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Digital Barricades and Blackouts: A Case of Internet Shutdowns in India

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Abstract

Using internet shutdowns as a reaction to civil unrest has become a common response from the Indian state. In 2022, India remained at the top with the highest number of recorded shutdowns in the world, for the fifth consecutive year. Several state and central governments have used this tactic to suspend the flow of information, either to curtail the ability of citizens to organise through social media networks, dominate discourse around an event, or both. Many such instances have increased the circulation of misinformation, leading to polarised online spaces created partly due to the lack of internet connectivity. Digital disconnection then becomes a condition forced upon its citizens rather than a voluntary choice made by individuals. To explore the impact of internet shutdowns on civic discourse, I look at the case of the farmers' protest in India, that lasted from September 2020 to November 2021. The movement successfully led to the repeal of the three controversial farm laws. The protest faced challenges due to internet shutdowns along with other forms of crackdown by authorities. I use in-depth interviews to bring in the voices of the various stakeholders who participated in this movement. In this article, I would like to place the farmers' protest as a vantage point from where one can look at how the Indian state has used internet shutdowns to control dissent.

Keywords

digital activism; farmers' protest; India; internet shutdowns; social movements; workarounds

1. Introduction

Citizen protests have historically played a crucial role in shaping policy by bringing attention to pressing issues and exerting pressure on policymakers. For instance, following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster,

in March 2011, Japan witnessed widespread protests from anti-nuclear groups, women's groups, and citizens who called for the government to abandon nuclear energy. While short-lived, the protests led to a dramatic change in the country's energy policy, aiming to become nuclear-free, until former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was re-elected in 2012 (Williams, 2012). In 1986, in the Philippines, the People Power Revolution (also known as the EDSA revolution) was a nonviolent civil resistance by the citizens, including students, and religious groups, against President Ferdinand Marcos' regime of violence and electoral fraud. In four days, Marcos was ousted to make way for democratic reforms (McGeown, 2011). The often-cited Civil Rights Movement, in the US, in the 20th century, also used various forms of civil disobedience to bring attention to legalised racial segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement of African Americans. This movement not only led to the striking down of the laws that allowed legal discrimination, but also achieved the passage of significant federal legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. It is important to note that each of these movements faced coercive responses from the state in each instance, including police crackdowns and military interventions as well as ideological control through censorship of critical media outlets, restricted access to information, and limiting media coverage.

In India too, there have been several protest movements that have contributed to changing the course of national governance and policy. In 2011, the anti-corruption movement took off under the leadership of activist Anna Hazare and several political figures to alleviate corruption and kleptocracy in the country. The movement led to the passing of the Lokpal and Lokayukta Bill in 2013, making it an act that:

> Seeks to provide for the establishment of the institution of Lokpal to inquire into allegations of corruption against certain important public functionaries including the Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, members of parliament, Group A officials of the Central Government and for matters connecting them. (IANS, 2013)

Similarly, in 2012, the incident of a gang rape and fatal assault of a woman in Delhi sparked widespread outrage, leading to massive protests demanding stronger laws and measures to address gender-based violence and ensure the safety of women. The protests prompted the government to enact the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (2013), which introduced harsher penalties for sexual offences, expanded the definition of rape, and enhanced provisions for the protection of women's rights ("President signs ordinance," 2013).

In this article, I look at a movement in the recent past that led to the change in government policy—the farmers' protest—which lasted from September 2020 to November 2021, and led to the repealing of the three controversial farm laws ("It's official. Three," 2021). The protestors, who were mainly farmers, held sit-in protests at the bordering villages of the national capital, Delhi at Singhu, Tikri, and Gazipur, for over a year. This civic dissent by the farmers was interrupted by the state at various points, sometimes coercively, through the use of water cannons, tear gas, and barricades; and some other times by disrupting or suspending information infrastructure, through internet shutdowns and network throttling ("Protesting farmers brave," 2020).

The objective of this article is to look at how network disconnectivity is used as a controlling tactic by authorities to suppress dissent and information. In the following sections, I locate the trajectory of network disruptions in India and what factors make the shutdowns unique. I detail the case of the farmers' protest

and the methodology that has been used in this research exploration. In my findings, I examine how protestors and journalists overcame communicative restrictions; find how the meaning of collective action changes shape with changing communicative regimes; and note that voluntary abstinence from communicative networks is very uncommon in the context of India, where large populations are yet to be connected to the internet in any meaningful way.

2. Literature Review

Restricting media and information through internet shutdowns has been a means to control movements in India for a long time (Access Now, 2023). Access Now, an international organisation that defends and extends the digital rights of people and communities at risk, defines internet shutdowns as "an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information" (Olukotun & Micek, 2016). India has been repeatedly called out for human rights violations over the last several years through the imposition of internet shutdowns and restricting the right to free speech, association, and assembly (Access Now, 2023; Kathuria et al., 2018; Woodhams & Migliano, 2021). In 2022, according to Access Now (2023), India remains the country with the highest number of recorded shutdowns in the world—for the fifth consecutive year.

When a government order mandates for telecom companies to shut down access to the internet, it essentially disrupts networks built and sustained over the internet for a long period of time. Many reports (Kathuria et al., 2018; KeepItOn, 2021) have found that the reasons cited by governing authorities for such blockades are to avoid cheating in examinations, to curb rumour-mongering on social media that eventually lead to public unrest, and sometimes to prevent violent protests. A report by Kathuria et al. (2018, pp. 30–31), for the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, reveals that "Administrators admitted the difficulty to keep order when provocative videos and photos were shared on social media. The justification of preemptive shutdowns was in anticipation of a law and order situation that could quickly go out of hand." Another report (KeepItOn, 2021, p. 10) echoes the same findings: "some governments have attempted to justify shutdown orders by insisting they were to stop the spread of "fake news" or hate speech and incendiary or violence-inciting content." In the Northeastern state of Manipur, authorities justified the shutdown by observing that "social media has become a useful tool for rumour-mongers and is being used extensively to incite the public" (KeepItOn, 2021, p. 12), however, the report claims that there is little evidence to suggest that cutting off access has led to stopping violence in these areas.

Internet shutdowns have been categorised into two broad categories based on how much of the network is blocked. According to Access Now (KeepItOn, 2021), governments have in the past used throttling, mobile and broadband internet service shutdown, or both tactics in combination. Throttling of a connection is to slow down the speed of the internet, either to specific sites, apps, or segments of traffic or to all of the internet, affecting both mobile and broadband connections. A complete shutdown, on the other hand, can cut access to mobile or fixed-line internet or completely block access to platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, or Telegram. It has been observed that several sectors get adversely impacted due to these shutdowns, like tourism, e-commerce, IT services, press and news media, education, healthcare, and digital payment gateways (Kathuria et al., 2018).

A report by industry body Internet and Mobile Association of India and market data analytics firm Kantar called *Internet in India Report 2022* shows that the "Usage of mobile phones for accessing the internet stays universal" (ICUBE, 2023, p. 24). This means that all users (100%) who comprise active internet users (AIU) in India have been accessing the internet on their mobile phones. This remains at 100% for both urban and rural areas. PC users measured 17% and 13% in urban and rural areas, respectively. Internet usage on other devices, such as tablets, streaming devices, smart speakers, smart TVs, etc., was at 18% and 9% in urban and rural areas, respectively. Moreover, the same report shows that 85% of all AIUs used the internet for entertainment, 77% used it for communication, and 70% used it to access social media. A steep spike of 14% was observed in using the internet for e-commerce since 2021, making it 52% of all AIUs. Internet adoption is also reported to be increasing rapidly in rural areas in comparison to urban areas.

As observed through the internet penetration data above, along with the usage of mobile devices, the effects of a network blackout have far-reaching consequences. A reason to shut mobile networks could arise from the fact that mobile phones are the most ubiquitously used device to connect to the internet. Kathuria et al. (2018, p. 36) observe that:

> Mobile networks were shut down more frequently than fixed lines. Administrators indicated that mobile networks were more impacted primarily because they are more widely accessible, and therefore potential for damage is higher. Only in very serious cases of agitation did administrators also shut down the fixed-line network.

This preference by the authorities to cut off mobile data networks increasingly endangers mobile phone users' online connectivity.

One can benefit from seeing the flip side of networked communities as well, by looking at those people and places that have not received telecommunication services. In India, it has been reported (Kemp, 2024) that about 683.7 million (or 47.6%) people are not connected to the internet. The digital divide in the country is immense, and several attempts are being made by the government to bridge this gap. Governments and civil societies have highlighted the benefits that citizens can avail through digitised governance and education. Thus, the internet is framed as not only desirable but also necessary in the country as many government schemes and public services are now digitally enabled, with the government pushing for a "Digital India" that presumes the widespread availability of internet access. While this is the case in India, in some parts of the world, people exercise what is known as digital disconnectivity, where one disconnects voluntarily from the internet. This has been observed in workplace situations, where excessive communication can lead to burnout, and among young adults who have grown up as digital natives. In India too, there has been research conducted in this regard (Garg, 2020; Handa & Ahuja, 2020), however, it is confined to the discussion within labour rights and digital divide perspectives. There was an attempt in 2018, through the introduction of a Right to Disconnect Bill in the parliament, which aimed to empower employees to negotiate terms for out-of-work communications. Although, this did not gain much traction in legislative discussions (Mukherjee, 2024).

Within the literature, digital disconnection can be seen to be practised in global North countries where constant and reliable connection has been taken for granted and, therefore, opting out becomes a choice (Bozan & Treré, 2023; Treré, 2021). Disconnection research has largely ignored societies where authorities force disconnection upon their people by lack of policy or through intention, like imposing internet

shutdowns. My preoccupation in this article is to examine this type of disconnective measure, which is not voluntary and is used as a means of control and restriction.

3. Methodology

More recently, it has become frequent for governments globally to clamp down on the internet during social unrest. Historically across the world, communication blackout is not a new tactic (Article 19, 2020; Tufekci, 2017). In late 2019 and early 2020, in India, due to the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests, many shutdowns across multiple cities occurred simultaneously. This severe crackdown on the internet was criticised by many international watchdogs (Amnesty International Australia, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Later that year, we saw the farmers' protest, where a majority of farmers in the Northern part of India dissented from the newly introduced farm laws, through a sit-in protest near the national capital, Delhi. This is one case that can be studied suitably for examining digital disconnectivity as it was a highly targeted communication shutdown undertaken by the state to silence dissent.

To research an event-based phenomenon, it is useful to adapt Clarke's (2003) situational analyses approach to lay out the several actors and actants involved in the event and then find analytical and relational categories from the coded data. Clarke (2003) takes grounded theory literature and renovates, regenerates, and re-articulates it to lay emphasis on its postmodern capacities. Abandoning overarching paradigms and theoretical and methodological metasystems, the grounded theory approach allows for specific, local, heterogenous, and relational categories to emerge from the data itself. Situational analyses can be made by drawing three kinds of maps: First, situational maps, which lay out the major human, non-human, discursive, and other major elements in the research situation of concern and provoke analyses of relations among them. Second, the social worlds/arenas map, which engages in ongoing negotiations of the various collective actors involved, where meso-level interpretations can be made of its social organisational, institutional, and discursive dimensions. And, finally, the positional map lays out the major positions taken and not taken (silences) by actors. Using these maps to interpret data encourages making connections previously ignored or not seen, while also acknowledging disparities, contradictions, and gaps.

For this article, I emphasise the situational map aspect of the situational analyses method. I map out the various actors involved in the situation of a protest that has faced communication blackout at various levels throughout the duration of the protest. In this article, I will be using in-depth interviews of protestors, journalists, and internet advocacy groups to understand how internet shutdowns played out during the farmers' protest. The protest started in late 2020 and went on till the controversial farm laws were repealed in November 2021. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. At the time of the interviews, the protest had just been called off and protesters had vacated the site. All interviews were conducted online, on Zoom, in 2022, between February and August.

In this article, I draw on interviews with protestors, journalists, and civil society activists, who have engaged with the protest to understand how the movement as a whole negotiated through the periods of communication disruption. In my conversations, my focus was to understand in what ways were people dependent on the internet for the purpose of the protest, and how connectivity is understood vis-a-vis shutdowns in the larger context of the country. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity. The transcribed interviews have been coded into similar groups and analysed based on intersecting and

recurring ideas and experiences. In the following sections, I unpack the various themes that emerged in these analyses and lay out the strategies and techniques used to manage communications and sustain the movement over the duration of the protest.

4. The Case: Farmers' Protest

Farmers from across the Northern region of the Indian subcontinent came together to oppose three farm laws that had been passed by the central government in 2019. Farmers came in large numbers from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Their initial target was to reach the national capital, Delhi, but were stopped by the police force at the borders of the city. Instead of returning home, the farmers started a sit-in protest at the very borders of these places—which are now well-known areas—Singhu (which is on the Delhi–Haryana border, to the North of the capital), Tikri (which is in the West, on the Delhi–Haryana border), and Gazipur (to the East, on the Delhi–Up border; Figure 1).

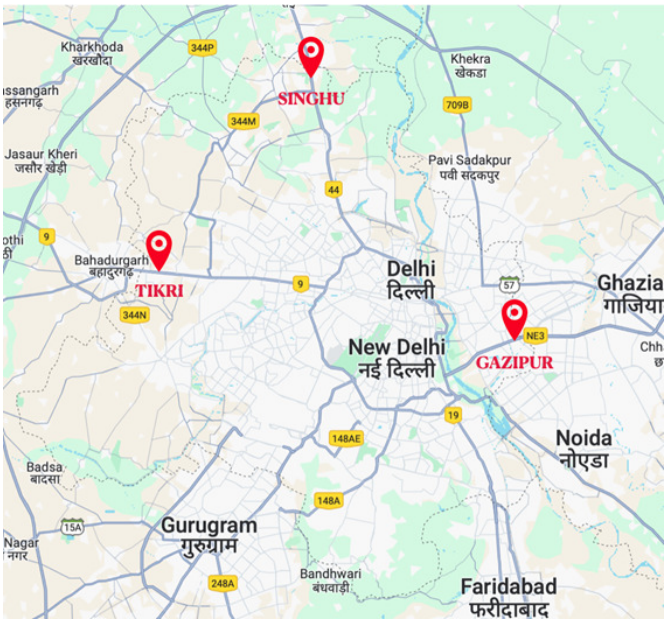

Figure 1. Map of New Delhi, marking the protest sites.

The three farm laws that were opposed are listed below:

1. The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act: This essentially allowed farmers to sell outside of the Agricultural Produce & Livestock Market Committee, Mandis (which are regulated market-places for agricultural produce, where farmers sold to licensed commission agents), and enabled intra-state and inter-state trade.

2. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act: This act aimed to provide a legal framework for contract farming, where farmers entered into contracts with private buyers, specifying terms and conditions for the sale of their agricultural produce. It is intended to facilitate competitive investments in the sector, promote better price assurance, and access to modern farming technologies.

3. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act: This is an amendment to an existing act, which seeks to remove certain commodities, such as cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions, and potatoes, from the list of essential commodities. It aims to remove stock holding limits on these items so that it can attract private investments in the storage of such commodities (Tiwari & Sharma, 2021).

The opposition to these laws from farmer unions was manifold. The APMC Mandis is where the crop is ensured to be sold at a Minimum Support Price to the licensed commissioned agents from the farmer. Minimum Support Price would not exist if the market was liberalised to allow private players to enter outside the Mandi set-up. This could weaken APMC Mandis, undermining the infrastructure, market regulation, and support mechanisms that currently benefit farmers, particularly small and marginal farmers. They feared that they would be vulnerable to exploitation and find it difficult to secure fair pricing. The involvement of private players like big corporations would, they argued, take away the bargaining power of small farmers in contract-based farming. This would gradually lead to market dominance by large corporations, reduced competition, and limited choices for farmers to sell. These laws were framed and passed without consultations with farmers (Bhatnagar, 2021).

The following sub-section outlines the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. I look at how internet networks become essential during a social movement for communication amongst themselves, how protestors find ways to work around internet shutdowns, how the nature of protests has changed with the coming of internet-based communication, and finally how journalists have to adapt and overcome disconnectivity while reporting from locations with capricious networks.

4.1. Protest Communication

Internet connectivity for those at the protest site became very important. The protestors started a newsletter called Trolley Times, which initially emerged over social media networks. One of the respondents recalls that they learned they were a part of the newsletter only when they went onto Instagram to find themselves tagged in a post by a friend to send in stories from the different border sites occupied by protestors.

Jaspreet (personal communication, February 5, 2022), a protestor, said that even on "normal" days when there was no official shutdown, they would have to travel for a few kilometres from the site of the protest to attend a video call or to send a multimedia clip over the internet. Protestors sitting at the border had connectivity issues from the very beginning, in November 2020. Trolley Times (Figure 2) was started by some of the protestors as a trilingual newsletter (published in Gurmukhi, Hindi, and English), with the first issue launched on December 18, 2020. There were more newsletters apart from Trolley Times, like Karti Dharti, which is a women-led newsletter that brought diverse voices from the farmers' movement in a fortnightly publication. Jaspreet, who was also one of the people responsible for starting the Trolley Times, mentioned that the content for the newsletter came from many different places, such as videos, pictures, and stories, through a collaborative process that the internet afforded. This initially was published bi-weekly and later became a weekly newsletter because of various other on-ground engagements that the protestors were involved in.

The Singhu border, which was the biggest among the three sit-in camps, had a media centre. This was set up primarily to coordinate information going out to the press because many journalists were coming to this

Figure 2. Website of Trolley Times.

location. Deepinder (personal communication, February 23, 2022), who was at Singhu and was responsible for the media centre, said that their press releases and the information they officially put out were very necessary to counter the mainstream media channels, which he claimed were spreading lies about the farmers' motive to protest. He said that since all the farmers were not literate, it was necessary for a responsible translator to ensure they were not being misunderstood and misrepresented. Most farmers conversed in the Punjabi language which was not understood by some journalists who came to the protest site. Younger protestors would help these journalists translate to Hindi and English languages to further news reportage that carried their voices. Everyday communication was targeted by the authorities, he said:

> Since 27th November, 2020 it (slow internet) was there. Initially, we thought the government had put jammers. And some of them (protestors) identified that they were jammers. But even jammers had their limitation of 1–2 kilometres, and the protest site was 13–14 kilometres. The users increased rapidly, and the internet connectivity got very slow. We spent the first 3 months, with very slow internet. (Deepinder, interview, February 23, 2022)

An important strategy for those at the media centre handling X was to post first-hand accounts of events; i.e., they only posted in the first person and never re-posted. These posts would sometimes be picked up by mainstream media channels as official communication from protestors to report their own stories. Narratives coming from protestors themselves, about why they were protesting, and how they were being treated by police authorities were of immense value. Jaspreet (interview, February 5, 2022) says: "we thought of countering fake narratives…which said farmers were not protesting the three laws, but they were fighting for a separate state." The mainstream media channels and the big news broadcasters were running stories that criminalised the protestors, calling them Khalistanis (a militant separatist group that had acquired notoriety in the 1980s) disguised to cause trouble in the capital (Singh, 2023).

Many reporters and journalists from the mainstream media channels did not come to these protest sites as access to the site was difficult and the threat of a police crackdown was imminent. They relied on

correspondence from the protestors at the media centre, which sent press releases, images, and videos from the protest site to the institutional and mainstream media. It was important for them to be seen and heard, therefore, the protestors at the media centre went to lengths to ensure that it was done. Connectivity to the internet at these locations of protest was quite unreliable and fragile. One of my respondents, who was active at the media centre, referred to these media houses as "NOIDA media," given most of their offices are located in the NOIDA area of Delhi's National Capital Region. Jaspreet narrates a story of what she had to go through to send a short video to the press:

> We recorded that video clip. And then it took us three or four hours to send that one, two minute long video clip. Because, first we tried on the protest side from different internet connections. Then we went to a nearby local hotel to ask them for internet which didn't work. Then we took the metro and went to Bahadurgarh city metro station. (Nearest metro station to the Tikri border) Then we de-boarded the train there and then we went to a mobile shop, there we asked for a wifi connection, it was around 10pm they were about to close the shop. At that time we successfully transferred the video and came back. (Jaspreet, interview, February 5, 2022)

4.2. Traditional vs Digital Activism

Farmers have displayed dissent in the past too, without the help of the internet. For instance, in 2017, farmers from the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu staged demonstrations in Delhi, demanding drought relief and waiver of loans. They brought skulls of those farmers who died by suicide, used dead rats and snakes as food, shaved their heads, and other extreme forms to show their dire conditions. They called off their protest after 41 days, only after receiving assurances from their chief minister and the union finance minister (PTI, 2017). This type of protest may be described as a traditional protest. This article refers to traditional protests as those which do not use the internet as a mode of spreading information or gathering support.

When asked about whether social media support translates into garnering on-ground numbers, Jaspreet said that this support did not sustain. They said that social media does not tell you how many people actually support your cause, but on the ground, you have real numbers. And even the way your own social media feed is curated can deceive you into thinking everyone is with you, giving you a false sense of solidarity. They also note that the people influenced by social media are urban and young. Having been at the protest site since the beginning, they say that:

> Those who got influenced by seeing things on social media were the urban and young generation, who came from major cities of Punjab, or Delhi. They came in large numbers initially, but their visits were not long lasting. When the initial craze died down, it eventually became a traditional protest site. (Jaspreet, personal communication, February 5, 2022)

Most of the protesters who were physically present there from the beginning were farmers and their families who came from the most rural parts of the states. Jaspreet does not dismiss the role of social media entirely, however, they say that these online networks are very useful in keeping the narrative alive. Digital activism generates discourse, but only as long as the on-ground protest continues to exist. They say that online activism can be used as a "tool to aid" the already existing protest. Referring to another citizen-led protest that happened just before the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, they say:

> I feel in this, your campaigning/digital activism can exist as long as your ground activism is going on. Like we saw in Anti-CAA movement, if it was to be sustained digitally, it could have stayed alive through lockdown. But as soon as it ceased to exist on the ground, it was also gone from the digital media spaces. This movement went on for so long only because people actually came out of their homes, and sat on the roads, actually people were fighting and actually people were dying. That's why the momentum was there in the digital space. So in digital space, it cannot exist independently for long. The life of a political or social issue in the digital sphere, is at 1 or 2 weeks maximum, not more than that. On Twitter, it is a matter of a few hours. Did something trend? Ok, it's finished. Just because some news media channels have started doing segments that talk about what's trending on Twitter, it doesn't mean it will lead to a political change. (Jaspreet, personal communication, February 5, 2022)

All three protest sites, at Singhu, Tikri, and Gazipur, had camps that extended several kilometres. Therefore, being connected to the internet was also necessary for everyday communication for those at the protest site. Several WhatsApp groups were created to coordinate the next steps and strategies amongst those at the protest site. Protestors also used VoIP calls to stay in touch with their family, that was back at home. Protestors used the internet for entertainment purposes as well. However, it is important to note that connection to the internet was not constant or strong throughout. More often than not, people would travel a few kilometres away from the protest camp to be able to receive any meaningful internet connection.

Protestors also used the internet to connect with people and solidarity groups who were outside the country, in Canada and the UK. My respondents informed me that they would use webinars and Zoom meetings to inform those abroad of the situation on the ground and of ways in which they can support and contribute to the protest.

4.3. Workarounds During Network Disruptions

The farmers' protest, which started in late 2020, faced the same problems of internet shutdowns as the protestors in Hong Kong earlier that year. The protestors in Hong Kong, mostly young, worked around shutdowns by using alternative bluetooth-based apps, like Bridgefy, to stay connected under a blackout (Wakefield, 2019). When asked if such apps assisted the protesting farmers, the response was negative. My respondent said that they did not make use of Bluetooth-based apps under conditions of disconnectivity for many reasons: Firstly, most of the farmers came from rural backgrounds and not all had smartphones. Apps like Bridgefy and Signal rely on Bluetooth to work effectively when many people have the app on their mobiles, so the signal can jump from the nearest device to another to reach the intended recipient. To use this app, one has to be technologically literate and skilled, which was a barrier for most people at the protest site. As a result, even for younger protestors, it became very difficult and unreliable to depend on these mobile applications.

Interestingly, although the protestors may not have been savvy to use Bluetooth apps, they were well aware of surveillance tactics employed by the government. A protester shared that one day some placards announcing free wifi connection had popped up overnight, near the Singhu stage area, providing credentials to connect to the network. There was no information provided on who had facilitated the service. Despite people constantly facing poor to no connection inside the protest area, most protestors were aware that they should not connect to unknown networks. There was widespread fear of surveillance and hacking of

phones amongst the protesters, something that often came up in their discussions. In another instance, six people lost their mobile phones in a matter of 15 days, all of them suspected to be stolen. From then on, they started using small dumb phones, without internet connectivity, to avoid "Pegasus-like snooping." The protestors were selectively disconnected, not from digital fatigue but for digital security. Being connected to a smartphone became a weakness in this situation, where the issues of privacy and safety arise.

When people at the protest site could not send correspondence to media persons, they would send pictures and videos to friends in Canada, US, and Australia for safekeeping, who would then send them on to the intended recipients. Protestors further faced obstacles to accessing the internet with electronic hardware stores, which refused to sell adapters and routers to protestors to install new connections by the instruction of police and government officials. Electricity and water supply was also cut off in addition to the internet, as a blackmailing tactic, to pressure protestors into leaving the site.

Jaspreet made an interesting observation about the spatiality of the internet shutdowns. The Singhu and Tikri protest sites were located outside the capital in working-class colonies. The Singhu site was located in the Kundli industrial belt, while Tikri was in the suburban area of Bahadurgarh, in both these places residents did not display a huge outcry over internet shutdowns. She says that people did not have the same kind of dependency on the internet as in the centre of the city. It can be compared with the shorter and more localised shutdowns that occurred within the city limits of Delhi (Express Web Desk, 2021). The digital divide that was present in the suburbs was in stark contrast to the high dependency that more urban areas have on the internet for day-to-day activities. Disconnection and unreliable connection are the norm rather than an exception in these suburbs, where the protest sites were established. It is less out of choice and more out of compulsion that residents in these areas remain disconnected from networks, services, and channels on the internet.

4.4. Reporting Without the Internet

On January 26, 2021, which marks India's Republic Day, the biggest altercation took place between the police and the protestors in the capital, New Delhi. Of all the shutdowns imposed in the country to suppress information from protesting farmers, it was during the Republic Day tractor parade that the most severe and complete blackouts occurred. It was highlighted in the press as well as by the people on the protest site that the network disruption occurred not only on Republic Day but the following days as well. Leading up to Republic Day, a tractor rally was called for by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella organisation of 32 farmer unions (Mitra & Regan, 2021). Thousands of protestors clashed with the police during the tractor parade called by farmer unions on January 26, demanding a repeal of the laws. After several protestors from Singhu and Ghazipur changed their route, they marched towards Central Delhi's ITO and Red Fort, where police resorted to teargas shelling and lathi charges, while some protestors vandalised public property and attacked police personnel. At Red Fort, a section of protesters climbed poles and walls and hoisted the Nishan Sahib flag (Arvin, 2021). This crackdown led to an internet shutdown inside the national capital, Delhi, for the first time during the protest, which was until now only restricted to the bordering villages (Express Web Desk, 2021). The official shutdown was called by the state home secretary, on 26th and 27th January, 2021 (Agarwal, 2021). In Haryana, shutdowns were seen on 31 January 2021, which extended to 1 February 2021 (DNA Web Team, 2021). However, internet network was not back until a few days later. Deepinder says:

> On 26th January, at 4 or 5 o' clock, internet was shutdown at all borders. From 26th January till 6th of February it was the hardest period for us. We were working in the media (centre) and we were sending the press notes, and every minute updates. I used to go 3–4 kilometres towards the Delhi side and send press notes. Many times, it was very hard for us to get published in the next day newspaper." (Deepinder, personal communication, February 23, 2022)

In my interviews with journalists, many expressed that reporting from protest locations comes with a unique set of challenges. A reporter, Aquib, described how he would go to the location to report:

> You prepare yourself for anything that could come to you, come your way in a conflict zone where you don't know whether a gunshot will be fired or not. So, you roam around with your bike's helmet on your head and your bag on your back and another bag in front of your chest with some shield inside the bag so that even if you get fired at, at least you'll be safe….I'm walking with two litres of water, water bottles on both sides of my bag. (Aquib, interview, August 21, 2022)

Such precautions would be useful, they say, in the event of tear gas shelling or if someone is hit by a stone and starts bleeding.

One of the observations that Aquib made was that farmers themselves did not rely on the internet for day-to-day activities. He observed that the panchayat system in Punjab and Haryana is very strong. Panchayat is a local governing body at the grassroots level. Every panchayat leader would communicate with ward members who would relay it to the larger public. The protesters took turns in batches to stay at the site, while some of their families stayed back to look after their farmlands. It was through the panchayats that the farmers knew when to come and go. Most of the coordination work about the farmlands at home was done over regular calls. During the long periods of wait, the protesters would sometimes want to watch movies and listen to songs and news, which was initially difficult. However, the next time they came back to the protest site, they would have downloaded movies to watch at their leisure (Aquib, personal communication, August 21, 2022).

Mukesh, another reporter, said that it was very difficult to capture everything if you were not writing notes at the same time while the event was happening. So, they would take notes and write the full piece before sending an email from a location far from the protest site. On a few occasions, the reporter wrote articles on SMSs and sent a long chain of them to their editors at the office. The reporters I spoke to made a similar observation as the protestors: They would move two to three kilometres away from the protest site to be able to send reports with multimedia files. Many journalists practised going out of the site area to send correspondence to their offices (Mukesh, interview, August 31, 2022).

5. Conclusion

The ubiquity of digital technology and our reliance on it has increased in the last few decades. As reflected in this article, our need for digital connectivity is not only regarding routine civic participation and access to services but also to engage in democratic dialogue and to talk back to the state. In societies where large populations are not connected to the internet in a meaningful way, voluntary disconnective action becomes an exception. Disconnectivity is often imposed by the state to disempower people, in this case, the protesting farmers.

The article looks at the specific case of the farmers' protest in India, during 2020–2021. I discussed the various experiences that people faced at the protest site. The clampdown on dissent by the government occurred at various phases through different means, such as throttling and shutting down networks, and denying access to infrastructure that supports internet connectivity and their daily activities. I examined how protestors and journalists also found ways to work around the restrictions imposed upon them.

The internet shutdowns during the farmers' protest in India can be analysed within the broader literature on censorship and disconnectivity, particularly in the context of state control over information, suppression of dissent, and the impact on democratic processes. The literature on censorship often discusses how governments use various tools to control information flow, including traditional media censorship, surveillance, and internet shutdowns. Internet shutdowns are a modern extension of censorship, where the state directly limits access to information by disabling digital communication networks. Disconnectivity in this context examines how such deliberate measures by the state are used not just to prevent the spread of information but to isolate communities and weaken movements by cutting off their ability to coordinate. The internet shutdowns during the farmers' protest can be seen as a form of enforced disconnectivity aimed at breaking the protestors' momentum by severing their communication channels. Internet shutdowns can be seen as a violation of the right to freedom of expression and access to information, which are essential for informed citizen participation in a democracy. Internet shutdowns often disproportionately affect marginalised communities who rely on digital communication for access to essential services, education, and economic activities. The farmers' protest, largely driven by rural communities, exemplifies how such measures can exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine the rights of vulnerable populations. In India, the use of internet shutdowns during the farmers' protest raises concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and the state's increasing reliance on digital authoritarianism. The Indian case adds to the growing concern about the future of digital activism in an era where states are increasingly willing to use internet shutdowns as a tool of repression.

The internet was not always the subject of state regulation; in fact, its decentralised architecture was structured to discourage control. As Lessig (2006) says, in post-Communist Europe, it was thought of as the opposite of control—it would not and could not be controlled by the state. It was thought that: "Governments could threaten, but behaviour could not be controlled; laws could be passed, but they would have no real effect" (Lessig, 2006, p. 3). In a similar vein, Castells (2008) talks about an international public sphere that is not governed by any particular sovereign nation but is shaped by various states and global non-state actors. Castells (2008) observes that a major part of the public sphere of the 21st century is constituted by media. In the digital era, this includes mass media, the internet, and wireless communication networks.

State and central governments in India continue to restrict media and communication networks rampantly. "Although we counted fewer than 100 shutdowns in India for the first time since 2017, we're not convinced Indian authorities have embarked on the path toward positive, sustained change with regard to digital rights" (Access Now, 2023, p. 18). While the number of shutdowns may have decreased in 2022 that certainly makes up for the increased social media censorship that is rising proportionally.

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Conflict of Interests

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