INVESTIGATING INDIA'S PROGRESS TOWARD DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM: EVIDENCE FROM INTERNET SHUTDOWN AMIDST FARMER PROTEST 2024

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ABSTRACT

The notion of economic development often goes hand in hand with political stability. Even in the so-called democratic countries, political stability usually came before democratic value as an underlying reason to keep economic development on track. As one of the biggest democratic countries, India also experiences the paradox. Paradoxically, being one of the digital superpowers with the highest total internet transactions and internet infrastructure, India consistently shown internet shutdowns amidst massive civil protests. Recently, there was a massive farmer protest in February 2024 towards minimum selling prices, which triggered the Indian government to cut off internet access and ban the platform 'X' in several districts in India. Using digital authoritarianism approaches, we argue that the Indian government has claimed digital sovereignty to construct counter-narratives toward the protesters. The strategy was to quell the agitation of the protesters and facilitate the filtering of information amidst massive protests. To investigate the notions, we performed qualitative content analysis upon official social media account of the Indian government. Further, they also target minority groups to limit freedom of information. The Indian government employed such tactics to cover up the atrocities that occurred to prevent attention from the international media. Thus, India does not receive allegations regarding human rights violations.

Keywords: India, Digital Authoritarianism, Farmer Protest 2024, Minority

INTRODUCTION

India has experienced significant economic growth in this decade. According to an analyst report on BBC, India has surpassed the UK's GDP and will overtake Japan by 2027 (Inamdar, 2024). This economic growth has been fueled by the digital transformation spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the support of the ruling party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The annual increase in internet penetration in India has positively impacted digital transformation in the economic sector. One prominent example is the rise of digital payment transactions in India, which now account for 46% of total digital transactions worldwide (Times of India, 2023). With the world's

most significant number of internet transactions and adequate infrastructure, India is cementing its position as a digital superpower.

However, despite all of the rising dominations of economic power, India is one of the democratic countries with a high tendency towards digital repressiveness. Under the current political regimes, Hinduism is central to every policy execution. Thus led to the ideology of Hindu supremacy, manifesting the narrations of Hindu-centric politics (Varshney & Staggs, 2024, 6). Quoting the Accessnow website data, India experienced the world's most extensive internet shutdown for the sixth consecutive year, which affected those who opposed the government (Accessnow, 2024). For example, in 2019, the Kashmir protests arose after the Indian government revoked the region's special autonomy status through the abolition of Article 370, leading to fears of additional outside population and a reduction in Kashmiris' political rights.

The situation was exacerbated by increased tensions and a heavy military presence, which further deepened the frustration and desire for self-determination among Kashmiris (BBC, 2019). The impact of Kashmiri discontent led to protests that severely impacted the region as the protests became anarchic, causing Kashmir to be locked down. However, the internet blackout in Jammu and Kashmir significantly impacted the region. Daily life was disrupted, as access to essential services like healthcare and education was hindered. Businesses, particularly those reliant on communication and digital infrastructure, suffered massive financial losses. The shutdown was seen as an apparent attempt to restrict the flow of information and prevent the organization of protests or mass mobilizations against the government's controversial decision (Human Right Watch, 2023).

Another indication of Digital Authoritarianism was also reflected in Farmer Protest 2021, where "The Indian government offered guaranteed prices to farmers for certain crops, providing long-term certainty that, in theory, allowed them to make investments for the next crop cycle. The new rules allow farmers to sell their goods to anyone for any price – giving them more freedom to do things such as sell directly to buyers and sell to other states. Nevertheless, farmers argue that the new rules will leave them worse off by making it easier for corporations to exploit agricultural workers and help big companies drive down prices. While farmers could sell crops at elevated prices if the demand is there, conversely, they could struggle to meet the minimum price in years when there is

too much supply in the market.". Same with the movement in 2024, the demands for minimum guaranteed prices increased because the primary source of livelihood is agriculture, which also indicates that farmers held a big influence on political decisions by the government. However, instead, internet access remained blocked from early February in several districts of India's capital borders, following violent clash between police and farmers for agricultural reforms. Online access were suspended in at least 14 of 22 districts in Haryana, near New Delhi for 24 hours, even extended every day since. (Mitra & Hollingsworth, 2021).

One of the consistently scrutinized cases is how the Indian government responded to The Farmer's protest. Still, in 2024, the protest again became the highlighted issue, especially from February until September. In early 2024, there was a massive influx in the social media movement in X, where several activists and journalists wanted to address the notions more broadly in the public eye. The expressions 'Farmer Protests 2024' and '#LegalizedMSP' are primarily echoed by Indian X users, making them a trending topic domestically up to September. It resulted from the government's internet shutdown (Mitchell, 2024) followed by account blocking and filtered information (Henry, 2024). Hence, we opted to elaborate on the digital democratic paradox in India. Despite being the largest democratic country, India is indicating a tactical turn to more digital authoritarianism in responding to the ongoing farmer protest. The paradox emerges because political expression by the people is a big chunk of the democratic process. Thus, the authority response is central to scrutinizing the process.

METHOD

We employ qualitative methods with social media analysis as the primary approach to structure the thinking process. This method was chosen due to the relational characteristics of the data, which include relationships between various entities related to the phenomenon of farmer protests in India (Williams & Shepherd, 2017). This approach aims to understand the context and meaning behind the farmers' protests and the Indian government's response. Data was collected through a news review to understand the demonstrations comprehensively. In addition, we also explored multiple perspectives using qualitative methods. Denzin et al. (2024) state, "This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret,

phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." In this study, we explored the narratives of both farmers and the government conveyed through social media. We analyzed tweets published on platform X, given its ability to convey narratives through user interactions (Sadler, 2017). We examined tweets using the hashtags #farmersprotest2024 and #legalizedMSP; we also used the keywords "MSP and Crop diversification" to understand the narratives that developed around this phenomenon. The key words and hashtag above have been successfully analyzed, showing the pattern of Digital Authoritarianism toward the Farmers Protest. Subsequently, this data was used to look at trends in the Indian government's response to the farmers' protest, analyzed through the digital authoritarianism framework.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Discussions of India's political dynamics in the age of digitalization often resulted in an authoritarian nuance, marked by the decline of the community's digital rights (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2022). In Modi's era, he is infamous for exercising spatial control, has been made possible through the domination of media and social media (Sinha, 2021). It indicates a strong sense of digital authoritarians, using technology to deepen their grip internally, spread propaganda, undermine basic human rights, promote illiberal practices beyond their borders, and erode public trust in open societies." (Barma et al., 2020). Modi's administrative employs Digital Authoritarianism by enacting censorship, including the use of automated systems, into the country's legal framework (Funk et al., 2023). An integral part of that practice was manipulations, the expansion of misinformation, and, most of all, the limitations of people's voices. Many spreads of rumors, misleading information, and the removal of certain activists' social media accounts mainly be the reasons for the ongoing internet shutdown from 7th January until 30th September. Respectively, it responded to the echo of the Farmer Protest Movement 2024. The government. Traditional methods of digital autocracy blocking and censoring rely on suppressing free flows of information, which are tactics of control called informational flooding (Gunitsky, 2020). Informational flooding is one of the critical aspects that comply with the patterns of Digital Authoritarianism in India.

In 2024, farmer protests continued, rooted in the discontent that had existed since 2020-2021. Farmers felt that the Indian government had failed or been too slow to deliver

on promises related to agricultural reforms, including establishing a board tasked with maintaining stability and setting minimum sales prices for agricultural commodities (Dayal et al., 2024). Farmers, predominantly coming from the Sikh minority community in Northern Punjab, demanded this minimum price as a measure to prevent the financial losses that can occur in the event of overproduction of a commodity, which is crucial for these primarily small farmers with limited economic means (Chaudhuri, 2024). At the movement's peak, more than 200 farmers' unions in the northern state of Punjab took up the issue, coordinating with several communities in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh to voice their demands (Pradhan, 2024). Protests occurred at the Delhi city border, where farmers voiced their aspirations. However, the security forces met their efforts with a harsh response. According to a Human Rights Watch report, the Indian government applied excessive measures in dealing with the protests. People who criticized the government on this issue risked imprisonment, with some cases showing demonstrators having their passports and visas suspended by Indian authorities (Human Rights Watch, 2024). In an attempt to disperse the demonstrations, the government resorted to violence, including the use of tear gas and rubber bullets (NANU, 2024).

The violent government's countermeasures were not only happening in the real world but also digitally deployed. There is evidence that India is exercising digital autocracy over its citizens to disrupt protests in the country. One strong example of this is when the Indian government asked X to block accounts that supported farmers' protests (Al Jazeera, 2024). This was confirmed by the official X representative, who stated,

> *"The Indian government has issued executive orders requiring X to act*
> *on specific accounts and posts, subject to potential penalties including*
> *significant fines and imprisonment"* *(@GlobalAffairs, 2024).*

The restriction of these accounts by X came as a shock to Indians, as seen by its reply in the post regarding the X policy: *"Coward Modi is turning India into Autocracy ....He can't even handle protest tweets."* *(@ManikGoyal_, 2024)*. They were visibly disappointed with the Modi regime for fearing X's post and thought that this was the direction of a dictatorial government. Not only @ManikGoyal_ voiced his disappointment and anger in reply to the post, but there were also posts that echoed

this. *"Dictatorship ! No courage can exist in tyranny. This time, there will be an end to the excess." (@Post4Lamba, 2024).* The reply to this post shows that the Indian government has a big problem because this treatment is a form of tyranny, where the Indian government is afraid of criticism by the people. This is a clear definition of Digital Authority. It showcases how platforms are pressured to align with government directives, limiting free speech in the disguise of national security or public order.

The removal of these social media accounts also occurred alongside internet restrictions in seven districts of Haryana (Kumar, 2024). These actions exacerbated the growing narrative on social media, where BJP supporters alleged that the protesting farmers, the majority of whom were from the Sikh minority, were separatists. In addition, the Indian government has also often failed to punish BJP leaders and supporters who incite violence against minority religious communities (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Throughout February, the Indian government has blocked 177 social media accounts. This move marks a significant effort to control the information circulating online. Of these, 49 links related to the X platform were blocked. In addition, 42 X user accounts were also targeted. Most of the X accounts affected by this blocking allegedly posted content related to farmer protests, which the government considered to trigger concerns about potential public unrest and public order issues (Agrawal 2024). The Indian government's move drew criticism, including from X itself, who disagreed with the action. X refused to provide a specific list of which accounts or links would be blocked, citing the need to maintain transparency and free speech on their platform (Lahiri, 2024).

We managed to analyze a few of the account characteristics that are banned, suspended, or blocked; two examples are the @FarmersFront and a few Tractor 2 Twitter accounts, that are made intentionally because those accounts were blocked in early February 2024, maintaining the campaign movement, Tractor Twitter expand their accounts. Here is a depiction of the majority of their posts:

> *"We condemn this action by @BJP4India party. On one side they want to sit and resolve the farmers' issues on table and on other side they are trying to twist our arms. This is not done @PiyushGoyal @PiyushGoyalOffc. The negotiations can't undergo under such conditions," (@FarmersFront, 2024).*

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The Farmers Front's honest and daring declaration, as well as direct criticism of the administration, has been one of its most distinguishing features, and it is also the most severe challenge to the government. They also discuss how MSP demands are seldom heard and addressed correctly. The bogus accusations leveled against farmers, in particular, highlight how this spirit is not being followed. Another prominent activist actor provides proof that the account was blocked because it posed a threat:

> *"It's been 3 days since farmer protester Shubhkaran Singh was shot dead, @BhagwantMann has failed to file an FIR. All we have received so far are assurances and promises. @Sandhwan @DGPPunjabPolice #FarmersProtest2024" (@tractor2twitr_c, 2024)*

That post contains the graphic video of how one of the farmers got shot with a rubber bullet and much evidence of the chronology and how the police become one of the antagonists in their movement. The activists never forget to tag the official account of the involved and also write the farmer protest hashtag. Also, Tractor Twitter has several other accounts because of the blocking experience, for instance:

> *"Where are the financial facts to support these changes? Is this a genuine effort to reform or just a delay tactic? Farmers have been clear: they need #MSP guarantees, a concrete roadmap with financial clarity, and immediate action. No more promises—deliver real solutions. #Tractor2Twitter #ਖੇਤੀ_ਨੀਤੀ" (@Tractor2twitr_P, 2024)*

The demand for promises has become one of the weapons used to combat hidden agenda charges. The echo of MSP is designed for financial certainty and rights for farmers, and they do not require a list of commitments but relatively immediate action to implement this. They demand real solutions; they have had enough empty promises and the spread of the impossible in India's economic and political settings. Tractor Twitter always finds a robust and changing way of life through online movements, which is why

he has received a lot of support and attention from the public, which is very harmful to the government, especially during the protest.

Those posts give us a pattern, each always containing tags to the BJP accounts, ministries, or parliament figure's X accounts, alongside the movement hashtags. They give us some video proof, firm and frank statements throwing shame on the government, and a massive resistance narrative to tackle the misleading information spread mainly through government accounts. Through this, the farmers gained more attention and support of demand while also flooring some facts in the field, reposting each other's tweets, and creating trends affiliating the government accounts. Hence, a threat arises for the government, which is the main reason for the rationalization of account blocking. For instance, they document all the violence the officers of India gave to India's farmers, give some detailed issues about the farmer's murder, and rebuttal a false accusation pointed at farmers.

This has come with the concern of how Digital Authoritarianism became the epitome of the Government's reactions towards the farmer's demands in prior pledges, containing minimum selling prices, gaining more justice for the farmers, including the former protesters, and emphasizing human rights against the minority. The high number of internet shutdowns amidst farmer protests and the heavily censored content by the government is a strong indication of where Modi's administration is moving. In the next part, we discuss how the protest and the countermeasure went in the digital sphere. It then served as a ground to establish a framework for how digital authoritarianism works within Modi's political ideology.

Articulation of Protesters Narrative in the Social Media

To better understand the call and response in the digital sphere between the government and the protesters, we analyzed social media to see what movements and narratives are happening on X social media regarding farmers' protests. As mentioned earlier, there was a massive internet shutdown in early February, and many protester accounts on X were blocked. It became a note of limitation in our research, which we landed into scrutinized #FarmersProtest2024. The hashtag summarizes the protesters' narratives that they voiced through social media. #FarmersProtest2024 focuses on the key demands of Indian farmers, including the legalization of Minimum Support Price (MSP)

for all crops. It also emphasizes crop diversification to ensure more stable incomes and fairer agricultural practices across the country

We found a video in early February using #FarmersProtest2024 that narrated why the Indian government had to block farmers who wanted to protest in Delhi using barricades and barbed wire. The blockade was made to block any traffic going to Delhi. This aimed to deter protestors from going to Delhi, the video is made with a caption the caption reads as follows:

> "Considering farmers as enemies, the Modi government is using iron kilos on the roads so farmers cannot reach Delhi. The Prime Minister is a trustee elected by the people. This is indecent behavior in a democracy. The Modi government is going to crush the voice of farmers against the Constitution and democracy" (@ManjeetChanna2, 2024).

It was an influencer account that was posted at the beginning of the protest, where they felt disappointed when they were blocked from entering Delhi and felt that the government was not hearing their voices. They also felt this was unfair and incompatible with democracy and the country's constitution.

When the protests started to heat up in mid-February, there was a riot where several Indian media outlets in X started to cover the situation. There were also narratives from prominent leaders of the farmers themselves who narrated the events that took place during the protests:

> "The government will not fulfill its promise of MSP guarantee law! The government will spray tear gas from drones, will open fire, and will martyr the farmers, filing false cases against the farmers demanding MSP guarantee law," (@mannraman1974, 2024)

This is one of the posts, but also the most compelling narrative, they provide in early February when the spirit of Farmer Protest is at its zenith and massive blockage of online or offline access occurs. One of the most noteworthy patterns is that their statements show that they are not afraid and will not quit, even if the government plans to use violence

against the movement. They are reiterating how the spirit will always be there and how the government's response is always limited to physical damage, as backed by other posts:*"Shambhu Border: See, police fired hundreds of shells in a minute on farmers who were going to pull down the barricades with tractors." (@moliticsindia, 2024).* In those posts, the narrative began to emerge that the government did not want to listen to farmers' aspirations and that the chaotic situation during the protest caused the government to overreact, shooting at them with rubber bullets and arresting protesters who voiced their aspirations at the 2024 farmers protest, which is why this movement will never stop.

In this chaotic situation, there were still influencers who gave and delivered speeches from the farmer leaders who were protesting on that day, which influenced the narrative in X:

> *"This is a black day in Indian history. Tear gases, rubber bullets, and water cannons were used against the farmers today. We will continue our protest with double intensity tomorrow."— Farmer Leader Sarwan Singh Pandher" (@mr_mayank, 2024).*

The brief, compact, but full-of statement is one of the characteristics of the protesters' posts. One of the farmer's protests always stated the real field situations, highlighting the government's violence just because of the march of farmers demanding Modi's regime promises. They always bring up the courageous, undaunted mentality as the petrol of the movement spirit. Another proof of the same pattern brought up by Rahul Gandhi, leader of the opposition in Lok Sabha:

> *"Modi, his propaganda machinery, and friendly media are the enemies of the poor and the farmers. When it comes to the interests of those who build India, the 'government experts' start worrying about the budget, but it is not about the budget, it is about intentions. Today, providing MSP to every farmer is the need and will change the lives of crores of farmer families of the country along with the rural economy." (@RahulGandhi, 2024).*

The tweets plainly state that the government will always generate propaganda in response to the poor and farmers' demands, giving the impression that they are not a part of the

buildup of disappointment and indignation. All of the demonstrators' statements are to clear up numerous charges about impossible economic conditions. In contrast, the truth is that they intend to gatekeep interest for the elites only rather than based on the grassroots. The protesters constantly demanded the same thing as before, demonstrating that they had no ulterior motivation other than legitimizing MSP.

All the government's actions in reducing the farmers' protest did not make them submit, and they were even more enthusiastic about protesting. This is because there is a narrative that forms a call to be even more enthusiastic in voicing this. After all, this can show the government how serious we are in this matter. They feel that the government has never heard them, so they will make the government hear them.

Although the narrative of the farmers' protest was strong initially, the status quo of Farmers Protest 2024 began to weaken like the movements in previous years. The farmer's protest movement only became a symbolic movement, seen from several hashtags or keywords that still contain the word farmers protest 2024 just simply calling for what farmers' protest wants without any significant real action taking place, such as:

> *"Farmers are demanding genuine rights not any luxuries. Government should fulfill their promise and legalize MSP, wave of farmers loans and withdraw fake cases against farmers.." (@AnilJha58772137, 2024).*

Even as the offline action fades, X activists continue to massively echo this farmer protest movement, as they always have, in accordance with MSP's goal. The next subchapter will show why the engagement of farmer protest posts has decreased since February. We will also discuss how the Indian government deals with the myth that farmers are weakened by them.

Portraying Government's Counter Narratives

The Farmers Protest movement's dissemination of narratives through X is one of the cornerstones of their demands for MSP legitimacy. The skyrocketing number of posts on X related to #Farmersprotest2024 and the MSP keyword creates a perception where the public can be influenced and see the protest movement as a form of achieving justice

that needs to be fought for. In response to the widening rage of protests on social media, the Modi administration also launched several counter-narratives against the protesters' voices on social media.

Government subtle approaches with a few politicians and ministry's posts representing the support towards government and against the Farmer's Protest, depicted by the Ministry of Agriculture India's tweet, Arjun Munda:

"After the fourth round, the government is ready to discuss all the issues like MSP, crop diversification, stubble issue, FIR in the fifth round. I again invite the farmer leaders for discussion. It is important for us to maintain peace." (@MundaArjun, 2024).

This statement was also posted by a few other accounts, such as Asian News International and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in India. Those narratives reflect what image the government wants to create in order to redeem the spike in posts related to allegations over the government's indifference to MSP guarantees. Instead, they take the safe step and emphasize the invitation to this rendezvous.

A Congress Working Committee, Supriya Shrinate, posted several assurances regarding the Farmers' Protest by Sanjay Raut as a member of the Rajya Sabha Parliament and Sharad Pawar as President of the Nationalist Congress Party. One of the posts containing assurances is:

"1. MSP will be given legal status. 2. A set up to waive farmers' loans and determine the amount of loan waiver 3. Ensure payment directly into the bank account within 30 days in case of crop loss of the farmer 4. An import-export policy will be implemented for agricultural products 5. Farmers will be GST free." (@SupriyaShrinate, 2024)

This post received around 2,000 likes and 400 reposts, including three government accounts with over a million followers. According to the post, they always make a guarantee in a conference regarding the legal containment of MSP in their constitutions, following the farmer's loan and goods and services tax (GST) free policy, as a result of

addressing the significant demand for MSP legalization, in the hope that the agitation will subside. We can see their efforts to project the image that they are willing to compromise with the farmers amid a significant protest movement. This strategy is a first step to embracing the unconducive bias against the government; at least with this, they may catch the attention of and garner support as a figure who listens to the demand.

On the other hand, another narratives emerges consisting claim that legitimacy of MSP would not be on par with other businesses, and violated the constitutional right of equality, such as the post made by a member of the Indian Administrative Service, Surya Pratap Singh, which reads With nearly 1 million followers, Surya got over forty thousand engagements.

> *"A legal guarantee of MSP for all or most crops is neither constitutionally nor economically possible. It is also not equivalent to the products of other businesses. Guaranteeing 50% profit to a particular business is against the Right to Equality granted in the Constitution. The crooks should protest because their aim is something else." (@suryapsingh_IAS, 2024).*

This post intends to create a mindset where the public would realize that legalizing MSP would be impossible in India's economic climate and when it comes to the equality rights of workers written in the constitutions. Surya tried to give different approaches, rather than bringing up some guarantee towards MSP legitimization, and indicating that the government slowly implies the disagreement with the farmers' demand, which was strengthened by a similar narrative posted by MP Praveen Khandelwal:

> *"Farmers should take decisions after careful consideration in the interest of all. By accepting the MSP proposed by the government for 5 crops, they should also understand the problems in other sections. Just as the government is working for their welfare, they should also make efforts to ensure that there is no additional burden on the country's economy."(@praveendel, 2024).*

By bringing out some critical difficulties with MSP for five crops, he indicated that farmers must still evaluate the components that must be met if MSP is to be legalized, which is unachievable in India, claiming it will be a burden. In these settings, he is attempting to play the role of a 'rational actor' about the government, as if they always know what to do, and unfulfilled demands continue to arise because it is in the best interests of the entire economy.

These posts came after the series of peak demonstrations from the 13th until the 23rd of February, as it looks like the government chose to make the subtle shifting approaches, other than the failed meeting with the farmers, but rather to point out how it could harm India's economy growth, also constitutionally impossible because it contains the right to equality, if the farmers get 50% profit, then it is violating the workers rights. Some experts like @suryapsingh_IAS said that the farmers' demands are not achievable because they are unrealistic in India's economic climate and unconstitutional; consequently, Farmer Protest are facing massive allegations of misleading in their goals.

Also additional approach as has been shared by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in his 'X' account, through an interview with the owner of the micro and small enterprise, the farmer protests only worsened the situation with their riots:

> *"Here are daily wagers, micro and small enterprise owners, shopkeepers explaining how the so-called 'farmers protest' has disrupted their livelihoods. Many fear a rerun of the last 'agitation' — losses that piled up then are yet to be recouped." (@KanchanGupta, 2024).*

Kanchan is attempting to amplify the negative consequences of farmer protests by highlighting the public's voices to emphasize the turmoil during the rallies and how those movements do not focus on MSP but on disrupting the neighborhood rather than real farmers with a vision. Quite the massive amount of support in the counter-narratives of farmers' protest indicates the desire to obscure the farmer's movement. Most replies choose to underpin the government statement, alleging that they are not real farmers and do not care about the Minimum Selling Prices or farmer's welfare, but only chaos or violence.

The government will try everything to maintain a good image, except to fulfill the farmers' demands starting in 2020. India's economy increased under the regime of Modi, creating a more considerable hope and glorification powered by the voice of the majority, which "To create Hindu nationalists had expected the creation of a single nation with Hindu majority rule" (Venkatesh, 2024). Farmers who want to protest to ease the burden of crop failure or loss in sales due to lower selling prices of products caused by overproduction get allegations that they want to profit more from sales and enrich themselves. Based on the few posts by a government figure, we can see how they tried to calm the protests by providing an agreement meeting, which did not work. In perspective, cultivation contains how it is economically impossible and constitutionally problematic, but still did not end the farmer protest in February; it created a series of protests until now, generating a more aggressive response from the government.

The Government Aggressive Responses

After deploying a counter-narrative into the social media sphere, the Modi administration executed an aggressive countermeasure by executing an internet shutdown at the center of the protester region. To scrutinize the shutdown, we collected data on Internet shutdowns in India from January to September 2024, and we formed a graph to better understand the event's flow. At the beginning of the year, in January, the government shut down the internet once. However, in February, there was a spike of six internet shutdowns. This was right around the peak of the Farmer's Protest. In May and June, the frequency of shutdowns began to increase again, although in lower numbers, with fluctuations of around one to two times. Entering September, the frequency of internet shutdowns again increased, approaching two shutdowns, indicating continued tensions, although not as intense as in February.
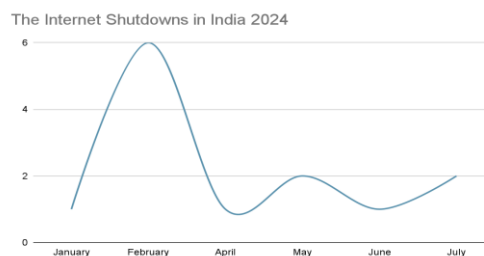

Figure 1. India's Internet Shutdown Frequency according to Pulse Internet Society (Pulse Internet Society, 2024)

The graph above shows an increase in internet shutdowns at the beginning of 2024, and the peak occurred in February, which coincided with the farmer's protest. This trend strengthens the assumption that the Modi regime uses a digital authoritarianism approach, where control over access to information is used as a tool to express political aspirations. In expressing dissatisfaction with a policy, the internet shutdown became a government strategy in controlling the narrative to prevent people from organizing protests. This gives a strong indication that the government uses technology as a way to strengthen its power.

Along with the internet shutdown, Modi's administration also executes oppression toward protesters by arresting them. India's farmers are one of the most important supporters of the upcoming elections, possessing a massive amount of influence created due to this constant series of protests. Since mid-February, protesters have been flooding New Delhi's streets, demanding the government's promises to guarantee the price for produce, another 23 crops for minimum selling prices, and justice for the criminalized former protester (BBC, 2024). These demonstrations led to arresting farmers, barricading highways to avoid them from the capital, New Delhi, firing shotguns and pellets, followed using drones to drop tear gas on unarmed farmers, simultaneously with the allegation of being a terrorist and part of the opposition party. (Chhabra & Sebastian, 2024).

Even if the farmer's leader has met the government representative for the list demand in Modi's regime, it shows the actual and rightest vision to fight the same as before yet get more violent approaches by the government also the people. The blocking of 177 social media accounts and posts in X amid the farmer's protest, including the account of Gurpreet Sangha, the farmer leader, specifically on 13 February 2024. Sangha also stated that X blocked the second account he had created within a week, although it only had a small number of followers. Subsequently, other farmer leader and journalist accounts were also withheld, which are Ramandeep Mann, Pandher Sarvan, Ashok Danoda, Anuj Singh, Tejveer Singh, and Surjeet Phool, following the farmer union account–Bharatiya Kisan Union. The reason these accounts are withheld until 2 months, is to prevent the provocative and propaganda by the farmer's protest, which shows how allergic they are to factual information (Mittal, 2024).

The aggressive, repressive way of handling free speech on social media sparks an epitome of how India's government under Modi is approaching an unfavorable principle of democracy, or as we mentioned earlier, Digital Authoritarianism. This has led to one interpretation, where the government did not meet the effectiveness of the counter-narrative and instead shut down all at once.

The Impact on the Minority Identity

Digital authoritarianism by the Indian government is dangerous because it can limit the flow of information that should be open to avoid a deviant event in politics and democracy. The restriction of information by a state government can lead to the oppression of certain parties, and they face severe censorship and surveillance from the government, making it extremely difficult for them to organize and voice their concerns effectively. In every oppressive government policy, the minority will always be the one who suffers the greatest. In this context, the farmers who organized the Farmers Protest 2024 were farmers from the Sikh ethnic group, considered a minority in India (Minority Rights Group, n.d.). This trajectory threatens to deepen the oppression of marginalized groups and worsen violence and censorship. Sikh ethnic groups are minorities that are not legally recognized as distinct religions. This makes the Farmer's Protest challenging to resolve as the ethnic minority, where 1.72% of the country's population adheres to the Sikh religion (World Population Review, 2024).

The problem experienced by the Sikh ethnic group is that many acts of violence are targeted at them (Minority Rights Group, n.d.). When communities are targeted for violence in India, restrictions on internet access prevent the dissemination of information about such incidents. This makes it difficult for issues of violence to be widely recognized and for perpetrators to be prosecuted. In social media, cases that go viral tend to attract the public's and authorities' attention, which often accelerates law enforcement and justice efforts. This has also been touched upon in The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse in the chapter Bystander Apathy and Intervention in the Era of Social Media which suggests that Social media often amplifies situations, increasing visibility and public awareness, which can lead to faster responses from authorities, emphasizing that platforms can either contribute to bystander apathy or encourage intervention by providing the necessary visibility for justice and accountability

in various social issues ("Bystander Apathy and Intervention in the Era of Social Media", 2021, 712-728).

The internet shutdown carried out by the Indian government during the 2024 Farmers Protest had a significant impact on the Sikh community; this is because Sikhs became the main actors in this protest. With the internet being an essential tool for the community to communicate and coordinate their protest, the government's internet shutdown will limit the Sikh community's ability to voice their grievances. The Sikh community has long held an essential role in the agrarian field in India, experiencing repression both in person and in cyberspace, where violence is used to suppress the movement. These repressive policies take a physical and emotional toll, weakening the Sikh movement's network. The internet shutdown can benefit the government, as without internet coverage the protests by the Sikh community do not receive fair and independent coverage. This provides an opportunity for the government to discredit or even twist the facts of the protest movement into a national threat, which ultimately marginalizes the issues raised by the Sikh community. Thus, the internet shutdown became a strategic tool in shaping public perception and isolating the Sikh community from national and international support.

The Internet shutdown imposed by the Indian government on the Sikh community at the farmer's protest was not the first time; last year, the Sikh community became the target of the Indian government's Internet shutdown. In March 2023, Indian authorities conducted a massive manhunt to arrest Amritpal Singh, a prominent Sikh separatist leader advocating for the revival of the Khalistan movement, which seeks an independent Sikh state. This is to prevent the spread of misinformation and stop coordination between Singh's supporters. The government aimed to control the narrative and ensure the situation did not escalate. The shutdown disproportionately affected Sikh populations, cutting off communication channels, disrupting daily life, and restricting the ability to organize or protest the actions of the government. It also further fueled the perception of targeted repression against the Sikh community, given that the shutdown coincided with actions against Sikh separatists. This case demonstrates how internet shutdowns can be a tool of digital authoritarianism used by the state to suppress movements, particularly among minorities. These internet shutdowns have become a typical pattern for the Indian government in controlling narratives. It shows the government's consistent use of digital

control mechanisms to curtail public dissent and suppress the voices of marginalized communities like the Sikhs, framing it as necessary for law and order.

CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of this decade, India has experienced significant economic growth, surpassing the UK in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and is expected to surpass Japan by 2027. This growth has been largely driven by the digital transformation led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). However, behind this economic success, India faces a critical problem of rising Digital Authoritarianism. This phenomenon has triggered political instability, with growing concerns over censorship and suppression of dissent, especially during periods of social tension such as the 2024 Farmers Protest. Our findings show that, despite India's rapid digitisation, the government's approach to controlling information through internet shutdowns and social media censorship highlights the dark side of its technological progress.

The narratives carried by influencers on the X platform were not reciprocated well by the government, as evidenced by the lack of official statements from the government on the platform. The government losing control of the narrative carried by influencers on X created a situation of panic, which ultimately prompted the Indian government to take repressive measures in the form of internet shutdowns. We noticed that the farmer protest movement that developed on platform X was the main trigger that fuelled the offline protests. However, upon further observation, we found that this assumption was not entirely accurate. The movement on platform X actually acted more as a 'petrol that fuels the fire', meaning that social media amplified and accelerated the spirit of resistance that already existed on the ground, but was not the main source that started the movement. These demands were answered with a crackdown by the government, both physically and digitally. Accounts supporting the protests were blocked on social media, and large-scale internet shutdowns were imposed, further hampering farmers' ability to organize and voice their aspirations. In our analysis of X social media platforms, we found that narratives supporting the farmers faced aggressive action from the government. Posts depicting the harsh treatment of farmers by security forces, including the use of barricades and rubber bullets, gained widespread attention and strengthened the movement, despite

increased censorship. Influential accounts such as that of Gurpreet Sangha, one of the key figures in the protests, were repeatedly blocked, demonstrating the government's determination to silence dissent in the digital realm. This is in line with what we observe as the systematic use of informational flooding, where the government attempts to flood the protest narrative with counter-narratives that discredit the demonstrators. In this context, we assume a pattern of digital authoritarianism that heavily impacts minority groups, particularly the Sikh community. The farmers, who are predominantly from this minority group, not only faced physical violence, but were also targeted for digital censorship. We argue that this reflects a broader issue of how the government is leveraging its digital infrastructure to reinforce existing social hierarchies and suppress marginalized voices. This suppression further intensifies the challenges faced by these communities, further neglecting their interests. Ultimately, we as authors conclude that while India's economy continues to grow, its growing reliance on digital authoritarianism poses a serious threat to democratic values. The 2024 Farmers' Protest illustrates the tension between rapid economic growth and the erosion of civil liberties, especially for minority groups. We assume that the government's approach to information control and censorship could undermine progress. Strengthening protections for free speech and creating a fairer digital space are essential to maintaining political stability and the rights of all citizens.

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