JNU Fee Hike Protests and the Protest Paradigm: An Analysis of the Coverage in *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*

Dr. Avneesh Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

Email- avneesh.kumar@jaipur.manipal.edu

Dr. Lakhan Raghuvanshi

Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

Email- lakhan.raghuvanshi@jaipur.manipal.edu

**Corresponding author:** Dr. Lakhan Raghuvanshi, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur, Rajasthan 303007, India

**Abstract** - Media representation of protest events plays a major role in the broader understanding of the protests. This study assesses the coverage of JNU fee hike protests for its coverage in the two leading English newspapers of India – *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*. The analysis of the coverage over a period of two months demonstrated that both the newspapers framed the protests in ways that had characteristics of the protest paradigm. More features of the coverage include the use of framing devices for marginalization, trivialization and demonization. The results also showed heavy reliance on official sources and an overall negative tone in the newspaper coverage.

**Keywords** - media framing, newspaper coverage, protest, protest paradigm

I. Introduction

Protests and demonstrations are means of asserting the opposite point of view and challenging the authorities. In the efforts of strengthening and broadening democracy, protests act as a significant force. As the largest democracy of the world, India’s constitution confers upon its citizens the right to assemble and organise a peaceful protest. From time to time, this fundamental right has been used by the citizens of the country to express their discontent with governmental policies and highlight their issues.

The formulation and presentation of protest events by the media impact the understanding people develop about protests. It is generally accepted that, to a greater extent, a protest movement remains contingent upon the media for achieving its objectives [1]. Previous research on social and political movements has shown that media frame protests in negative ways and largely bring out the official point of view [2,3]. Not much attention is given to the perspective of protesters, which undermines the image of protesters and does disservice to them. However, this disservice is, to a greater extent, because of the built-in “status quo bias” in the usual practice of news coverage [4,5]. This biasness has a critical role in the process of media’s construction of social reality. Furthermore, that is how unorganised events and happenings are assigned some meaning by journalists.

Media decides the backdrop of the public discourse by highlighting certain events and overlooking others. Within this coverage also, one involved group is presented differently than the other. To be of assistance to one side, and create hindrance for the other, in creating a dominant point of view, media framing of events, issues, and actors are carried out in ways that promote perceptions and interpretations of a particular kind [6,7]. Framing, Entman (1993)[8] argues, is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient, thus promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” Considering that framing highlights a particular orientation, media enjoys the leverage of framing incidents or issues in specific ways and reorient the viewpoint of its consumers.

Framing, as Cappella and Jamieson (1996)[9] explicate, is “a question of slant, structure, emphasis, selection, word choice and context”. In the communication text, news frames may well appear completely implicit.
Nevertheless, they assist people “locate, perceive, identify, and label” and can best be described as “guided doings” [10]. The significance of media frames can be understood by their ability to “both produce and limit meaning” [4], which explains the repeated utilization of certain frames and omission or neglect of other frames.

For protests and social movements to be successful in getting the attention of the public, they have to rely on media. Sometimes, protesters indulge in “outrageous” behaviour to attract more coverage [11]. More media coverage means better visibility for the movement. It works as a validation for the protest and the politics involved. The attention of the media also means that the protest is being perceived as an important one. Publicity through media, however, is always full of uncertainty for movements. Protests can be everywhere in the media, but that may not serve their purpose. The problem is that if the news media happens to apply negative news frames for the depiction of the social movement, it only undermines the goals of the movement. In this context, with more coverage, the movement may not be widening its support base among the larger public and the legitimacy of the movement may also be questioned.

Protest and the protest paradigm

Coined by McLeod and Hertog (1998)[12], “protest paradigm” discusses the fixed template or script journalists use to cover protests, which is like a guide book for them for covering protests. Defined as “routinized pattern or implicit template for the coverage of social protest” by McLeod and Hertog (1998) [12], protest paradigm highlights the techniques journalists employ to cover protests. At the centre of the protest paradigm is the perspective that media’s protest coverage carries little substance because protests are almost always presented in a bad light and derogatory news frames are used to represent protesters. One of the common tactics observed in the media coverage of protests is the depiction of protests in the structural narrative of battle and violence [12]. This type of framing of the protest activities decontextualizes the protest events. And this decontextualization of incidents happens because of media’s emphasis on individuals in a conflict and not on situational or structural reasons [13].

While studying the media coverage of protests, researchers have continuously found validation for the concept of protest paradigm. Several studies provide the evidence of the hostile treatment and antagonism media has demonstrated in their coverage of protest movements [14,15]. Scholars identify traditional news production routines, reporter’s biases, and media’s support for the existing power structure responsible for the hostility towards protest movements [4,11,16]. There are some recurring elements in the coverage of social protests. Collectively, these are the elements that constitute the protest paradigm. According to McLeod and Hertog (1998) [12], essentially protest paradigm has following characteristics: news frames, dependence on official sources, the invocation of public opinion, delegitimization, and demonization.

The presentation of social protests in terms of the protest paradigm also remains contingent upon the issues of protest and the degree of radicality involved. Shoemaker (1984)[17] contends that negative coverage becomes more prominent if the protest is organised by a group considered to be radical by the media. This negative coverage is carried out primarily by using “language cues” that work as a technique for media framing [18]. More emphasis is put on framing devices to “delegitimize and demonize” protests. The consequences of this practice are the marginalisation of the protesters, neutralisation of the legitimacy of protests and the prevalence of the interpretation that protests are manifestations of indiscipline, lawlessness and violence [12,19].

In the case of media following the protest paradigm, they have to adhere to the most robust characteristic of the paradigm – the nature of the media coverage will be more episodic than thematic. Shanto Iyengar (1991)[20] established the concept of news coverage being either episodic or thematic in nature. He argues that episodic coverage presents news as concrete instances or specific events and consequently news coverage essentially becomes event-oriented. On the other hand, thematic coverage provides an abstract and generalised perspective, and ignores larger contexts.

JNU fee hike protests

In the aftermath of Jawaharlal Nehru University administration’s decision to issue a new draft hostel manual, students of the varsity came out in large numbers to oppose the proposed changes. Initially, the protest organised by the students did not receive much media attention, and news coverage across the media remained minimal. However, the decision of students to escalate the protest brought extraordinary changes in the media coverage. In their efforts to keep the cost of education affordable, the students of the university tried to march towards a function the Vice President and the Human Resource Development Minister of India were attending. Their march towards the function was halted by the police forces. And then the police and the students turned against each other, resulting in violence and the detention of students. These events sparked the media coverage of the protests.
The JNU fee hike protest is exclusive in the way that the protests were organized primarily by the students. Additionally, the protests brought out the importance of public-funded education and, to a certain extent, forced newspapers and other media channels to discuss and provide news coverage to the issue.

**Research questions**

This study is driven by the objective of examining the mainstream media coverage of the demonstrations organised by the students of Jawahar Lal University against the proposed fee hike. Keeping the objectives of the study in consideration, following research questions are proposed:

1. Did *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* frame their stories of JNU fee hike protests as per the protest paradigm?
2. What was the overall tone of the coverage of protest in the two newspapers?
3. Was there any difference between the coverage of *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*?

**II. Methodology**

This study was undertaken with the intention to investigate the press coverage of JNU fee hike protests. Media framing of the protest is the focus of this article. An attempt has been made to understand and examine whether the coverage of the protests supported the protest paradigm. And if the coverage was as per the protest paradigm, how was the dominant narrative structure constructed. To conduct this research study and analyse the data, a descriptive content analysis was carried out. This analysis was conducted on the two major English newspapers of India – *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*.

The newspaper coverage of JNU fee hike protests over a period of two months was selected. The time period was chosen considering that, first, this will give enough newspaper articles to carry out the research, and second, this allowed for the examination of the treatment the protests received over two months by the selected newspapers. Also, the time period selected provided with the scope to examine the coverage of the protests from the beginning of the protests and through the peak of the protests. All the stories, including editorials and opinion pieces, that appeared during this period – from October 25, 2019 to December 25, 2019 – related to the JNU fee hike protests were selected for analysis. The articles were retrieved from the online archives of the two selected newspapers – *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*. In total, 119 news stories were found to be relevant to the newspaper coverage of JNU fee hikes protests, 51 in *The Times of India* and 68 in *The Hindu*.

To make the methodology systematic, articles were searched with the help of using the same keywords, and a common codebook was also prepared for coding the selected samples. The codebook focussed on the characterization of the issue and the overall tone of the article, and for this following coding categories were established: “responsibility, conflict, primary narrative structure or theme, context focus, dominant news sources, use of delegitimization tools and the overall description”, which is a combination of the characteristics of the protest paradigm identified by Gitlin [11], Shoemaker[17], Iyengar[20], McLeod[21] and Mcleod and Detenber[22].

Once the codebook was ready, articles were coded for further analysis. Individual news article was treated as the unit of analysis. Using individual article as a coding unit while doing research on social protests and movements has been done by researchers frequently [see 15 and 23].

**III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the data in both the newspapers – *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* – revealed the presence of the conflict frame. The primary way that the newspapers structured the JNU fee hike protests is by resorting to the use of “conflict” frame. Newspaper articles, to a greater extent, concentrated on the “battle” between the protesting students and the police. Consequently, violence is one of the things that was put at the forefront, and “grounds of the protests or the causes of the protests” took a backseat. The Times of India used headlines like “Protesting students vent ire with caustic graffiti on walls”, “Delhi stops as JNU students walk their talk” and “JNU students go on long march, Delhi grinds to halt”. This conflict frame was not limited to *The Times of India* only. The other newspaper, *The Hindu*, selected for the research also used the conflict frame in abundance and as the dominant narrative structure. *The Times of India* used phrases like “stop-off, traffic mayhem, and protesters break through to describe the protestors. In comparison, *The Hindu* used phrases like “clash with police, broke through barricades, and indulged in vandalism” for the construction of the dominant narrative of students versus the police/administration. This construction of a “confrontation narrative” between the protesting students and the police supported the advancement of the framing of the JNU fee hike protests in terms of the “conflict frame”.

Highlighting the conflict frame was also done by the newspapers through portraying the police and the students as opposing forces. And this was primarily done by depicting the event as one of high tension. For this, an article
in The Hindu was published with the headline “JNU students lathi-charged by police during march to Rashtrapati Bhawan” [24]. The same article further adds that:

The Delhi police on December 9 lathi-charged students from the Jawaharl Nehru (JNU) University who were on a peaceful march from the University campus to Rashtrapati Bhawan to petition the President, who is also the visitor of the University, to roll back the hostel fee hike [24].

This incident was depicted in a similar way by The Times of India. The newspaper portrayed the incident as one of confrontation between the police and the student protestors. The article in the newspaper described the incident as follows:

Scores of JNU students were lathi-charged by police on Monday and several of them detained when they tried to march towards Rashtrapati Bhawan against the hostel fee hike, throwing traffic out of gear and leaving metro commuters stranded for hours with three central Delhi stations being closed as a precautionary measure (PTI, 2019).

The conflict frame is the dominant one and through this frame, the stories have been constructed by the two newspapers. Additionally, the stories also indicate the discomfort common people have to face because of the protests. Newspaper articles blame the student protestors for causing heavy traffic jams and leaving the daily commuters stranded. This prominence attributed to the “discomfort” caused by the protestors brings the “social disorder” theme into the debate and frames the protestors as the ones threatening the social order. By paying excessive attention to the traffic problems and police violence, newspapers successfully highlighted the dominant narrative of students becoming the disruptors. Throughout the coverage of the two newspapers, the responsibility frame was highlighted largely for the protestors, mainly because the reports about the protests did not consider the government and the university administration equal stakeholders in this whole incident. The fundamental reason of this is in line with the argument made by Iyengar[20]. If the focus of the newspapers is event-oriented, which is the case here, the framing will be more episodic in nature. Consequently, the coverage of the newspapers will follow the protest paradigm.

Demonization and delegitimization

Demonizing the protestors serves the purpose of the authorities. Protest paradigm lays out the characteristics normally used by the media to trivialize the protest movements and control the effectiveness of the protests. Predominant techniques to demonize and delegitimize the social protests during the JNU fee hike protests included the marginalization of the issue at hand, blaming protestors for disturbing the social order, and giving more media coverage to the statements issued by the authorities. Gitlin[11] has explained that media demonize the social movements by using various framing devices in their stories. The analysis of the data collected from the two English newspapers of India – The Times of India and The Hindu – of their coverage of the JNU fee hike protests demonstrated the presence of evidence that supported the arguments of Gitlin[11].

One such article in The Hindu gave a free hand to JNU Vice-Chancellor. In this article, the JNU VC took the help of the students who were not part of the protests to advance his case and trivialize and delegitimize the protests. Not only that, the JNU VC also blamed the protestors of using “abusive” language and indulging in illegal activities. In one of the articles published in The Hindu on November 8, 2019, the JNU administration is quoted as saying that students have been “repeatedly issuing propaganda materials with offensive and abusive language often”. The same article trivializes and demonizes protestors by accusing them of obstructing the usual academic activities and putting the carrier of “innocent students” at risk and labelling the entire movement as a “falsehood campaign”. The article quotes the JNU administration statement to make the following viewpoint about the movement: “These agitations have affected normal life of a large number of innocent students from across India who are unable to concentrate on their studies, complete academic assignments and prepare for their examinations.”

The demonization of the protesting students continues in the article published in The Times of India as well. In this article, the JNU VC is quoted as saying:

On November 11 and November 13, the agitating students crossed every line of civil behaviour. No civilised society, let alone a higher academic institution of the stature of JNU, would bear such abominable activities and behaviour by its members,” the VC said. “JNU administration would always like to engage in a dialogue and discussion, but the process and form of any such interaction cannot be dictated through coercion and illegal methods (TNN, 2019).

The emphasis in the articles mentioned above is clearly on discrediting the movement by demonizing the protestors. By focussing on the protestors, the reasons because of which protests are being held are neglected.
This technique helps in marginalizing the protestors and thus trivializing the cause. The necessity of the issue, in this case the fee hike or free education, is not discussed, and emphasis is placed more on the actors involved. And neglect of the issue is another framing device that has been used here.

Source representation: Telling the stories through official sources

The dominance of official sources in the news is well known. Newspapers rely heavily on official source to write stories about events. In this process, the audience generally receives the news from the perspective of the authorities. In their coverage of the social movements and protests, this typical characteristic of the media coverage turn into a feature of the protest paradigm. The analysis of the coverage of *The Hindu* and *The Times* of India demonstrated that both the newspapers granted more space to the official source than the protestors. Entire articles were written only on the basis of the statement issued by the JNU authorities and the JNU VC or what the police said. This indicates that perspective of the officials was considered more significant the protestors. And majority of the news articles in both the newspapers followed this pattern. In doing so, however, *The Hindu* followed a little more balanced approach and attempted to tell stories from the perspective of the protestors. One such article tried concentrating the actual problem by quoting the JNU students’ union:

More than 40% of students belong to families with annual income below ₹1.44 lakh, the poverty cut-off line, as suggested by the annual reports of JNU. Bachelors and Masters students are dependent on the Merit Cum Means Scholarships, which is ₹2,000 per month, and MPhil and PhD students are dependent on the UGC Non Net Scholarship, which is ₹5,000 per month. How will students survive and pay the amount that is more than their scholarships?” [25]

However, one easily noticeable trend in the article of both newspapers was that whenever they cited a source belonging to the protest groups, immediately an official source was cited to respond to the claims of the protestors. On the other hand, protestors were not extended the same privilege. For example, in an article in *The Hindu*, the JNU VC is quoted as labelling acts of protestors as “unbecoming, dangerous and shameful”, but no representative from the other side has been asked to respond to the allegations.

An article in *The Times of India* published on November 7, 2019 runs with the headline “Students claim JNU provosts’ backing”. Going through the article reveals that out of the four sources quoted in the article, three are official sources. Effectively, the article successfully contradicts the claims of the protestors by citing official sources and their perspective. In another story, *The Times of India*, tries to tell the story through the representatives of the protestors. This article, published on November 21, 2019, attempts to describe the demands of the students and how they would not end the protests until their demands are accepted. The article discussed the objections of students. “Our demand is to arrive at a new manual through an acceptable deliberative process. The current manual does not guarantee reservations to SC, ST and PWD students in hostel seats, which we cannot accept”, the JNUSU general secretary is quoted as saying. This quotation was different in the sense that protestors were given a chance to express their problems and the reasons why they are protesting, and not just describe the atrocities meted out on them.

Incidentally, sources have a vital role to play in the frame-building process. The struggle to control the narrative is played out here. Including more news sources from one side means neglecting the other side and granting more space to one point of view. The presence of more official sources in the articles of both the newspapers meant that the newspapers carried out the coverage and framed the JNU fee hike protests in ways that share similarities with the characteristics of the protest paradigm.

Overall tone of the coverage

To a greater extent, the coverage in the selected two English newspapers of India leaned more towards the negative tone in their coverage. Considering the inclusion of the protest paradigm characteristics in the coverage of the two newspapers, an event-oriented coverage left scope for more negative connotation in the protest coverage. This also the reason because of which the overriding structure in the coverage was reduced to the “social order” theme. An example of the same is the article published in *The Hindu* that blamed protestors for causing traffic troubles in the city:

The protest caused a massive traffic jam on Ring Road and several commuters using the metro also were left stranded as entry and exit points at Udyog Bhawan, Lok Kalyan Marg and Central Secretariat metro stations were closed for over four hours by authorities following directions from the Delhi police [24].

An important aspect observed in the analysis of this protest coverage is the neglection of the bigger issue, which is government’s apathy towards public education. The newspapers did not find it appropriate to directly put the responsibility on the government or the university administration. Rather, they kept focussing on the...
disruption and the violence. Heavy reliance on official sources by the newspapers also ensured that the authorities could mould the coverage in their favour. Also, the actions of the police are framed in ways that appear like they did everything to maintain the social order and stop the capital city of India from coming to a halt. The consequence of this type of framing, however, is that the protestors automatically are portrayed in a negative light.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The study was undertaken with the objective of analysing the coverage of JNU fee hike protests of the two leading English newspapers of India – The Times of India and The Hindu. For the purpose of conducting the study, media framing was used as a method and through that the study intended to analyse whether the coverage followed the protests paradigm. Also, the study attempted to evaluate the overall tone of the articles. The examination of the articles collected from the coverage of two newspapers revealed that the JNU fee hike protests were framed as per the characteristics of the protest paradigm. Overall, the coverage was more episodic in nature, used framing devices that trivialised the protests and demonized the protestors and demonstrated high degree of reliance on the official sources. Collectively, the articles carried an overall negative tone for the protests and the protestors. And the two selected newspapers also did not differ too much in their coverage, apart from The Hindu publishing a greater number of articles about the protests and following a balanced approach in selecting the news actors.

Newspapers affect the overall understanding of common people about protest movements. Keeping that in consideration, it can be argued that the coverage by the two selected newspapers undermined people’s understanding of the protests by concentrating too much on the episodic coverage. Also, the prevalence of negative-tone articles in the two newspapers did not extend any favour to the protests.

REFERENCES


