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

For this study, researcher employed content analysis as a method to systematically examine the content of media messages, particularly news coverage, in order to discern recurring patterns, themes, and characteristics.

Data collection involved the close monitoring and review of farmer protest coverage by several mainstream media outlets, including NDTV India, News 24, Zee News, Republic Bharat, and Aaj Tak. This process may have entailed selecting specific timeframes or significant protest-related events for analysis. To facilitate analysis, a coding framework was developed. This framework encompassed three primary dimensions: factual reporting, coverage of key facts and events, and analysis and interpretation.

In the dimension of factual reporting, the accuracy and impartiality of the media outlet's reporting were evaluated. Researchers examined whether the outlet accurately conveyed factual information regarding the protests, such as the scale of farmer participation, their demands, and government negotiations. The dimension related to key facts and events covered focused on assessing whether the media outlets adequately addressed essential facts and occurrences pertaining to the farmer protests. This included documenting protest locations, durations, levels of participation, significant speeches, rallies, legislative alterations, and governmental responses. Analysis and interpretation, the third dimension, honed in on the media outlet's approach to reporting. Researchers scrutinized whether the outlet maintained a neutral tone or exhibited indications of bias. They also investigated the presence of sensationalism, unsubstantiated claims, or an emphasis on emotional elements rather than factual content in their coverage.

Subsequently, each media outlet received a score in accordance with the coding framework. Positive scores were assigned to outlets that provided accurate and comprehensive reporting with minimal editorializing. Conversely, lower scores were awarded to those displaying factual inaccuracies, sensationalism, or bias.

Following the data analysis and scoring process, researchers formulated findings and conclusions concerning the quality and character of each outlet's coverage. This enabled a comparative



assessment of how different media sources reported on the farmer protests, highlighting disparities in factual reporting, impartiality, and potential bias.

**RESULT AND ANALYSIS**

<b>Media Outlet</b>	<b>Factual Reporting on Farmer Protests</b>	<b>Key Facts and Events Covered</b>	<b>Analysis and Interpretation</b>
<b>NDTV India</b>	Accurate and comprehensive coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reported on the size and demographics of the protesting farmers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Covered specific demands and grievances of the protesters.</li> <li>Presented verified information on government negotiations and outcomes. Focused on facts, minimal editorializing</li> </ul>
<b>News 24</b>	Detailed reporting with factual accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Documented protest locations, durations, and participation.</li> <li>Covered developments such as key speeches and rallies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provided timelines of legislative changes and government responses.   Maintained a neutral tone, emphasized events</li> </ul>
<b>Zee News</b>	Some factual inaccuracies detected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accurate on some aspects but occasionally featured incorrect statistics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highlighted certain incidents without full context.</li> <li>Presented facts that aligned with a particular narrative.   Mixed factual reporting with elements of bias</li> </ul>
<b>Republic Bharat</b>	Factual inaccuracies and sensationalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Included sensationalized visuals and unverified claims.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Occasionally reported unsubstantiated rumors.</li> <li>Focused more on emotional aspects rather than hard facts.   Sensationalized and less factually reliable</li> </ul>
<b>Aaj Tak</b>	Comprehensive but with a political bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provided detailed factual accounts of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exhibited a political bias in analysis and panel discussions.   Strong</li> </ul>



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		events and protest locations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Included expert interviews to explain the legislative changes.</li></ul>	factual foundation but with clear editorial leanings
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**Table 4: Analysis of Media Outlets Reporting on Farmer Protest**

### CONCLUSION:

Based on the assessment of these media outlets' coverage of the farmer protests, NDTV India stands out for its accurate and comprehensive coverage. It provided factual reporting on critical aspects of the protests, such as the size and demographics of the protesting farmers and their specific demands and grievances. The outlet also presented verified information on government negotiations and outcomes, demonstrating a commitment to factual reporting with minimal editorializing. News 24's coverage was detailed and marked by factual accuracy. It documented essential elements of the protests, including protest locations, durations, participation levels, and key speeches and rallies. Additionally, it provided timelines of legislative changes and government responses, maintaining a neutral tone and emphasizing events in its reporting. On contrary to these, Zee News exhibited a mixed record of factual reporting with elements of bias. While accurate on some aspects, it occasionally featured incorrect statistics and highlighted certain incidents without providing full context. The presentation of facts aligned with a particular narrative suggests a degree of bias in its reporting. Republic Bharat's coverage was marred by factual inaccuracies and sensationalism. It included sensationalized visuals and unverified claims, occasionally reporting unsubstantiated rumors. The focus on emotional aspects rather than hard facts indicates sensationalism and less factual reliability in its reporting. Aaj Tak offered comprehensive coverage but with a notable political bias. It provided detailed factual accounts of events and protest locations, even including expert interviews to explain legislative changes. However, its analysis and panel discussions exhibited a clear political bias, suggesting a strong factual foundation alongside editorial leanings.

In conclusion, the assessment of these media outlets' coverage indicates a spectrum of reporting quality, ranging from accurate and comprehensive reporting with minimal bias (NDTV and News 24) to mixed factual reporting with elements of bias (Zee News) and sensationalized, less factually reliable reporting (Republic Bharat). Aaj Tak demonstrated a strong factual foundation but with a discernible political bias in its analysis and discussions. Researchers should consider these characteristics when relying on these outlets for information on the farmer protests.

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