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## **An Examination of State Response to the Indian Farmers' Protest (2020-2021) and Its Consequences**

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# **An Examination of State Response to the Indian Farmers' Protest (2020-2021) and Its Consequences**

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## Abstract

This research paper delves into a case study of the Indian farmers' protest of 2020-2021, focusing on the state actor's response to the event and its ensuing impact on the country's sociopolitical landscape. While considerable literature discusses, for example, the farmers' strategies in the movement and scholars have used the case to test various theories, the long-term consequences of the Indian state's response to the protest remain underexplored. This paper makes use of qualitative content analysis to analyze a wide range of sources and the framing theory to gain insight into the state's handling of the movement. The findings indicate that the Indian government used repressive measures to a notable extent and that the protest had significant, lasting impacts on Indian society, governance, and democracy. Through a detailed examination of the protest events and state action, this research sheds light on state-society dynamics and democratic challenges present in contexts as diverse as India's.

**Keywords:** protest; repression; state response; framing theory.

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## 1. Introduction

India is the most populous country globally, the world's biggest democracy, and one of the fastest-growing economies in the world (The World Bank, n.d.). Its increasing importance in the international landscape has not only led politicians of various countries to build or strengthen relations with the country, but it has also attracted growing interest from political scientists and other academics as a subject of study (Kumar, 2023). India's economic growth can be attributed to a considerable extent to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who first came into power in 2014 and were re-elected in 2019 (Sahoo, n.d.). Nonetheless, his style of ruling has also raised several critical questions about the future of Indian democracy. Multiple international organizations have downgraded India to "partly free" (Freedom House, 2024) or a "flawed" democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023), while others classify it as an "electoral autocracy" (V-Dem Institute, 2024, p. 13). This trend has raised many concerns about the country's freedom of press, freedom of speech, and judicial independence under the current government (Freedom House, 2024).

The Indian farmers' protest, spanning from 2020-2021, remains a significant political moment for both social movements and Indian governance and society. It is worth studying because the protest emerged after the Indian government enacted three farm bills without adhering to parliamentary procedures or first consulting farmers, resulting in a nationwide protest (Behl, 2022). Notably, this movement marks the first time that Modi capitulated since assuming power (Narula, 2022, p. 93), and the protest has proved to be a test of resilience for Indian civil society and democratic institutions. Especially, since a key feature of democratic regimes is that citizens' right to express grievances and organize is respected. States, of course, (must) respond to political uprisings, but while respecting democratic principles. However, many question if this was the case in the farmers' protest.

The Indian farmers' movement garnered significant scholarly attention and current literature examines the event from multiple angles. This includes research on various aspects of the movement itself, Indian agriculture, and locating the protest in social movement literature and theory. Nevertheless, there is a lack of literature discussing state response to the Indian farmers'

protest, which is crucial to study in the context of the ruling party, the BJP, where India has become better governed but more illiberal. Thus, this research paper aims to address this gap by shedding light on the repercussions of the Indian government's response to the movement and its influence on the country's sociopolitical landscape. The paper contributes to current scholarship by discussing the long-term consequences of the government's response to the protest, including its impact on Indian society, governance, and democracy. The research question explored is: ***How did the Indian state actors respond to the farmers' protest (2020 - 2021) and what are its consequences?***

This research is academically relevant because it adds to the contentious political action literature. It is argued that social movements can sometimes help deepen and even restore democracy (Behl, 2022), making this case study worth undertaking in the context of Modi's strongman rule and India's declining democracy. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature on 'deviant' cases of democracy. The regime type is associated with critical levels of prosperity, mass literacy, urbanization, and national unity (McMillan, 2008; Doucouliagos & Ulubaşoğlu, 2008) — criteria India simply does not meet. Therefore, this research draws attention to how democratic principles manifest in diverse contexts such as India and the challenges it faces due to its multi-cultures, explanations which could be potentially useful in understanding other deviant cases of democracy as well. Particularly, given that the protesting farmers were primarily from specific parts of India. As for the research's societal relevance, India is a global agricultural powerhouse, and, nationally, the sector contributes to more than 17% of its GDP and employs over 60% of the population (Ministry of Agriculture, 2021). Hence, the farm bills and the protest must be examined more closely as they were a huge concern to a significant portion of the population. Had they not been withdrawn, their impact would have been widespread. Lastly, because the case study is a recent one, occurring between 2020-2021, it can be used as a foundation to understand the new farmers' protests that have emerged in the country in 2024 (BBC, 2024).

I commence with the theoretical framework containing a literature review on protest and state repression, and an introduction to the framing theory. This is followed by the research design, in which I detail the case selection, research method, and data. Subsequently, the findings and

analysis are discussed and the framing theory is applied to the case study to enhance our understanding of the event. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key points of the paper, reviews its academic and societal relevance, and ends with some suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Protest

Within the social movement literature, various forms of social protest, such as blockades and street marches are often called ‘repertoires of contention’ or ‘the social movement repertoire’ (della Porta & Diani, 1999; Tilly, 1995, 2004). Tilly (1995) defined repertoires as a set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted on by choice. He maintains that they are learned cultural constructs, not arising from abstract philosophy or political propaganda but from political struggle.

This research focuses on the social movement form of ‘protest,’ which is conceptualized as emerging from “asymmetrical power relations between actors, where at minimum one group attempts to defend its interests which it perceives as being threatened” (Hanna et al., 2016, p. 218). This definition aptly applies to the case study, as the units of analysis are the farmers and the Indian state. The former believed its interests were being threatened by the farm laws and it fought against the Indian state, a larger and more powerful entity, to have them withdrawn.

Rucht et al. (1999) argue that a protest is a “telling indicator for problems which are neither registered nor dealt with in an adequate manner” (pp. 8-9), signifying that a protest occurs when claimants deem the state’s response insufficient. Harley (2014) points out most groups commence first with legal means, such as a formal speech or petition to have their grievances heard or make demands. Once this fails, they then resort to unconventional political action and/or more confrontational measures such as protest or sabotage. It is also found that roadblocks are usually the last resort used by protestors (2014), which is notable as that was a key tactic used by the Indian farmers.

According to some scholars, protests are performative events that shape social dramas (Turner, 1974, 1980, 1982). However, they are also a part of bigger conflict between actors and have a performative quality that is intensified by the media (Hanna et al., 2016). From either point of view, it is important that protest participants convey their message to large audiences, mobilize support, and build or retain solidarity for the protest cause, adapting and innovating their protest events to evolving circumstances to keep their issues and demands relevant (Taylor & van Dyke,



2004; Tilly, 1993). della Porta (2008) maintains that for a protest to be ‘eventful’ it must have a “cognitive, relational, and emotional impact” (p. 48) on public opinion, authorities, and the participants of the movement themselves. Eyerman (2006) adds to this by underscoring that the “performance of opposition,” which encompasses protest events such as strikes, featuring organizers, participants, a target audience, and a stage (often important symbolic protest locations) can enhance the protest’s visibility and resonance. This enables claimants to reach a wider audience by framing the issue as greater than one singular event and associating it with a larger meaning and perhaps systemic issues. In summary, a protest is a notable form of contentious political action and can deeply shape societal dynamics and spark change.

## 2.2 State Response

The outlawing of political organizations, arbitrary arrests, censorship, and surveillance are some measures that have been used by the state since its founding. While the extent and/or types of activities employed by the state may vary across time and political context, there is always some repressive measure being implemented (Davenport, 2007, p. 1). The Indian government used both non-repressive and repressive measures to deal with the farmer’s protest; however, because it primarily used the latter, ‘repression’ is the focus of this paper.

According to Earl (2022, p. 2), the “repression of social movements refers to attempts by individuals, groups or corporations, or state actors (e.g. militaries, national police, and local police) to control, constrain, or prevent protest. Historically, this has often involved increasing the costs associated with social movement participation (e.g. through violence, arrest, etc.)” This conceptualization is used in this paper as opposed to others because the definition broadly refers to repression by the state and it is comprehensive and targeted, instead of being too abstract.

However, it remains debated whether repression causes movements to decline or grow. On one hand, researchers argue that repression leads to demobilization (Boykoff, 2006; Ellefsen, 2016; Wood, 2007). It raises the costs of participating, causing individuals to deter or opt out of the movement (Nepstad, 2023). On the other hand, several studies have also found the opposite, associating repression with further mobilization (Hess & Martin, 2006; Kurtz & Smithey, 2018). Nepstad (2023) posits state repression can trigger moral outrage among citizens as they witness

the state crackdown on unarmed protestors. During this, citizens' belief in state unresponsiveness or lack of attention to their concerns may be reinforced, highlighting their dire situation and the urgency of the change required, motivating others to join the movement.

Nepstad's (2023) review article, offers an excellent examination of the common methods states use to erode a movement's power. Among these methods, first and foremost, portraying the protest in a negative light is most commonly used, a tactic aiming to delegitimize the movement and minimize its appeal (2023). Second, the government gathers intelligence about movement activists and their plans, for instance, by accessing texts and emails, surveilling social media accounts, and deploying infiltrators to pose as movement participants (Marx, 1979). Third, the state makes use of provocateurs to cause violence during the protests; this not only tarnishes the movement's image but also justifies a crackdown (Feinberg et al., 2020; Thomas & Louis, 2014). Fourth, state actors send infiltrators to cause internal conflicts within the movement (Cunningham, 2004). This is to cause divisions in the protest about their plans and strategies, for instance, to delay or weaken the movement's objectives, and hamper activists' morale (Nepstad, 2023). Fifth, state actors spread misinformation to obstruct the movement's activities (Gohdes, 2015) or do the opposite, which entails the sixth method. They shut down access to the internet or block social movement participants from using social media (Nepstad, 2023). Seventh, they engage in legal harassment (Balbus, 1973). Protestors are charged with minor crimes and are led to immediately face the consequences of their actions. If they were first committed by another citizen, it would most likely first only result in a warning (Shriver et al., 2018). Eighth, many governments remove leaders and key persons of the movement, hoping that it will falter without anyone to guide it (Bob & Nepstad, 2007). This typically occurs through intimidating, arresting and/or jailing main figures (2007). Lastly, the state engages in direct violence by beating protestors and shooting rubber bullets at them or kidnapping and torture (Nepstad, 2023). While these mostly occur in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, they have also been documented to have happened in democracies (2023).

The theoretical expectation is that the Indian state's highly repressive response to the largely peaceful farmers' protest will exacerbate social tensions, diminish public confidence in governance, and raise concerns about the state of democracy and civil liberties in India.

The Indian government argued that the farm bills would benefit the farmers by enabling barrier-free trade in agricultural produce, empowering them with more options to sell their produce where it is most profitable for them (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020a). Conversely, the farmers called them ‘kale kanoon’ (black laws) and maintained that they would lead to small farmers losing land ownership and becoming vulnerable to corporate exploitation (Raj, 2021). The stark contrast in both the group’s descriptions of the farm laws is notable. Particularly, the Indian government’s framing of the protest is a significant part of its response to the event. Hence, the framing theory is introduced here and applied to the case study in Section 4.3 to gain an in-depth understanding of the state’s response to the protest (2020 - 2021).

### 2.3 Framing Theory

Snow et al. (2019) argue that the idea of framing is to challenge the meanings associated with relevant events, activities, places, and actors, proposing that these meanings are frequently contestable and open to debate and various interpretations. This perspective differs from other social movement theories as for the framing theory, mobilizing grievances is neither seen as a naturally occurring sentiment nor as arising automatically from certain material conditions. Instead, it is viewed as a product of interaction and signifying work.

The success of collective action frames in mobilizing is determined by the extent to which they adhere to the core framing tasks “diagnostic framing,” “prognostic framing,” and “motivational framing” (Snow & Benford, 1988). Diagnostic framing, first, involves problem identification and insistence that the issue needs to be fixed or changed, and second, the attribution of blame or responsibility for its problematic state. This type of framing usually defines or redefines a situation or an event as “injustice” (Benford & Snow, 2000). Prognostic framing entails providing potential solutions to the specified problem and articulating strategies to implement these suggested solutions while countering the opponent’s current or proposed solutions (Snow et al., 2019). The final framing task is motivational framing which involves knitting narratives of severity or urgency to create compelling accounts and inspire action. These framing processes occur during conversations and written communications between movement leaders and their members, leading to the creation of their own narrative of events (Benford, 1993).

Snow et al. (2019) found that the effectiveness of collective action frames is largely determined by a group's adoption of various strategies within the framing theory. For example, the extent to which they align with discursive opportunity structures, which contain important ideas and values prevalent in political culture. Parallel to this, frame crystallization is the active and evolving process of reality construction, agency, and contention emergence. The 'frame' highlights some words and phrases over others and those verbal and written communications become a group's own narrative (2019). Subsequently, 'frame alignment and diffusion' involve the process of linking existing values, identities, and goals of individuals or groups with the frame to persuade others to join the movement and increase the likelihood of participation (2019). This is followed by 'framing effects' which are appeals to emotions such as empathy, outrage, or hope which can mobilize individuals to participate in collective action, despite rational considerations (2019).

Finally, framing for resonance, such as ensuring credibility is salient for the audience to observe frame consistency and check whether or not the frame is an accurate reflection of reality (Snow et al., 2019). Relatedly, relative salience is crucial for a frame to be successful in addition to its centrality, which is how the values and ideas of the frame are pivotal for the targets of mobilization (2019). The concept of relative salience relates closely to commensurability, which is whether the frame is resonant with the target's daily experiences or if it is too abstract, with the former having a greater likelihood of success (2019). Lastly, frame transformation involves adapting frames to changing circumstances and counter-framing the frames of opponents and the media if necessary (2019). In brief, framing processes can have a noteworthy influence on the reach, success, and credibility of the created narrative by a group.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Case Selection

This research paper uses the case study strategy, which is defined as “an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units” (Gerring, 2004, p. 342), with a focus on the Indian farmer’s protest (2021-2022). Meredith (1998) maintains that case study research has three main strengths. Firstly, it is valuable because it allows for the phenomenon to be studied in its real-life and natural setting, generating rich observations and details from actual practice. Secondly, it enables the phenomenon to be researched from a holistic approach, as the case study method emphasizes contextual understanding, providing a thorough background. Thirdly and relatedly, the method accommodates early, exploratory investigations where variables may be unknown and when the phenomenon may not at all be understood. It allows for the discovery of notable insights and findings independent of the researcher’s expectations.

#### *The Indian Farmers’ Protest (2020 - 2021)*

The Indian farmers’ protest is selected as a case study for this paper for several reasons. First, the farmer’s protest was the first time that an alliance was created between urban-based individuals and civil society groups, workers, students, and oppositional political parties (Fadaee, 2022). This is significant as it illustrates the deep impact of the farmers’ protest on coalition-building to achieve a particular goal and the Indian society.

Importantly, India is not new to the passing of neoliberal reforms aimed at easing the market regulation for ‘Big Capital’ (Roy, 2023). Hence, the protest received significant international support not because of the content of the farm bills, as economists have been urging the Indian government to pass laws of such sort for years (2023). Instead, it received attention due to the government’s abrupt method of passing the bills and their handling of the protest (Behl, 2022). Specifically, once the government applied disproportionate physical force on the protestors. For example, U.S. President Biden asked the Indian government to have a “dialogue” with the farmers, recognize their peaceful protests, and restore their internet (Ganapathy, 2021). Celebrities such as Rihanna, and Greta Thunberg also tweeted expressing their support for the farmers. Lastly, the Indian diaspora in many countries protested outside respective Indian

embassies to show solidarity with the farmers (2021). This is significant because it highlights the magnitude of the repressive measures used by the government and the severity of the situation, making the phenomenon worth studying.

Third, the farmer's protest marks an important moment in recent Indian history, particularly for social movements in India, because it emerged essentially as a stance against neoliberal corporatization of agriculture (Roy, 2023). Indian agriculture is a segregated populace itself – a 'social class' divided between the landed and landless peasantry and further segmented by caste and gender hierarchies. Thus, several agrarian movements in India must navigate the struggle against the dual challenges of both capitalism and federalism (2023). In brief, a case study of the Indian farmer's protest is significant for various reasons, highlighting its relation to deep-rooted political issues in the country and hence its potential to hugely impact Indian governance and society.

### 3.2 Research Method

In the method of deductive qualitative content analysis (QCA), "the organization phase involves categorization matrix development, whereby all the data are reviewed for content and coded for correspondence to or exemplification of the identified categories" (Elo et al., 2014). QCA is the most optimal research method for the Indian farmer's case study due to the protest's multidimensional aspects and numerous differing perspectives on it which must be taken into account. Maier (2018) identified three key strengths of QCA. First, its scope is narrow and targeted as it focuses on specific communication messages and the message creator. This is valuable because the message is "close to" to the communicator, enabling researchers to analyze both the manifest and latent content of the message. The former includes plain communicative message characteristics, and the latter includes meanings that can be inferred from the text. Second, it is useful for the collection and analysis of diverse text types, such as reports, newspaper articles, blogs, and personal communication, facilitating the study of communication from different contexts. Finally, QCA is also a "secure" process because when errors are made in different research processes, a project may have to be discarded or re-started with a new sample. However, because content analysis examines texts and is separated from the original

communicators and their potential to bias the process, errors can be fixed more easily and whole projects are not lost.

### 3.3 Data Collection & Operationalization

The dependent variable in this study is state response with a focus on social movement repression. This is conceptualized using Earl's (2022) definition as aforementioned and operationalized using Nepstad's (2023) review article. The first category is non-repressive measures and the subcategories are derived from Orimiyeye (2023), Ellis et al. (2010), and Rasler (1996). These studies are used because each focuses on a different peaceful conflict resolution method and they have a rich discussion on non-violent conflict resolution. The second category is repressive measures which is operationalized by taking the nine distinct methods identified by Nepstad (2023) in her review article that state actors use to repress social movements, and subsequently grouping them into four main groups. They are grouped together because of conceptual similarity and as they often overlap. The methods identified in Nepstad (2023) are used because the article was only published recently, in 2023, informing us of the latest developments in the field and the author reviews a vast number of studies on social movement repression.

The independent variable is the farmers' protest (2020-21). The event was largely non-violent with the group organizing rallies, tractor parades, and community kitchens (International Commission of Jurists, 2021). However, they met with significant government resistance. The ruling party erected militarized borders around the farmers' protest camps and arrested hundreds of protestors (BBC, 2021b). Furthermore, the government charged journalists with sedition, restricted internet access in Delhi and Haryana – the epicenters of the protests, and mandated Twitter to suspend the accounts of news outlets not supporting the government's framing of the issue (Roy & Purnell, 2021). It also cut off water (Roy & Purnell, 2021) and electricity supply to the protestors' encampments (Kumar, 2021).

The Indian farmers' protest (2020-21) is operationalized by analyzing farmers' communication to gain insight into their narrative and how they experienced governmental intervention in their movement. Specifically, I analyze sources from *Trolley Times*, a newsletter run by activists in

support of the ‘Samyukt Kisan Morcha,’ (SKM) an umbrella organization of 32 farmers’ unions that organized against the government’s passage of the three farm bills (Arora, 2022). This source is valuable as it allows a first-hand examination of the farmers’ experiences. Additionally, statements from the Press Information Bureau (PIB) of the Government of India are examined to gain insight into the institution’s experience of the protest. The PIB is the country’s official agency responsible for disseminating information on “governmental policies, programmes, initiatives, and achievements” (Press Information Bureau, n.d.). This source is important because it represents the government’s official stance on political issues. Lastly, I analyze reports from news channels and international organizations when deemed relevant. A combination of these sources allows for a thorough investigation of the Indian state’s response to the protest. A total of 34 sources were analyzed; I collected them per the protest’s timeline of the main events that occurred as it was one year long. This allowed an all-around examination of the event, setting the stage for a comprehensive and solid analysis of the phenomenon.

As a researcher who is a proponent of economic liberalization and globalization, I may be biased toward favoring the reform laws because they were aimed at liberalizing Indian agriculture. However, to counter this potential bias, I studied a multitude of diverse sources independent of the government. For example, sources from *Trolley Times*, local news channels, and international organizations to understand the plight of the farmers and why they were against the laws. Nonetheless, because most sources from *Trolley Times* are written in Panjabi and Hindi, I used ‘Google Translate’ to understand those sources. Consequently, I may have missed some nuances in the farmers’ communications. Nevertheless, I believe that the benefits of access and analysis of these sources outweigh the risk of missing some details.



## 4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Coding Frame Development

The concept-driven subsumption strategy, a form of deduction, is defined as the development of categories from theory, literature (the current state of research), or the research question (Kuckartz, 2019). In this paper, the subcategories ‘avoidance,’ and ‘negotiation,’ under the category ‘use of non-repressive measures’ are derived from Orimiyeye (2023) and Ellis et al. (2010) respectively. The subcategory ‘policy reform or change’ is derived from Rasler (1996) as a major form of concession. For the ‘use of repressive measures’ category, the research methods constituting the four main categories are acquired from Nepstad (2023). She identified nine different repression methods states use to deal with protests. I organized them into four groups based on conceptual similarity to facilitate analysis and better communication of the findings. In the fourth group, I added another repressive method the state used in the face of the case study. The groups contain the methods as follows:

1. Delegitimization and Disinformation: *portraying the protest negatively and spreading misinformation and interfering with the movement's activities.*
2. Surveillance and Infiltration: *gathering information about the movement's activities and plans and sending infiltrators to cause internal conflict in the protest.*
3. Provocation and Violence: *using provocateurs to cause violence during the protests and using of physical force and engaging in direct violence*
4. Legal and Structural Harassment: The former includes *charging protestors for minor crimes and being harsher than usual toward them and intimidating and jailing important protest figures.* I add *unlawful passage of bills* in legal harassment as another repressive measure in this category. Debating a bill before its enactment is a significant feature of democracy for informing and empowering stakeholders and citizens; however, the government passed the bills without following parliamentary procedures. Structural Harassment includes but is not limited to *shutting down access to the internet or blocking access to social media.*

## 4.2 The Coding Frame

- A. Use of Non-Repressive Measures: This category applies when the state uses a peaceful conflict resolution method.
- a. Avoidance: This subcategory applies when the state does not use repressive measures but avoids, ignores, or refuses to address the underlying issue(s) of the protest.
  - b. Negotiation: This subcategory applies when the state engages in discussions and attempts to find solutions to the protestors' grievances.
  - c. Policy Reform or Repeal: This subcategory applies when the state makes changes in policy or withdraws the contentious law.
- B. Use of Repressive Measure: This category applies when the state uses coercive tactics or physical force to respond to a protest instead of peaceful means.
- a. Delegitimization and Disinformation: This subcategory applies when the state attempts to undermine the credibility of the protests and/or spreads false information to reduce its support.
  - b. Surveillance and Infiltration: This subcategory applies when the state monitors a group's movements and collects intelligence about their activities. Alternatively, when it sends infiltrators among protestors to cause internal conflicts and potentially disrupt their plans.
  - c. Provocation and Violence: This subcategory applies when the state sends provocateurs to cause violence during protests, potentially providing them a reason to crack down. Alternatively, when the state uses physical force or engages in direct violence, such as kidnapping.
  - d. Legal and Structural Harassment: This subcategory applies when there is unlawful passage of bills and legal harassment. It also includes intimidating, arresting, and/or removing leaders and other main actors in the protest including protestors with the hope that the movement dissolves. Structural harassment includes but is not limited to blocking internet access or particular accounts from social media.

### 4.3 Findings & Discussion

The results of the qualitative content analysis show that the government used repressive measures to a large extent. Below, the findings for each subcategory in the coding frame are discussed:

#### *Use of Non-Repressive Measures*

##### *Negotiation*

The primary non-repressive measure the government used was negotiation, having held at least 11 rounds of negotiations with the farmer union representatives (Media Centre, 2021). The Indian government continually invited them for one meeting after another with the hope of reaching a solution. They constantly reassured the farmers that the farm bills were crafted and passed with their welfare in mind and highlighted its benefits (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020d). Additionally, the government asked the representatives of the Farmers' Union to identify the specific issues they had with the Farm Reform Acts and offered various solutions (2020d). For example, when the farmers questioned the constitutional validity of the farm laws, the government explained that the bills only came into existence after "1.5 lakhs trainings and webinar sessions" in which discussions about them also took place (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020d). They also offered to put forth the question of the constitutional validity of the laws to a committee (2020d). In addition, the government suggested constituting an expert committee to resolve the issues about the farm bills. However, the farmers refused this offer and instead preferred to engage with the government directly (2020d).

The government's willingness to engage in multiple discussions and its offer of various solutions demonstrates the large extent to which the government sought the farmers' agreement with the laws. Despite this, the negotiations appear to have been misplaced. The consultation with the farmers and discussions about the laws should have taken place before its enactment, and not after. Hence, it appears the government was more worried about its image, wanting to show the public that it was engaging in deliberation rather than genuinely finding a solution to the farmers' grievances. Moreover, most publications in the Press Information Bureau are titled as "Government committed to the welfare of farmers and is always ready for dialogue," (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020b) and "Talks held with representatives of Farmers' Unions in a cordial and

frank atmosphere...” (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020d). The usage of words such as “cordial” and “frank” and phrases like “always ready for dialogue” reinforce that the government wished to resolve protesting farmers’ issues with the farm bills through negotiation and wanted to prevent an escalation of the matter. Especially, since the laws had already been passed and the government was extremely reluctant initially to consider its withdrawal (Natt, 2020). It is important to note here that the Supreme Court upheld the right of farmers to protest and ordered a stay of implementation of the farm laws (Rakesh Vaishnav v. Union of India, 2020), although the farmers proceeded to reject this offer (BBC, 2021a). The Supreme Court’s order is a significant development, indicating that India’s democratic institutions do not completely side with the government on all issues. It upheld the rule of law in this case, reflecting a pivotal aspect of democratic governance.

Notably, while the farmers shared multiple concerns related to the farm bills, one of the main ones was that they believed the minimum support price (MSP) would not remain after the passage of the farm bills. This is despite the government’s reassurance provided to them in writing that the MSP is unrelated to the farm bills and that it would remain and even increase in the future similarly to how it has in the past (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020b). Nevertheless, the government has previously made several promises to the farmers but they were either only partially fulfilled or simply did not deliver what they were supposed to (Agarwal, 2020). This can explain why the farmers remained unconvinced about the government’s promises on the MSP as they were not confident in their word. Overall, the negotiations revealed deeper problems between the state and farmers as there was a lack of trust between them. The abrupt passage of the farm bills only seemed to exacerbate this, pushing the farmers further away from the government.

### *Avoidance*

Coupled with the government’s tactic of negotiation, was avoidance. First, the government avoided consulting farmer organizations before passing the laws as aforementioned. Furthermore, many farmers believed that the negotiations were futile, alleging that the Modi government “stood firm like a rock” (Natt, 2020, p. 3) despite the pressure from farmer leaders and did not fulfill any of their major demands (2020). From the analysis, it seems that the Modi

government struggled to have meaningful discussions with the farmers and it was unable to address the underlying causes of the farmers' protest. This is reflective of deeper issues between the state-citizens relations and shows citizens' low confidence in the ruling party's form of governing.

### *Policy Reform or Repeal*

Negotiations failed and farmers insisted they would only cease the protest once the government withdrew the farm laws, willing to accept nothing short of that (BBC, 2021a). Thus, Modi eventually made an announcement sharing the government's decision to repeal the farm laws which also happened abruptly (Prime Minister's Office, 2021). Some point out that both the passage and repeal of the farm laws are problematic because new bills are simply being rolled in and out, without debate and deliberation (Kapur, 2022). This denotes that the issue extends beyond the farmers' case and raises fundamental questions about Indian law and order and the reliability of governmental institutions.

### *Use of Repressive Measures*

#### *Legal and Structural Harassment*

Compared to the use of non-repressive measures, the Indian government relied more on the use of repressive measures; the category was coded 19 times, making it the dominant one. As explained in Section 4.1, passing bills without following parliamentary procedure is coded in this category. It proved to be a huge trigger for the eruption of the protest and the unsuccessful negotiations later on because it caused a trust deficit between the government and the farmers.

Furthermore, several journalists were detained and arrested and the government engaged in investigations to intimidate them. For example, the Delhi police visited "political leader Ravi Roy's house and questioned Navkiran Nath, a member of Trolley Times and our editorial team" without any warrant (Singh, 2021a, p. 1). Several farmers who came with their tractors to participate in the movement were also arrested (2021a). Intimidating and jailing protest participants and journalists indicates that Indian freedom of press and speech is under threat, raising concerns about India's democratic future. Additionally, while international support for the farmers' movement grew, the Indian government released a statement responding to foreign

individuals to have a “proper understanding of the issues at hand” before “rushing to comment.” (Media Centre, 2021). Its harsh responses show the Indian government is increasingly intolerant of criticism against itself and leaning toward illiberalism, evincing its weakening democracy.

The government structurally harassed the protestors by asking Twitter to remove posts that used a provocative hashtag and asked it to block certain accounts (Civicus, 2021). While Twitter removed them temporarily, it then decided to make them visible again, citing that there was little to no valid justification for why the posts should be removed (2021). However, the government threatened Twitter with legal action if the platform did not block those accounts. It also shut down internet services, which is concerning as this is not the first time this has happened (2021). Additionally, barricades erected by the government prevented men, women, and families from water access and sanitation facilities (International Commission of Jurists, 2021). Evidently, the measures taken by the government are highly repressive, pointing toward how the country is gradually becoming a dominant one-party rule and its growing illiberalism.

### *Provocation and Violence*

In addition to Legal and Structural Harassment, the Indian government made considerable use of physical force as this category was coded 11 times. For example, the farmers “braved police action, arrests, concrete barriers, iron spikes, suspension of water, electricity and the Internet” (Natt, 2020, p. 2). Moreover, they “broke the barricades of Shambhu, Khanuri, Pahewa, Ratia etc., facing tear gas and water cannons in cold weather...” (p. 2) and “barbed wire fences, piles of dirt, deep trenches in the roads and tipper trucks standing to block the way” (p. 2) to reach the Delhi border. The government’s disproportionate use of physical force to contain the largely peaceful protest led to it gaining international attention. This is significant because it displays the country’s increasing authoritarian ruling style. Moreover, the police obstructed the farmers from the route that was predecided (Rajewal, 2021). The Central Government also ordered the state of Haryana to close all borders of Punjab “in an unconstitutional manner by barricading them like international borders” (Singh, 2021c, p. 2). This shows that the government reneged on its commitment once again, further straining public trust and damaging its long-term relationship with the farmers.

### *Delegitimization and Disinformation*

The Indian government attempted to delegitimize the movement by labeling it as anti-national and “...calling it a movement of Khalistanis [a Sikh separatist movement], Naxalites or only Punjabis” (Singh, 2021b, p. 2). Furthermore, it spread misinformation on social media by spreading fake pictures and videos and manipulated the reason behind the protest. For example, many videos of pro-Khalistani rallies in the US and England were falsely linked to the movement, despite having no connection with it (2021b). A misinformation campaign by the government is alarming because it distorts citizens’ decision-making and can undermine public trust. From the analysis, actions such as these appear to have aggravated social tensions as well, especially because the protesting farmers were primarily Panjabi. This further contributes to the challenge of sustaining an inclusive democracy in India’s multicultural society along with competing interests.

### *Surveillance and Infiltration*

Lastly, the farmer leaders suspected that the Indian government was spying on them using Israeli software Pegasus to gather information about the protest (NDTV, 2022). If they were indeed spying on them, this raises concerns about civil liberties and the misuse of state power in the country. While infiltration is included as a repressive measure, this research finds that the government did not use it. Overall, the Indian government responded to the protest using a combination of non-repressive and repressive measures. According to the analysis, it relied more on the latter and left a lasting impact on Indian society, including diminishing public confidence in governance, raising concerns about the state of democracy and civil liberties, and exacerbating social tensions. Hence, the findings support the theoretical expectation.

### *Application of the Framing Theory*

From the findings, it is clear that the framing theory is highly applicable to the Indian farmers’ protest. The theory, as explained in Section 2.3 using Snow et al.’s (2019) article is applied here to the case study. This is valuable in examining the framing strategies used by the Indian state, a part of its response to the farmers’ protest, and hence will further strengthen our understanding of the event.

In the government's diagnostic frame, they portrayed the protest as halting economic growth and national stability, alluding that the farmers' contention is an obstacle to India's development. Furthermore, they insinuated that the farmers were incapable of properly understanding the bills and the protest erupted due to their misunderstanding of the laws' objective, and blamed them for causing unrest (DHNS, 2021).

Moreover, the government's prognostic framing was apparent when they hosted negotiation rounds and discussed areas of compromise with the farmers. The claimants framed the farm bills as a gateway to their exploitation by huge enterprises and did not entrust the government to keep the minimum support prices (MSP) (Behl, 2022). Nevertheless, the Modi government countered the farmers' framing of the issue by highlighting in speeches and parliamentary debates the benefits of the laws for the farmers such as "increased market access, better price realization, and opportunities for farmers to engage with agribusiness," refuting farmers' concerns (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020a).

In the motivational framing of the farmers' protest by the government, they addressed the concerns of the farmers by reassuring them that the minimum support price (MSP) would remain. Furthermore, they urged the farmers to have faith in the government and cease the protest, propelling them to go home. They cited examples of schemes introduced in the past by the government for the welfare of the farmers and maintained that the reform bills were for their welfare (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020c).

Additionally, the Indian government's frame crystallization is visible in how it discussed the farmer protest in speeches and parliamentary debates. They created their own reality of the protest by labeling the farmers in various ways, insisting that the protest was not for a good cause. For example, Modi called the farmer's protest 'andolanjeevi' (one who thrives on protest and unrest). Some of the Central government ministers called them 'leftists' and 'Maoists' while other BJP politicians called the protestors 'jihadis' and 'Khalistani' (DHNS, 2021). In short, the BJP portrayed the farmers as anti-nationalist and focussed on the chaos and disruption the protest caused more than on the farmers' grievances. They underscored some aspects of the protest more than others and created their own narrative of the event.



Moreover, from the analysis, it is visible that the Indian government strived to retain the support of the masses by encouraging Indian media news consumers to think about the event as unfounded and unruly, instead of focusing on the plight of the farmers, showcasing examples of ‘frame alignment and diffusion’ and ‘framing effects.’ The government ensured framing for resonance by pointing out that the Indian police also suffered injuries and deaths during the protest events when the farmers complained about the government’s shooting of rubber bullets at the protestors and their mistreatment (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2021a). Additionally, to back the narrative of the farmer’s protest the Indian government curated, they emphasized the disruptive nature of the protest, focusing on the inconvenience the farmers were causing by blocking the roads, for instance (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2021b).

Frame transformation was visible when Modi shared his respect for the farmers of the country in his speech and then recognized that the government had failed to convey the advantages of the farm bills to them (Prime Minister’s Office, 2021). These comments contrasted the earlier ones that had been made about the group and showed how the protests eventually led to the government withdrawing them. Overall, the Indian government used several framing strategies to gain support for the farm laws and to portray the protest negatively, bolstered by the Indian media siding with the government’s stance. Hence, the farmers’ protest and victory – the withdrawal of the farm bills – was a significant moment for social movements in India and left a notable impact on the country’s sociopolitical landscape.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, in this paper, I investigated the long-term impacts of the Indian state's response to the farmers' protest from the lens of the framing theory. The findings showed that the government framed the farm bills as giving farmers more options and autonomy to sell and make decisions about their produce. Conversely, the farmers framed the farm bills as a gateway to their exploitation by big corporations and the BJP's handling of the protest to criticize the increasing illiberalism of the government. While the farm bills would have been beneficial for the country as agrarian economists have long been prompting the Indian government to take those measures, the manner in which the government passed the laws was problematic. Through the use of qualitative content analysis, it was evident that the government relied significantly on repressive measures to deal with the largely peaceful protest, including physical force and blocking essential resources. This type of state response had several consequences on the Indian sociopolitical landscape, including diminishing public confidence in governance, raising concerns about the state of democracy and civil liberties, and exacerbating social tensions in India. The findings hence supported the theoretical expectation.

### *Academic and Practical Relevance*

The results are academically significant as they contribute to theoretical advancements in social movement literature. By applying the framing theory to the Indian farmers' case, this study underscores how framing processes are pivotal for states in retaining stakeholders' and the public's trust when new laws are passed and in influencing the reach of social movements. The practical relevance of the research is that it undertook a case study of a social movement in India, a key player in the emerging world order. This is notable because the country's national politics are increasingly important for the international realm as well, bolstered by its significant soft power arising from its vast diaspora.

### *Strengths, Weaknesses, and Suggestions for Future Research*

A strength of this research is that it used a thorough theoretical framework to investigate the state response to the Indian farmer's protest, providing a solid foundation for the research method and analysis, and thereby increasing the credibility of the findings. Additionally, using the case study

method coupled with qualitative content analysis enabled a detailed examination of the phenomenon and generated rich and nuanced findings, exhibiting methodological rigor. However, the case study research method also limits the scope of this study as it is specific to only one social movement and context. Hence, future research can incorporate comparative analyses with analogous movements in diverse countries. This can be valuable in understanding how contextual variations shape governmental reactions to social movements, enriching discussion on state-society dynamics and governance. Moreover, this paper only used one research method due to time constraints. Therefore, future research can strive to utilize a combination of relevant research methods instead of a singular one to ensure data triangulation and thereby further increase the validity of the findings.

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