MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND TWITTER NARRATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF THE FARMERS' PROTEST

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Abstract - After the advent of 2.0 web technology, Social Media like Facebook, Twitter etc have played a massive role in disseminating cascade of information to the people at large. Politicians, activists, cyber-activists and mainstream media used social media to facilitate a digital discourse on several boiling issues in India. Using Twitter as a tool for digital activism is becoming a new normal in this 21st century. Mainstream media like Newspapers and Television Channels have never failed to make use of this technoscape to avail Twitter to inform and to influence their audience. In this paper, the tweets of Mainstream Media during the time of Farmers' protest have been analysed to understand their role in active engagement with their audience with reference to Farmers' Protest in India. This study analyses tweets to identify the key players, major categories of twitter narratives and digital discourse of mainstream media with reference to Farmers' protest.

Keywords: Cyber-activism, Farmers' Protest, Twitter Narratives, Mainstream Media

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Twitter is a social networking and microblogging site which allows to tweet, retweet and like users' feed in real time (Maclean, 2013). Twitter feed is limited to 280 characters through which users interact and exchange ideas in brevity to people around the world. Hashtags '#' help to identify similar themes and specific areas of discussion. According to Statista web portal United States of America stands first in using Twitter as an effective microblogging tool with the audience reach of 69.3 million users as of January 2021. India takes the third place with 17.5 million Twitter users (Tankovska, 2021). Wilkinson states that Twitter follows a 'power law distribution' principle according to which a small number of very active users on Twitter post more tweets than the other users (Chen, 2020).

Today many people around the globe use cyberspace to inform, interact and mobilise people for a social or political cause. Some of the early examples are Tunisian, Egyptian, Mexican, Arab Spring Uprising etc. Even India witnessed such kind of uprising from Anna Hazare's Movement to Farmers' Movement. Politicians, Celebrities, Activists and even mainstream media organizations avail the technoscape to inform and to ignite their audience. In India Farmers have been protesting against three farm bills as they believe them exploitative. Number of discussions and discourses have taken place between the government and the farmers' representatives but a complete consensus has not yet been achieved. There are both positive and negative shared sentiments from different fields of experts and ordinary people with reference to Farmers' protest. Twitter has become the battle field for interactive sessions and emotional upheavals. Activists, farmers, celebrities, politicians and mainstream media plunge into the battle ground and try to engage with the audiences as much as they can. This paper highlights the role of Mainstream media in engaging with people through Twitter by analysing the tweets during the time of Farmers' Protests.

1.1 Background of Farmers' Protest

Three Farms bills such as, 1. Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services and 3. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act was 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. These Farm Bills got the President's assent on 27th September, 2020 (Narayanan, Understanding Farmer Protests in India, 2021).

Sudha Narayanan, an Associate Professor at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, argues that these bills propose a Unified National Market, 'One Nation-One Market' (Narayanan, The Three Farm Bills, 2020). Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) law allows the farmers to trade beyond the physical market which overrides all state level Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee's (APMC) law. This law also proposes online trading of produce and promotes barrier free marketing of farmer's produce. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, gives the provision to the farmers to engage in direct agreement with the corporates to sell their produce. The third law, The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020, removes cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onion, and potatoes from the list of essential commodities.

1.2 Reason behind Farmers' Protest

For several days farmers from Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU), the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), along with 30 Farmers Association from Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and from other pockets of our country, in the midst of biting cold, sit on protest in the Highways that lead to Delhi. Fasting, Tractor Rally, Road blockage etc. are few of the protest strategies that the farmers take to oppose those three farm laws until they are repealed. The farmers believe that these three laws are framed for the best convenience of the corporates who can easily buy, stock and contract for produce without any restrictions (Narayanan, Understanding Farmer Protests in India, 2021). Farmers also seem to be fearful of the removal of the '*Mandi* system' and abolishment of Minimum Support Prices (MSP) and procurement. In spite of the government's reassurance and the Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar's promise that the Minimum Support Price mechanism will stay and the *Mandi* system won't be removed, farmers are staunch enough to hold their demands high, that is to repeal all the three farm laws (Jyoti Prakash Sahoo et al., 2020).

1.3 Twitter Narratives in Farmers' Protest

As farmers are protesting against the implication of the three farm laws offline, meanwhile there are umpteen points of protest and anti-protest slogans and hashtags flared up in online Twitter platforms. Pro-farmers' protest and Anti-farmers' protests have become the centre of online discourses. Politicians, celebrities, online activists, sports stars all around the world started to opine on farmers' issues and never hesitated to express their views. American pop star Rihanna's six word tweet, "Why aren't we talking about this?!" brought a huge storm on the Twitter platform and led for faster global attention and further discussions. Few other global personalities like climate activist Greta Thunberg, lawyer Meena Harris, and media personality Mia Khalifa tweeted in support of farmers in India (Dibyendu Mishra et al., 2021). This foreign gesture of global personalities instigated the pro-government bodies and supporters to react against the online protesters. The hashtags #IndiaAgainstPropaganda and #IndiaTogether became top trending on Twitter on 3rd February, 2021. Indian Celebrities like Kangana Ranaut, Akshay Kumar, Ajay Devgun, Ekta Kapoor, Karan Johar, Anupam Kher and several cricketers like Sachin Tendulkar, Ravi Shastri, Shikhar Dhawan, Suresh Raina, Anil Kumble, Ajinkya Rahane, Rohit Sharma, Hardik Pandya tweeted with the hashtags #IndiaAgainstPropaganda and #IndiaTogether (Dibyendu Mishra et al., 2021). The Twitter narratives which had been generated by mainstream media organisations of these global and local personalities precipitated large scale digital discourses and discussions.

1.4 Mainstream Media and Farmers' Protest

As celebrities and cricket stars talk and tweet on farmers' issues. There are mainstream media which also play a major role in influencing the public with regard to farmers in India. Mainstream media always behaved as the shapers of opinions and conversations as an important agenda setting nodal in the past history (Newman, 2011). After the advent of social media, we could witness a lot of mainstream media migrating to social media platforms and ensure their presence as effective shapers of opinions. Today mainstream media is very much felt on Twitter through reportage and through content generation. Infographics, images, videos and texts are few of the formats effectively used by mainstream media to disseminate news and views

on Twitter. An earlier study in UK reveals that 73% of news links shared on Twitter are from traditional mainstream media organisations (Newman, 2011). Though mainstream media do coverage and reportage on farmers' protest, we could also see a strong resentment towards mainstream media as they are alleged of not covering the farmers' issue genuinely. Farmers went to the extreme of terming mainstream media as 'Godi Media', which means media at the lap of the power holders (Suresh, 2020). This research analyses the engagement of mainstream media on Twitter platforms covering farmers' protest. This includes the tweets of national newspapers, television news channels and other mainstream media organisations.

1.5 Research Problem

Twitter narratives engendered by mainstream media result endless discourses and shape public opinion on certain issues. The very purpose of this research paper is to identify the Key players of Mainstream Media who are very active on Twitter. This study also focuses on understanding major categories of narratives generated by mainstream media organizations on Twitter during the time of Farmers' Protest. The role of mainstream media in facilitating digital discourse on Twitter with reference to Farmers' Protest is also systematically studied.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

PEJ Research Associate Jesse Holcomb along with his research associates examined the Twitter feeds of 13 U.S News sources and the individual journalists who had large Twitter followers. This study analysed the hashtags, frequency of tweets, health beat reporting and the rapid growth of followers on Twitter (Holcomb, 2011). Mainstream media influences the public and shapes their opinion especially during the time of election whom to vote and whom not to vote. A study had been conducted to analyse the behaviour of mainstream media on Twitter in shaping the public opinion during the time of 2010 UK General Election (Zhongyu Wei et al., 2013). Twitter is a super-hub which disseminates a cascade of information to varied segments of the audience within a fraction of seconds.

An extant study, 'Measuring Influence on Twitter' measures the influencing potential of Twitter users in the process of attitudinal change in Austria. The researchers also analysed top 10 Twitter users in Austria with new tools and various methods (Anger, 2011). In the beginning of the advent of Social Media, Twitter was mostly used as a strong weapon to mobile and gather people to topple any regime and acted as an agent of social change. Twitter revolution was seen as a new trend in human history. A study by TraceyJ.Hayes analyses NewYork Police Department's Twitter public relations campaign and examines how brutality happened in physical locality has been discussed in the online location and how Twitter becomes the battle field of public protest (TraceyJ.Hayes, 2017). The interactivity and connectedness of Twitter create opportunities to mobilize citizens for or against critical incidents by posting and propagating well defined campaign messages (William Housley et al., 2018). There are various studies which extensively explore the aspects of Twitter narratives and their influencing ability in the 2016 US presidential election. This paper explores the Twitter narratives around Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. It also explains how a systematic campaign was organized in the social media by both the ends (Kolehmainen, 2017).

A book titled, 'Famers' Movement' by Nadkarni discusses the agrarian structure and their contribution to Indian economy, farmers' movement in TamilNadu, Karnataka, Punjab and Maharashtra. This book also explains about the price policy and the political economy of the farmers' movement (Nadkarni, 1987). 'Understanding Farmer Protests in India', a Journal article by Sudha Narayanan (2020) highlights the ground reality of farmers protesting in the highways leading to Delhi. This paper also focuses on the fear of Indian farmers and the vulnerability of India's agricultural workers. Farmers in India face a lot of challenges like failure of monsoon, drought, low minimum support price, poor support infrastructure, indebtedness and lack of government support (Kumar, 2017). The researchers try to deconstruct the enigma of farmers' protest in India. The authors also suggest proactive measures to revamp the richest heritage of India, the farming.

3.0 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the Key players of Mainstream Media being active on Twitter.

2. To understand major categories of narratives on Twitter during the time of Farmer's Protest.

3. To analyse the role of mainstream media in facilitating digital discourse on Twitter with reference to Farmers' Protest.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the content of mainstream media in shaping and facilitating digital discourse on Twitter with reference to Farmers' protest. This research is a Qualitative study which implies Content analysis as a method to examine and validate the role of mainstream media in influencing digital discourse with reference to Johnny Saldaña's code scheme. The online behaviours and interactions of mainstream media and their Twitter narratives will be coded, categorized and analyzed.

4.1 Methodology Flowchart
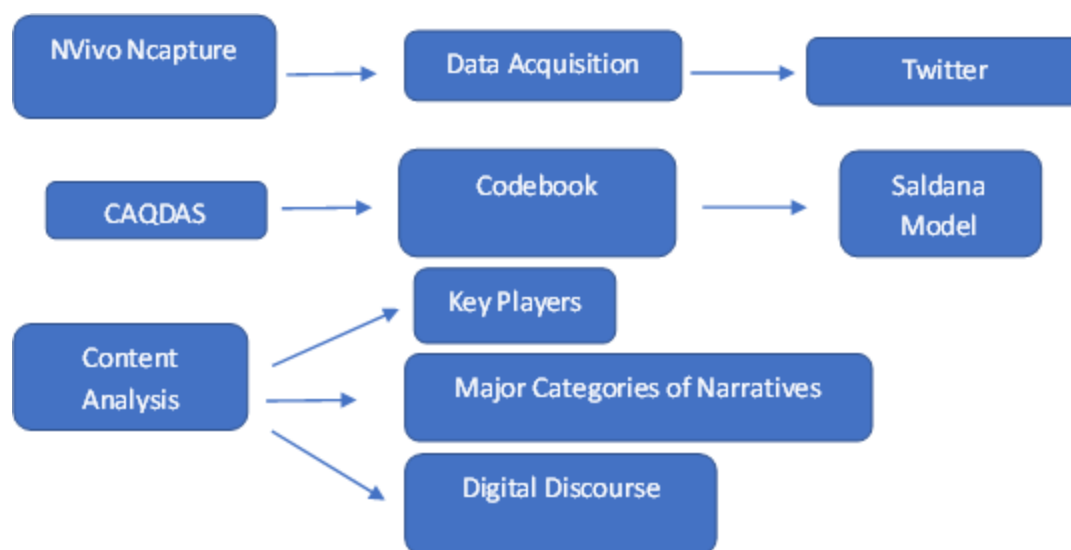
4.2 Data Acquisition and Content Analysis

Twitter handles of mainstream media and their retweets which prompted and propagated the farmers' protest will be analysed. It will also be helpful to know categories of narratives and motives of contents circulated through Twitter during the protest as mentioned in the objective. Data acquisition will also find out various kinds of media resources circulated online during the protest. The online behaviours and interactions of mainstream media organizations will be closely observed and analyzed.

4.3 Creation of a Codebook

A code book will be created to make the coding process credible and reliable. Twitter handles and tweets of mainstream media would be coded utilizing Johnny Saldana's (2016) coding model (Onwuegbuzie, 2016). Tweets will be coded, categorized and finally formulated into themes and theories through manual and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). This coding scheme would be useful to find out the key players and Twitter narratives influencing and shaping public opinion with reference to farmers' protest in India. NVivo, a Qualitative Content Analysis Software will be used to retrieve data, to analyze and code tweets of 13 mainstream media organizations.

4.4 Limitation and Delimitation of the Research

A data set of 17,598 tweets of 4th February, 2021 between 8.35 A.M. – 11.29 A.M., pertaining to Farmers' Protest have been collected through Ncapture, a web browser extension to import into NVivo, a qualitative content analysis software. The limitations of this study is that only 17,598 tweets posted on 4th February, 2021 between 8.35 A.M. – 11.29 A.M., were collected by the NVivo software and their tweets were analysed. The delimitation of this study is that only Hindi and English feeds of these 13 mainstream media organisations are analysed and tweets of other regional languages and other media organisations are discarded for analysis.

5.0 Content Analysis of Mainstream Media and Twitter Narratives

In order to identify the Key players of Mainstream media who are more active on Twitter, a data set of 17,598 tweets of 4th February, 2021 between 8.35 A.M. – 11.29 A.M., have been collected through Ncapture, a web browser extension which enables the users to collect web content to import into NVivo. These seventeen thousand five hundred and ninety eight tweets had been retrieved with the key words Farmers' protest on Twitter. Once these many tweets were collected, they were categorized and filtered to find out mainstream media organisations and their 1454 tweets on farmers' protest for further analysis.

5.1 Identifying Key players of Mainstream Media on Twitter

After having imported the data set into Nvivo, a qualitative content analysis software, the entire tweets had been filtered and categorised. 13 mainstream media organisations are identified as key players and their active role is analysed.

Figure 1: 13 Mainstream Media for Analysis.
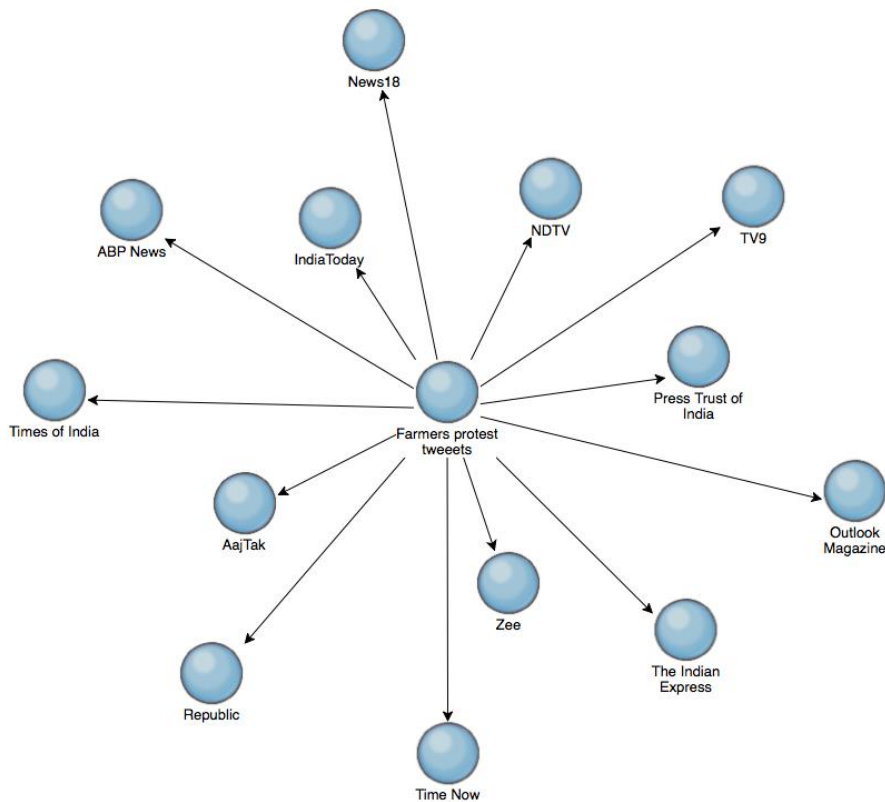
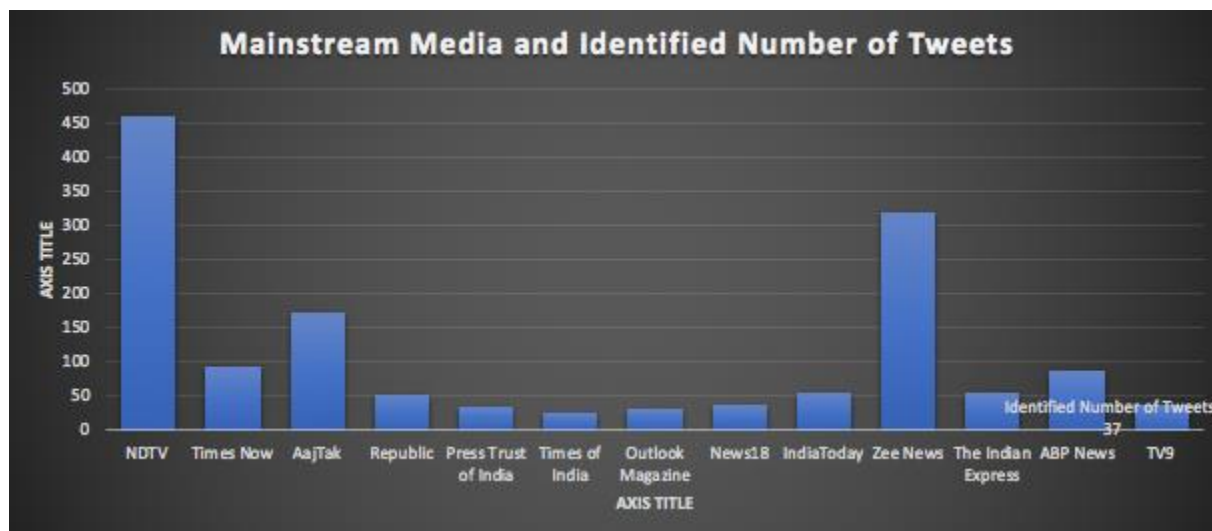*Source: Figure 1 is prepared and presented by the researcher*

Table 1: Key players of Mainstream Media on Twitter

Mainstream Media	Identified Number of Tweets
NDTV	460
Times Now	93
AajTak	171
Republic	51
Press Trust of India	34
Times of India	25
Outlook Magazine	31
News18	36
IndiaToday	54
Zee News	320
The Indian Express	55
ABP News	87
TV9	37
Total	**1454**

Source: Table 1 is prepared and presented by the researcher

Number of tweets from the well renowned 13 mainstream media have been categorized and filtered by using Nvivo Qualitative Content Analysis Software. We could identify 460 tweets by NDTV, Times Now – 93, AajTak – 171, Republic – 51, Press Trust of India – 34, Times of India – 25, Outlook Magazine – 31, News18 – 36, IndiaToday – 54, ZeeNews – 320, The Indian Express – 55, ABP News – 87 and TV9 – 37. And thus a total of 1454 tweets of these above mentioned mainstream media have been systematically codified and analysed later.

Figure 2: Mainstream Media and Identified Number of Tweets

Source: Figure2 is prepared and presented by the researcher

Analysing the content of the tweets of 17, 598 with reference to farmers protest postulates that 32% of tweets are of NDTV, 22% is of Zee News, 12% of tweets are of AajTak, ABP News and Times Now generate 6% of tweets, India Today with 4%, Republic and TV9 with 3%, Outlook Magazine, Press Trust of India, Times of India, News18 share 2% of tweets respectively. It is observed that most of the mainstream media use Twitter platforms to share their web content mostly with the value of news updates and breaking

news. As can be seen from figure 1, it has been identified that NDTV, Zee News and AajTak tweeted most frequently and are identified as Key Players of Mainstream media and very active on Twitter.

5.2 Analyzing Major Categories of Narratives on Twitter

User and gratification theory proposes that people usually seek news for information purposes (Boyle, 2014). The active users on Twitter seek information from mainstream media as they believe they are authentic and credible sources of information. Analyzing 1454 tweets of 13 mainstream media insinuates various themes which help us to understand the perspectives of the information and the purposes of the news feed. Johnny Saldana's (2016) coding model has been used to code, to categorize and finally to formulate themes and theories through manual and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS).

Table 2: Mainstream Media and Major Categories of Twitter Narratives

Major Categories	NDTV	Times Now	AajTak	Republic	Press Trust of India	Times of India	Outlook	News18	IndiaToday	ZeeNews	The Indian Express	ABP News	TV9
Government's Reactions	64	6	34	43	1	10	1	5	44	96	42	69	6
Oppositions' Reactions	34	0	34	0	1	12	0	0	0	0	13	15	1
Celebrities' Reactions	65	73	56	7	32	2	1	12	3	201	0	3	30
Farmers' Reactions	292	0	18	1	0	1	0	0	6	2	0	0	0
Foreign Countries' Reactions	5	1	29	0	0	0	29	8	1	1	0	0	0
Experts' Reactions	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	0	0	0	0	0
Residents' Reactions	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	0	0	0
Twitter's Reactions	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	460	93	171	51	34	25	31	36	54	320	55	87	37

Source: Table 2 is prepared and presented by the researcher

Figure 3: Mainstream Media and Major Categories of Narratives for Analysis

Source: Figure 3 is prepared and presented by the researcher

Most of the mainstream media organizations use Twitter as an effective tool to disseminate pieces of information and push content in different formats to the readers. Coding and analyzing 1454 tweets of 13 mainstream media organizations help us to elucidate major categories of Twitter narratives. Tweets which carry the actions and reactions of government, policemen or members belonging to the ruling party have been sorted as government's reactions. For example, "*Delhi Police Files Case Against #GretaThunberg Over Tweets On #FarmersProtest*". Analysis also shows that few mainstream media organisations project the views and activities of members of opposition parties as well. These tweets have also been identified and categorised as Oppositions' reactions. For example, *"#PriyankaGandhi To Visit Rampur To Condole Farmer's Death During Protest*." International and local Celebrities' such as cinema stars, famous activists and cricketers' tweets with reference to farmers' protest have been classified and categorised as Celebrities' reactions. For example, "*After @rihanna's post on Indian #FarmersProtest, @akshaykumar and @ajaydevgn stand united with #IndiaAgainstPropaganda. #FarmLaws*". Analysing the Twitter content of mainstream media also brings out various other aspects of farmers' protest. This analysis also finds out that

various mainstream media organisations never failed to report the views of foreign countries regarding farmers' protest in India. For example, "*Will Improve Efficiency Of India Markets": US On Farm Laws Amid Protest #farmersprotest #farmlaws."* Experts came out with their views and reviews on Farmers' issue. Twitter went to the extreme of removing the controversial accounts and controversial tweets of a few. There were also few tweets which reported the reactions of residents who felt uncomfortable about farmers' protest. Thus the above mentioned categories of Twitter narratives have been classified into Government's reactions, Oppositions' reactions, Celebrities' reactions, Farmers' reactions, Foreign Countries' reactions, Experts' reactions, Twitter's reactions and Residents' reactions.

Figure 4: Reactions and Actions of Tweets

Source: Figure 4 is prepared and presented by the researcher

Having analysed the tweets of 13 major mainstream media organisations with reference to farmers' protest on 4th February, 2021, postulates that NDTV generated maximum number of tweets (292) which explain farmers' actions and reactions. ZeeNews pushed the maximum number of tweets (96) on the action and reactions of the Government. NDTV and AajTak equally displayed 34 tweets each which express the actions and reactions of the Opposition parties. ZeeNews again stands first in expressing the views of Celebrities on farmers' protest. It generated a total number of 201 tweets within stipulated time. AajTak and Outlook Magazine with their 29 tweets each put forth the foreign countries' views regarding farmers' protest.

5.3 Analyzing the Role of Mainstream Media in Facilitating Digital Discourse
In the long history, media played a vital role in facilitating and shaping public opinion. Though mainstream media such as print and television generate multiple formats of content, they found it very difficult to understand the mindset of the audience as those media were considered as one way communicative channels. Being more interactive and more instant, Twitter enhances the reportorial strategy and enables the users to initiate digital discourses and discussions. Having analysed the data set of 17,598 tweets on farmers' protest, it is suggested that mainstream media have the ability to reach out, to impact and to influence the Twitter users for further digital discourse.

*Figure 5: Mainstream Media and the Number of Followers in Twitter*
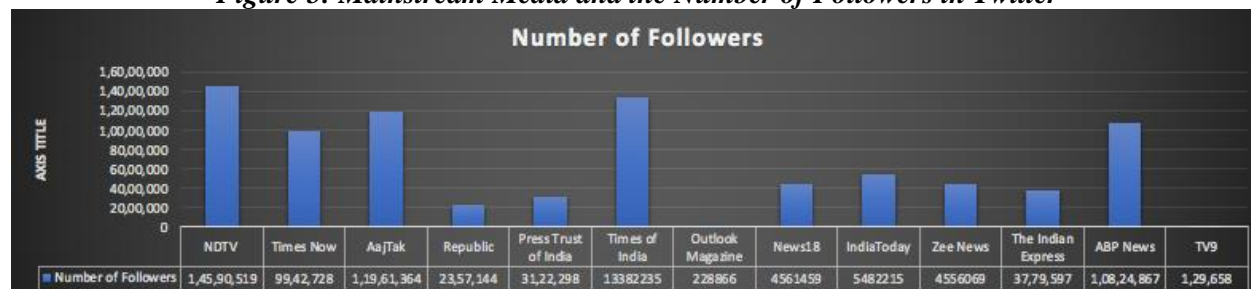
Source: Figure 5 is prepared and presented by the researcher

Content Analysis also finds out that a tweet feed generated one time has been frequently shared and retweeted several times until it reaches many people. The ability to reach out many would be a strategic way of reportage today. The mainstream media with more followers would be able to reach out many. Analysis suggests that NDTV with 1,45,90,519 followers stands first as a key player among mainstream media. Times of India with 1,33,82,235 followers, AajTak with 1,19,61,364 followers, ABP News with 1,08,24,867

followers and others also have lakhs of followers on Twitter. This cascade of followers would definitely be giving far-reaching ability to the mainstream media organizations and simultaneously facilitate digital discourse on Twitter.

Figure 6: Mainstream Media Organisations and their overall Tweets
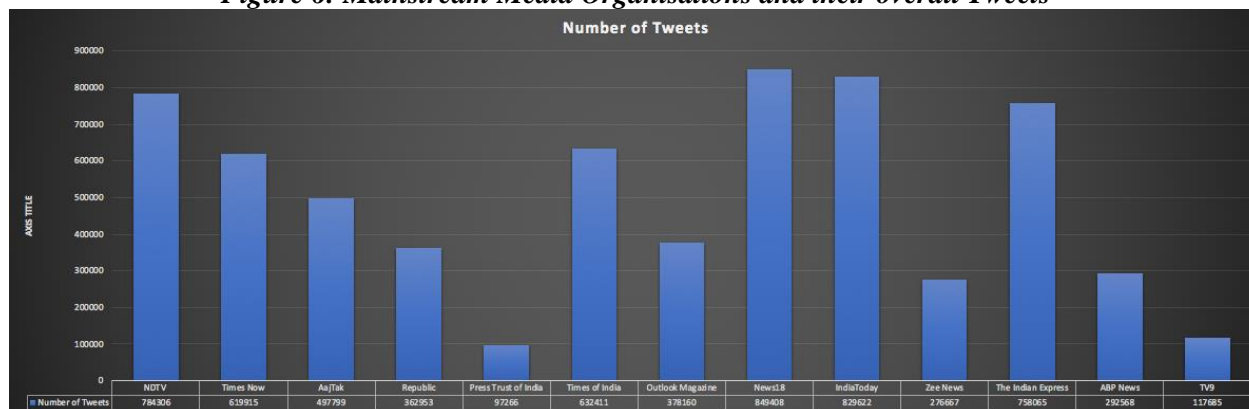
Source: Figure 6 is prepared and presented by the researcher

Number of tweets generated so far by these mainstream organizations on various issues also suggest that they could facilitate large-scale digital discourse and eventually influence public opinion. The above-mentioned figure 6, highlights the far reaching and fast influencing ability of mainstream media organizations with the number of tweets they generate. News18 stands first with generating maximum number 8,29,622 tweets on various issues, IndiaToday stands next with 8,29,622, NDTV with 7,84,306 tweets so far, other mainstream media also pushed a sizable number of Twitter feeds.

With regard to the farmers' protest, after analyzing the tweets of the mainstream media organizations we could definitely say that there were multiple online discourses on farmers' issue especially when it sought the attention of international celebrities like Popstar Rihanna and environmental activist Greta Thunberg as they tweeted in their handle "*Why aren't we talking about this*? and "*I still #StandWithFarmers and support their peaceful protest."* Lot of interactions flared up digital discourses and thus precipitated further actions and reactions from Indian politicians, activists, celebrities and cricket stars. And we can be certain that mainstream media organizations and their Twitter presence played a major role in facilitating public opinion and shaping public attitude in cyberspace.

6.0 FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

1. The presence of Mainstream media on Twitter platform is massive and more effective. As the Mainstream media have been believed to be more authentic and credible, its source and contents are more consumed and circulated. It is very obvious to note that a few mainstream media organizations meticulously advocate selective amplifications and thus facilitate public opinion through Twitter narratives.

2. This content analysis on the tweets of 13 mainstream media reiterates that a few media organizations generate only a few feeds for a day as news updates and News Breaking but they frequently and repeatedly circulate the same feed for quite a number of times.

3. NDTV stands as the important key player for generating more of the actions and reactions of the farmers when it is compared with the other. AajTak shares Twitter narratives of various groups of people and their perspectives in a balanced manner. ZeeNews gives more importance to the reactions of the celebrities and the actions of government than the other categories of twitter narratives.

4. It is observed that though all the mainstream media organizations construct their Twitter narratives around the farmers' protest, their content and intent vary according to their agenda setting priorities.

By using the traditional popularity, mainstream media organizations continue to stand firm in facilitating and shaping public opinion through multiple digital discourses. Though mainstream media stand erect and

extended on Twitter, their news sense and their essence remain as same as their traditional roots. Analyzing and identifying the Key players of mainstream media, the categories of Twitter narratives and their ability to influence and shape public opinion through multi-level online discourses would certainly be a new and phenomenal contribution to the field of online research. Analyzing the Twitter narratives of individual cyber-activists and celebrities in various issues would be another possible and further area of study.

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