

Radically Networked Societies: The case of the farmers' protests in India

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Abstract

This paper analyses India's ongoing farmer protests movement through the lens of the Radically Networked Societies (RNS) framework. Building on prior RNS-based case studies, the paper contends that this movement is marked by a combination of allied and opposing RNS groups. These RNS groups are characterised by the existence of overlapping identities operating across a mix of existing and instantaneous networks coalescing around their respective common causes of opposing the three farm laws enacted by the Union government and opposing this opposition itself. The ensuing interactions result in amplifying and sustaining adjacent and opposite RNS groups. The paper concludes that the hitherto weak bonds underlying spontaneous networked movements will be supported by hardening ties based on political identities that also transcend international boundaries. This can result in sharper responses by states which may be tempered by international pressure or scrutiny in the short term. Alternatively, an increasing number of protest movements for extended periods could lead to a flattening of responses and waning levels of attention.

Keywords: Networked Movements, Protests, Counter-Mobilisation

Publication Date: 07 May 2021

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I. Introduction

The period since 2009 is referred to as ‘the age of global mass protests’ with protest movements occurring at a ‘frequency, scope and size’ that are historically unprecedented (Brannen, Haig, and Schmidt 2020). Between 2009 and 2019, the number of recorded anti-government protests increased at an annual average of 11.5% (ibid). Rising internet penetration combined with the availability of communication tools such as social networks, encrypted messaging services, and collaboration suites have aided in facilitating mass mobilisation with lower friction than previous decades/phases that also witnessed a surge in mass protests.

Access to these tools has altered the traditional mobilisation versus counter-mobilisation dynamics as real-time communication/coordination unconstrained by distances have drastically reduced the time to mobilise (Pai and Kotasthane 2016) through interaction over spontaneously formed networks. As a result, states that operate hierarchically have started to adapt their responses to digitally networked movements (Tufekci 2014).

This paper analyses events and public discourse surrounding mobilisation and counter-mobilisation efforts instead of seeking to study the relative merits or demerits of the three farm laws themselves. Part II introduces the concept of Radically Networked Societies (RNS), which provides a framework to analyse networked movements as groups of individuals mobilising for an immediate cause, sharing a common identity that mobilise by coordinating using networks. Part III provides a background of the discourse surrounding the farmer protests in India in response to three farm laws enacted by GoI in September 2020. Part IV applies the RNS framework to the ongoing farmer protests in India. It explores three overlapping identity groups, a combination of three groupings of existing and spontaneous networks and their role in shaping the movement.

Part V considers counter-mobilisation actions, categorised as actions taken directly by the state and efforts to shape narratives. It also identifies a counter-RNS based on an existing, predominantly online network that is supportive of most state action. Part VI explores the interaction of these identified RNS groups both among adjacent and allied RNS as well as opposing RNS. It contends that these simultaneously mobilising and expanding groups also played a part in amplifying/sustaining the opposing groups. It concludes that political identity-based networks develop more robust bonds with time and will be a feature of political discourse across shifting and transient immediate causes. Part VII lists the implications of the perennial existence of hybrid RNS on the ability to mobilise, nature of state responses. It also concludes that with many of these networks transcending borders, states’ expectations to manage such movements as internal matters will conflict with greater international scrutiny.

It relies primarily on journalistic sources for two reasons. First, for the specific purpose of studying the nature of discourse, journalistic resources proved sufficient. Secondly, since the writing of this paper was contemporaneous with the events discussed, there was a paucity of academic sources that aligned with its objectives. The reliance on journalistic sources and public discourse introduces the risk that some unreported or underreported aspects may not be represented in the paper.

II. Radically Networked Societies framework

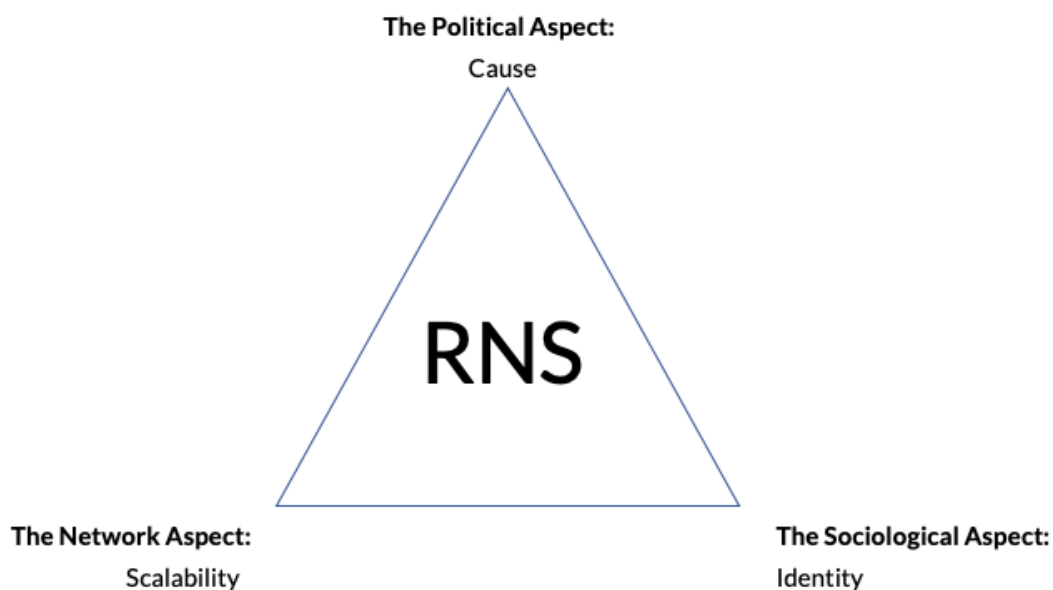
Radically Networked Societies (RNS) are defined as ‘a web of connected individuals possessing an identity (real or imagined) and motivated by a ‘common immediate cause’ (Pai and Kotasthane 2016).

RNS' scale of operation is the defining feature. The nature of communication used to support mobilisation can result in broader reach and circumvention/evasion of traditional counter-mobilisation responses (Kewalramani and Seth 2020). Note that 'radical' refers to the networks' depth and is not a descriptor of the mobilisation/protests themselves. i.e., 'radical elements'.

RNS movements have the following common traits (ibid):

- **Political Aspect:** Mobilisation occurs around a common immediate cause, which serves as a rallying point and protects the sociological aspect.
- **Sociological Aspect:** Participants within an RNS share a common identity (real or imagined). For internal solidarity to be maintained, they go through socialisation processes such as internalising common facts/myths.
- **Network Aspect:** The pace and scale of mobilisation is a crucial aspect of an RNS. The political and sociological factors are dependent on the depth of the network. Here, the internet as a medium in general, and the use of social networks, encrypted messaging services, collaboration suites, etc. specifically have had a profound effect on the way that mobilisation occurs.

Figure 1. Illustration of an RNS



Source: Liberty & Security in Radically Networked Societies

Such mobilisations, when they first occur, may also lack formal/informal organisational structures/decision-making processes ('ad hococracy') and a defined leader/set of leaders ('horizontalism') (Tufekci 2017). These qualities protect such movements from disruption through coercion or co-optation of their leadership. However, they simultaneously introduce weaknesses such as the possibility of a 'tactical freeze' marked by the inability to shift tactics and repeatedly arrive at a consensus required for multi-step processes such as negotiations (ibid).

By limiting itself to an 'immediate cause,' the framework positions it for utility in understanding short-term mobilising and counter-mobilising efforts rather than long-term collective action.

The framework lays significant emphasis on the role of the internet within the network aspect and does not engage explicitly with factors such as invitation (Schussman and Soule 2005) to protest, organisational membership (Anderson 2020) and strong ties (Schradie 2018) in protest participation.

As currently defined, the framework considers the sociological aspect primarily through the lens of identity. Prior work has stressed the role of a single identity in participation. There is room to expand its scope to consider the role of intersectional identity (Fisher, Dow, and Ray 2017). Future work should also seek to broaden the sociological aspect to explore factors beyond identity.

This paper aims to analyse the mobilisation in response to the Union Government enacting the three farm laws and the resulting counter-mobilisation between November 2020, and March 2021, through the RNS framework's lens.

III. Background

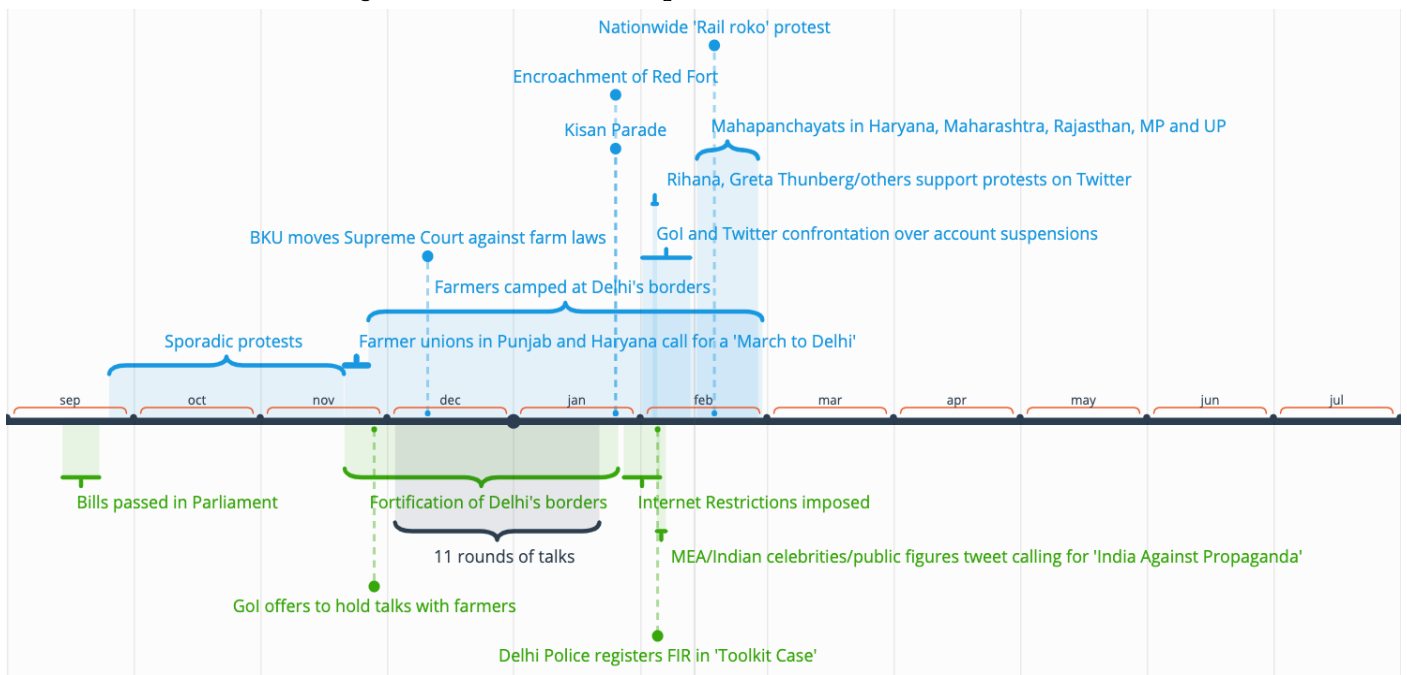
A critical analysis of the three laws at the centre of protests is outside the scope of this paper since it does not aim to explore the relative merits and demerits of the laws themselves. Nevertheless, the context surrounding their enactment is relevant to the various reactions their passage has brought forth.

The salient features of each of these laws are (PRS Legislative Research 2020):

- *The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020* will allow 'intra-state and inter-state trade of farmers' produce outside the physical premises of Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) markets' (ibid)
- *The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act 2020* will facilitate contract farming through an agreement between a farmer and sponsor (buyer) along with instituting a three-tier dispute settlement mechanism (ibid).
- *The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020* amends the existing Essential Commodities Act to limit the powers of the Union government to regulate storage only under extraordinary circumstances (ibid).

In June 2020, the Union government promulgated three ordinances with the stated benefits of empowering farmers, a transference of risk from farmers to sponsors, attracting private sector investments to enhance supply chains, and other benefits (PIB India 2020). Reactions to the ordinances were swift and polarised, in the form of protests (The Hindu Special Correspondent 2020), criticism (Jakhar 2020) and support (Patnaik and Roy 2020). In September 2020, the ordinances were replaced by corresponding bills that were tabled and passed in Parliament under contentious circumstances (Nair 2020). Protests ensued in different parts of the country (Times of India 2020). They intensified in late November, especially after calls for a march to Delhi were supported by over 470 farm outfits (Express News Service 2020). Farmers from states around Delhi (Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) would march towards Delhi. In contrast, those in other states would hold protests at state and district levels (ibid). While the intensification period does coincide with harvest season for Kharif crops, initial statements by protesting farmers indicated that they were prepared for durations ranging from two (Mohammad Ghazali 2020) to six months (Singh 2020).

Figure 2. Timeline from September 2020 until March 2021



Source: Compiled by author.

Note: Blue indicates events where mobilising groups were participants; green indicates actions taken by or in support of counter-mobilising groups/GoI/state governments.

With the protests crossing the 100-day mark (Express Web Desk 2021) in early March, some key developments were the build-up on police and paramilitary forces on highways leading to Delhi (Niharika Sharma 2021); eleven rounds of talks between representatives of farmer unions and GoI between early December and late January made limited progress with the latter offering to withdraw on penalties for stubble burning and the Electricity Amendment Bill (A. Sharma 2020) as well as agreeing to suspend implementation of the laws for 18 months, (Vishwa Mohan and Kamal 2021) [whether it could actually do this was questioned] (Arpan Chaturvedi 2021)] none of which were accepted by farmer unions; after initially denying permission, a Kisan Gantantra Parade (Nikita Sharma 2021) on designated routes was allowed, however, the day was marred by clashes, violence, fatalities and the storming of the red fort (Amit Chaturvedi 2021); subsequently additional deployment of security forces was accompanied by internet restrictions. While the outbreak of violence was a significant setback, the movement has since recovered (Iftikhar 2021) with several 'Mahapanchayats' across Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, (Tribune News Service 2021), Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, with plans for more in Karnataka and Odisha (FPJ Web Desk 2021).

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In early February, Rihanna, Greta Thunberg and many international figures drew attention to the farmer protests in India. India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) reacted by labelling this propaganda (BBC News 2021), and this was followed by several Indian celebrities posting content on Twitter calling for unity and delivering the message ‘India Against Propaganda’ (Times of India 2021). Thunberg also initially tweeted out and then deleted a link to a shared Google Docs file containing a ‘toolkit’ (Pandey 2021) which sparked off the ‘toolkit’ investigation to identify and punish India-based collaborators of the document. This event consumed several news cycles throughout the month.

Criticisms of various forms have followed the laws in their journey from ordinances to acts. These are:

1. Introduction the bills as ordinances while the Union Parliament was not in session.
2. The passage of the bills in Parliament with inadequate discussions in less than ten days.
3. Ignoring opposition demands in the Rajya Sabha for sending the bills to a select committee and a tallied vote in favour of a vote by voice.
4. Perception amongst farmers that the laws will result in an erosion of state-backed benefits and security leading to a concentration of power in the hands of private industry
5. Contention that the bills represented an overreach by the Union government for legislation that should have been in the domain of state governments.

Thus, the demands of the protesting farmer groups included a repeal of the three laws; legal safeguards that minimum support prices would not be withdrawn and maintained at levels recommended by the Swaminathan Panel Report; withdrawal of the Electricity (Amendment) Bill (FPJ Web Desk 2020). Other demands were reducing diesel prices, an end to fines and prison sentences for stubble burning (ibid). Additional demands pertaining to the release of political prisoners have also been made (Mahaprashasta 2020). Meanwhile, the Union government has remained steadfast in its claim over the question of authority to legislate on these subjects and made the case that the laws will lead to beneficial outcomes. It has also characterised any opposition to the laws across a spectrum ranging from ill-informed, motivated to outright malicious, even stating in the Parliament that specific flaws with the bills have not been raised (ANI 2021b). Supporters of the reforms have likened them to ‘90s era liberalisation’ efforts.

These fundamental disagreements over the legitimacy of the laws, the means employed to ensure their passage, their stated benefits versus anticipated outcomes have resulted in a series of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation efforts to further each sides objectives and narratives. In turn, these efforts have had the dual effects of supporting adjacent groups and galvanising opposing groups. Subsequent sections of the paper will explore these dynamics.

IV. The movement through the RNS framework

The mobilisation in opposition to the three farm laws took the form of overlapping RNS composed of different identities (real or imagined) and networks. These different identities were not always distinct from one another. Each of these RNS interacted within themselves and influenced other RNS that were a part of the same movement.

The traits, according to the RNS framework were:

- *Political Aspect/Immediate Cause:* Opposition to the Union government enacting the three farm laws is the *immediate* and overarching cause for the movement. There are two broad categories the nature of opposition can be classified into, resulting in causes within the overarching immediate cause. First, opposition to the content of the laws or the forecasted outcomes, with the latter playing a more prominent role, e.g., weakening governmental support for farmers, withdrawal of sops such as minimum support prices (MSPs), dismantling APMCs, thereby strengthening private corporations resulting in bargaining power imbalances. The second category is how the bills were enacted. There is scope to further identify sub-causes within this. Based on how the bills were passed in Parliament under controversial circumstances, limited discussions and refusals to refer the bills to committees. Further, the opposition was also based on the perception that GoI did not make the necessary efforts to bring stakeholders such as farmer unions and state governments on board. Groups/individuals mobilising based on the second cause may have supported the intentions behind reforms themselves but were not in favour of the means used to push them through.
- *Sociological Aspect/Identity:* Three broad identity groups (real or imagined) can be identified based on prevalent public discourse. First, an agrarian/farmer lifestyle identity that is rooted in 'new agrarian politics', past farmer agitations (Bentall and Corbridge 1996) and the idea of the farmer as 'annadata' (provider). This pertains to a phenomenon that is often referred to in the press as 'Bharat versus India'. Its manifestation specific to this movement was visible in a documentary film about the protests where an interviewee farmer expressed opposition to 'Digital India' (The Lallantop 2020) while voicing his frustration with the government. Multiple references have also been made to participants having the required patience (NH Political Bureau 2020) for a long struggle because of their farming background (Financial Times 2021). This identity group includes farmers and farming-adjacent occupations, e.g., labourers, and 'arthiyas'. It is further supported by an assumed adversarial relationship between 'small farmers' and 'large corporations'.

Multiple identity types also overlapped across the group. Both religious and caste-based identities played a role in the mobilisation among participants from Sikh and Jat communities (Anand 2020). Notably, the Dalit community, which is heavily represented among farm labourers, has also mobilised in favour of the protests (PTI 2021c). Further, the intensity of the protests in their nascent stages in Punjab and Haryana also lent a regional identity going back to the 'green revolution' where farmers of these states were credited with providing food for the rest of the country (Frayer 2021). While present throughout the movement, gender-based identities were in focus sporadically - in the early stages (Bakshi 2020) and around International Women's Day (PTI 2021d).

Second, their progeny, who may no longer be directly involved in farming as an occupation, was also a visible identity group through the protests. This group transcended international borders as many members of the Indian diaspora also mobilised over the internet, relying heavily on social media platforms. There was also a basis in religious and regional identities as Sikh and Punjabi communities played an active role. An illustrative example of this was the observed trend among Sikh/Punjabi origin entertainers of posting content aligning themselves with the protests in the aftermath of singer Rihanna's tweet calling attention to the movement (Mishra et al. 2021). Note that progeny still in farming and farming-adjacent professions would be constituents of the first identity group.

The third identity relates to individuals/groups/entities who self-identify as 'Liberal'. This label is often attributed/misattributed in contemporary discourse. However, in this paper, the term is not meant

as a complementary or pejorative descriptor. It aims to capture a broad identity-type that classifies its own political identity as favouring individual rights and social justice in opposition to what it considers state support for majoritarianism, exclusion, chauvinism, and discrimination. This identity group broadened the support base for the movement. At first, limited to India and those outside India with an active interest in Indian affairs, it then expanded to a more global audience, significantly aided by a series of tweets from Rihanna, Greta Thunberg, and others.

○ *Network Aspect/Scalability:* The network aspect of the movement can be considered based on three groupings:

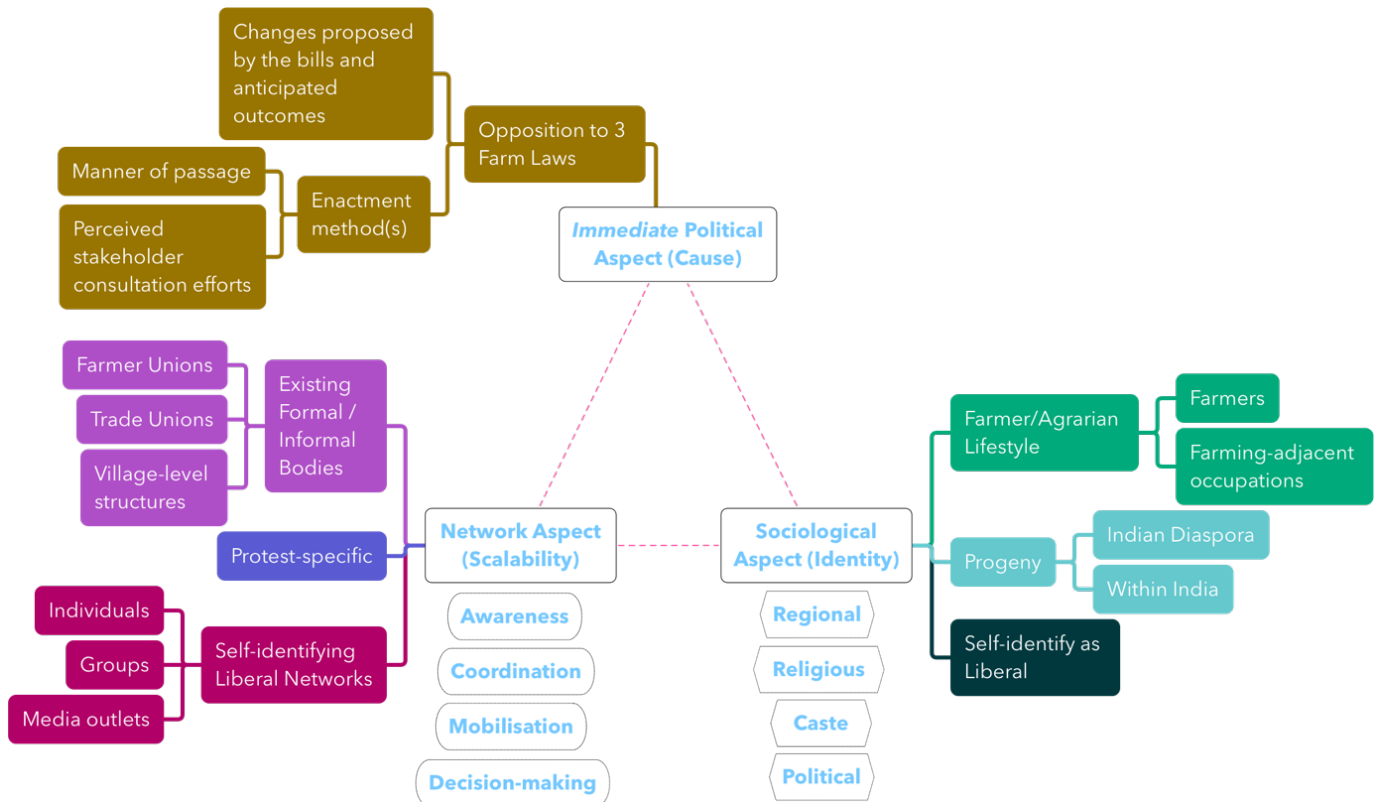
First, existing formal, semi-formal, and informal organisations/unions have constituted the core network infrastructure. The 'All India Kisan Sangharsh Committee' (AIKSC) was formed in 2017 and lists around 150 member organisations across the country. Many constituent organisations were functioning before 2017 and can be considered to have organisational capacity, a hierarchical structure and selected or elected leadership. Such unions have also played roles in electoral politics in the past (MN 2021). Protest instruments such as 'rasta roko' (roadblocks), 'rail roko' (railway blockades) and mobilisation events like 'mahapanchayats' have all been used in farmer agitations of the past. Peripheral groups such as transporters that expressed support for the movement also communicated these through existing/established representative bodies (Tribune News Service 2020). Efforts to raise awareness and communication have involved posting updates through social media properties (handles/pages) in multiple formats (text-based, live-video, etc.) and addressing regular press conferences.

Second, protest-specific responses ranging from the formation of new umbrella organisations to internet-supported mobilisation. The 'Samyukta Kisan Morcha' (SKM) is an umbrella group formed in November 2020 with 40 farmer unions. The 'Kisan Ekta Morcha' family of social media properties created in December 2020 across platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube functioned as an 'IT cell' of the movement (Sircar 2020). Volunteer initiated efforts to provide news to participants, like Trolley Times (print and digital) (Ramani 2020), or fact-checking misleading information, like tractor2twitter (Vibhor Mohan 2021) have also relied on the internet and social media properties. Participants also used encrypted messaging platforms such as Whatsapp to communicate with families that stayed behind in their respective villages (Sarfaraz 2021). By and large, the networks covered four functions – awareness, mobilisation, coordination and decision-making.

Third, an existing ecosystem of groups/individuals that self-identify as liberals. This network is held together by 'liberal bonds'. The bonds within this grouping can vary from weak to strong in terms of strength and have formed over years of iterative engagement on and off social media platforms. Nevertheless, interaction over social media platforms is essential in this network's width and mobilising potential. Boundaries of this network are not well-defined as participants can voice support or exit depending on causes, though they are hardening over time.

Thus, the network aspect relied on a hybrid model encapsulating interactions between online and offline organisational networks (Anderson 2020), and responses by existing networks/organisations and protest-specific responses/organisations.

Figure 3. Superimposing multiple identities and networks on the RNS framework



Source: Illustrated by the author

V. Opposing the Opposition

Responses to the opposition against the three farm laws can be classified into two categories, direct actions taken by the state and narrative-shaping responses. While the Union Government and representatives of the farmer unions are negotiating, broadly, the opposition to the movement has taken the shape of discrediting and increasing costs of participation in and supporting it.

Direct actions taken by the state: The primary actors in this category are internal security forces such as police and paramilitary forces, and administration of the departments of Home Affairs at Union and State (for affected states) levels. Police and paramilitary forces have responded to road-blockades/mobilisation/marches by farmers with their own blockades. Barbed-wire fences, roadblocks, heavy vehicles, trenches have been utilised at various state borders around Delhi (Rahar 2020). Within Delhi, local buses were also deployed as roadblocks (A. Srivastava 2021). Law enforcement agencies even used tear gas and water cannons at various times (Niharika Sharma 2021).

Apart from physical obstruction, the police denied permission (Express News Service 2021a) for planned marches by farmer unions in different parts of the country (Jagran News Desk 2021). Many of these responses were used even before a splinter-group hoisted flags at the Red Fort in New Delhi on January 26, 2021, and a temporary escalation of violence (Niharika Sharma 2021). The Uttar Pradesh state administration has imposed Section 144 for extended durations (Joseph 2021) (IANS 2020). Inaction, too, may have been deliberate in some instances where members of the police chose not to intervene as counter-mobilising non-state actors engaged on the ground (Zubair and Sinha 2021).

Authorities also imposed Internet Shutdowns in parts of Delhi [Union Home Ministry] (India Today Web Desk 2021a) and large parts of Haryana [Haryana state government] (Agrawal 2021) after January 26, 2021, with the stated intention of maintaining public order. This response tactic was employed sparingly since many international celebrities drew attention to the movement through social media posts. Though a causal link cannot be established, internet restrictions in other parts of the country were revoked (Ehsan 2021) as levels of scrutiny and criticism grew in the immediate aftermath.

The Union Government even directed social media platforms to take down content and suspend accounts. This instruction led to a public tussle with Twitter, during which accounts belonging to activists, politicians, journalists and press publications were also affected (Biswas 2021). The relevant sections of the Information Technology Act can be invoked with a confidentiality requirement, so a complete list of the accounts/content targeted is not available. Twitter has made some of this information on the Lumen Database. However, the lists provided did not include the handles of accounts like The Caravan magazine, which were known to be affected (Deep 2021). Media reports have attributed claims that action was taken against 97% of the accounts to unnamed sources within GoI (Doval 2021). Meanwhile, YouTube too reportedly took action against content based on legal requests by GoI (India Today Web Desk 2021b) (Kaur 2021).

Narrative-shaping: A non-exhaustive, paraphrased set of narrative pegs used to discredit the protests follow: Farmers are being misled (Tewary 2020); only farmers from certain regions are protesting (Zee Media Bureau 2021b); only wealthy farmers are protesting; middlemen are driving protests (Punj 2021); the presence of pizza at some protests (Times Now Digital 2021); farmer union leaders are ‘unelected’ (Agarwal 2021); donation of foot massagers by a foreign entity (RVCJ News 2020); the protests are being financed/supported and encouraged by Sikh separatist groups (Shukla 2021); protestors are rioters who want to vandalise public property (PTI 2021a); many individuals present at protest sites have been hired for a fee (ANI 2021a); members of one minority community are posing as members of another minority community and participating in the protests (Webqoof 2020); Rihanna, Greta Thunberg, et al. were paid to tweet in support of the protests (News18.COM 2021a); activists are colluding with foreigners to ‘break the country’ (Zee Media Bureau 2021a).

Apart from raising suspicions about the movement’s goals, in some instances, the narratives went further and advocated for violent intervention by the police. Examples of these include calling on the Delhi Police to baton-charge and even shoot protestors (BuzzFeed News 2021). Organs of the state have actively engaged in narrative-framing attempts too. At press conferences, Union Cabinet ministers have alluded to conspiracies (H. Sharma and Singh 2020) and prodded the media to determine who was ‘behind the protests’ (PTI 2020b). The Ministry of External Affairs reacted sharply to tweets by international celebrities and activists drawing attention to the protests (The Hindu Special Correspondent 2021a). Further, while investigating a collaborative document containing calls-to-action, the Delhi Police have cast several aspersions regarding the ‘motives’ behind creating it and also sought to link it to on-the-ground violence on January 26 2021 (Livemint 2021).

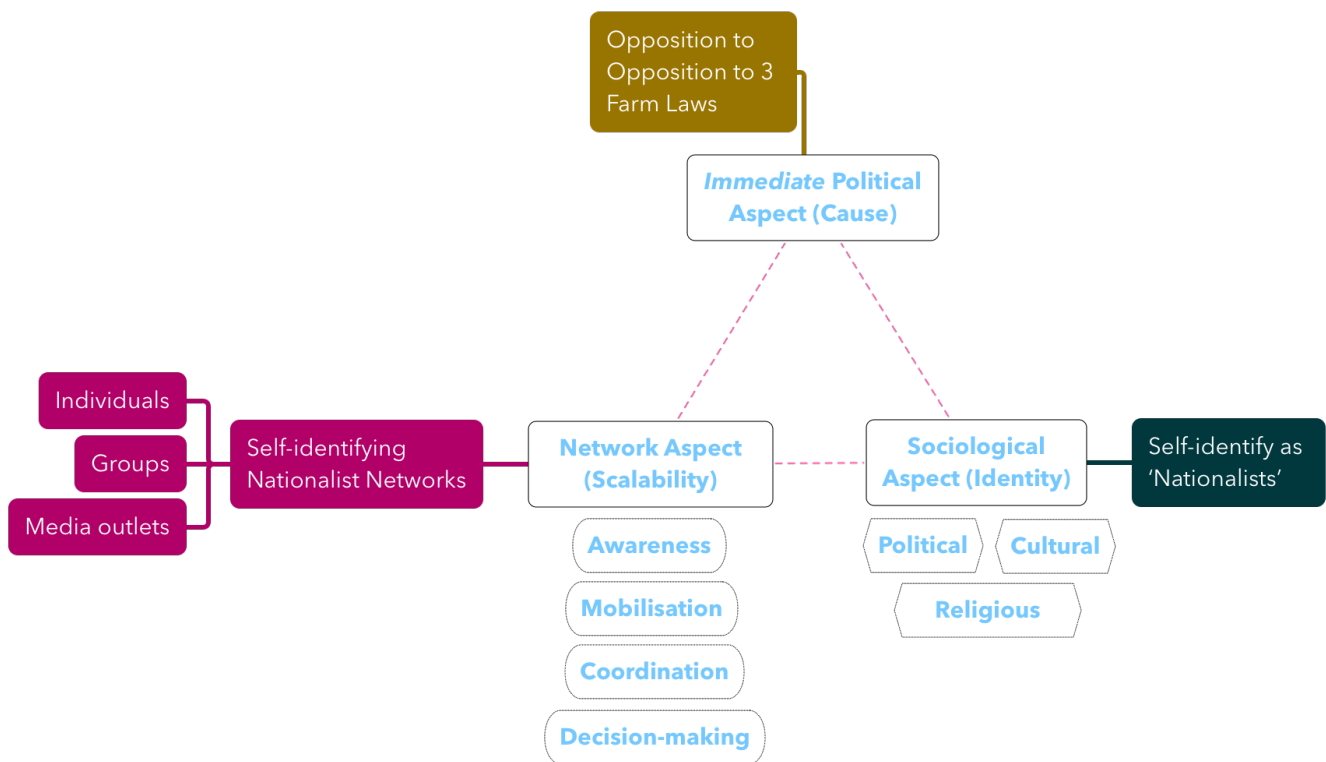
Efforts by GoI to allay concerns about forecasted outcomes by pointing out that the laws do not advocate for dismantling APMCs or sunseting the MSP regime have met with limited success.

Due to the overlapping nature of narrative amplification mechanics, a clear distinction between state and non-state actors in this regard is not feasible. Additionally, statements made by politicians belonging to political parties but not office-bearers in any of the organs of the state are in a grey area between state and non-state efforts. Similarly, influencers from the right-wing social media ecosystem often receive engagement from different actors, including politicians and publications, over and above their followers.

Messages advocating these narratives spread through social media platforms, encrypted messaging services, mainstream television and print news outlets, digital news outlets, including far-right and pink-slime portals. This cross-medium interaction and amplification are not unique to these counter mobilisation efforts, however.

A counter-RNS: Drawing on the RNS-framework, the non-state participants can be classified as a radically networked society as well. It is populated by individuals/groups/entities that self-identify (sociological aspect) as ‘nationalists’ (political identity) and ‘guardians of Indian Culture’ (cultural identity) with the immediate common goal of opposing the opposition to the three farm laws (political aspect). An argument can be made about the role of a religious identity which is often positioned as overlapping heavily with the political and cultural identities.

Figure 4. Illustration of the counter-RNS



Source: Illustrated by the author

Qualitatively, the bonds within these networks appear to be stronger than those within the ‘self-identifying as liberal’ equivalents. These networks’ boundaries are also more well defined even as the immediate causes they coalesce around shift periodically, often even on a day-to-day basis. Here too, various existing networks are in place that have evolved through years of narrative amplification and shaping activities extending across online and offline spaces. Again, interaction and coordination over digital platforms are crucial to their operations. New participants flocking to this RNS enter a positive feedback loop of information consumption. In limited cases, this participation can also amplify their messages or the new participants themselves if they co-opt existing narratives.

The ‘toolkit’ investigation exemplifies these overlapping responses (actions by the state and narrative shaping). The Delhi Police responded by registering an FIR for sedition against the toolkit creators (hindustantimes.com 2021). It sought the assistance of Google and social media companies (Express News

Service 2021b), and reports suggest that at least some of them did comply (Klein 2021). Three India-based activists, Disha Ravi, Nikita Jacob and Shantanu, were eventually identified (News18.COM 2021b). Ravi was even arrested from her residence in Bengaluru by the Delhi Police (ibid). While Delhi Police's narrative shaping efforts are already covered in this section, these developments also presented an opportunity for the counter-RNS to escalate their narrative shaping efforts. False claims about Ravi surfaced and were shared on social media platforms (Alphonso 2021b). News outlets repeated and amplified claims of a conspiracy against India (R. K. Srivastava 2021).

VI. Effects of Overlapping RNS

Parts IV and V have demonstrated the presence of overlapping identities, networks and opposing RNS' drawing from the public discourse surrounding the three farm laws. Elementary insights from systems theory suggest that interaction between systems results in reinforcing or balancing loops (Meadows 2008). Using the same theoretical concept, this section explores overlapping identities and networks across the various RNS and their potential impact on the movement. As the idea of overlapping RNS implies and is evident from the rest of the section, it is not always feasible to draw clear distinctions between them while observing these interactions. The effects of interaction among adjacent RNS and across opposing RNS co-occurred as existing networks sprang into action and subsequently expanded.

Interaction among adjacent RNS: The overlap of liberal (political), Sikh (religious) and Punjabi (religious) identities appear to have played a significant role in mobilising the large sections of the Indian diaspora. The coming together of diaspora groups and non-Indian origin self-identifying liberal identities in the US also seem to have led to an 'internationalisation' of the movement exemplified by protest events around the world, and even the adoption and subsequent import of slogans such as 'No Farmers, no food' and 'No Farmers, no food, no future' (The Quint 2020).

The significant presence of the Sikh identity could have played a role in the interventions by politicians whose constituencies reflected this identity, such as statements by Canadian PM Justin Trudeau (Bhattacharyya 2020); Leicester East MP Claudia Webbe (India Today Web Desk 2021c) or; the UK parliament's discussion on the farm laws (The Hindu Special Correspondent 2021b). A letter signed by 36 MPs in the UK noted that 'issue of particular concern to Sikhs in the UK and those linked to the Punjab' (Sonwalkar 2020). The Punjabi-Sikh identity was also a factor among Indian-origin public figures who mobilised in favour of the farmers' movement after Rihanna's tweet (Mishra et al., 2021). This identity group may have also led to the involvement of Yasmin Qureshi [Manchester], Gurratan Singh [Ontario] and Jim Costa [California], whose constituencies have a significant Punjabi population (ibid).

Within Indian political discourse, the liberal (political) identity also coalesced around the movement in support. First, it provided amplification for the cause and subsequently sought to defend it from counter-RNS. Its direct influences may have also led to the inclusion of demands to free political prisoners by farmer groups (R. M. Chaturvedi 2020). As referenced earlier, this broad and loose identity group does transcend national borders. Multiple international celebrities' decision to speak out in favour of the farmers can also be attributed to their identification with a liberal brand of personal politics. For all the questions raised about Rihanna's motivation for choosing to post about the movement (Bhardwaj 2021), it was unlikely to be an action she would have taken had it not been in sync with aspects of her political and social activism (Mokoena 2015), even if considered performative. Notably, the news article she posted

touched upon both the farmer movement and the response of the Indian state in the form of imposing restrictions on the internet.

Statements by farmer unions/groups in the United States of America can be considered a combination of the amplification provided by the liberal identity and an American agrarian identity (IANS 2021). While generally distinct from the Indian agrarian identity, the latter has similarities, such as an adversarial stance towards 'large corporations' (Pain 2021). Within India, the agrarian identity did unify groups across class, caste and religious identities in the form of farmer-labourer unity, Jat-Muslim unity, and others. (Sinha 2020) (MN 2021); regional identities of farmers from Punjab and Haryana who compete for water (PTI 2020a); occupations where farmers are believed to be at odds with 'arthiyas' (PNS 2020).

Interaction across opposing RNS: Since mobilising RNS and counter-RNS formed concurrently, it may not be possible to establish a chronology of interactions. However, various instances show that cross-RNS interaction also contributed to the expansion of the different RNS involved. As narratives of the movement being composed of 'radical' and 'violent' 'elements' by presenting false or out-of-context information spread, members of the self-identifying liberal networks appeared to consolidate their support for the movement. Members of these networks include individuals, media outlets, and public intellectuals too. The reactions to narratives about the movement being led by 'misled farmers', 'wealthy farmers', and middlemen followed similar cycles. The narrative about separatist forces was used as evidence of progressive 'other'isation of minority groups. Since this was also an attack on the Sikh identity, it possibly contributed to higher participation levels among diaspora groups that shared this identity.

The mobilising networks' expansion was met with growing counter-RNS across individuals, public figures, influencers, and media outlets. The response and simultaneous narrative shaping activities spread over social media posts, television news debates and op-ed pages. The inclusion of a demand to release political prisoner served as an indication of a 'leftist conspiracy'. Moreover, climate activists' supporting a movement whose demands included the repeal of an anti-pollution ordinance was used to highlight inconsistencies among the movement's activists and supporters. International celebrities tweeting about the farmer protests within a short time were seen as signs of coordination and a conspiracy, and an interference in internal affairs. A swift counter-mobilisation involving several Indian celebrities positioned using similar freshly minted hashtags as opposition to 'propaganda' followed.

Immediately, mobilising groups used this to point out that an 'obviously coordinated effort' was employed to counter what was a 'perceived coordinated exercise' and chastised those who participated. On January 26, 2020, an outbreak of violence led to competing narratives of injured protests versus injured police forces. Opposing RNS called for violent state action (Kaul 2021) accompanied by references (both veiled and overt) to anti-minority riots (Alphonso 2021a) from the past and accused the state of planning a genocide (Sakshi Post 2021). Mobilising groups (local and international) responded to perceived negative media coverage by instituting their information dissemination, fact-checking mechanisms (Yadav 2021).

Though not exhaustive, these instances indicate a common theme of interpreting (whether genuine or with malice) opposing RNS actions as an attack (whether real or imagined), leading to entrenchment and expansion of the respective RNS.

Role of existing networks: The presence of existing networks on the mobilising (farmer groups, self-identifying liberal networks) and the counter-mobilising (self-identifying nationalist) have significantly

shaped the movement. The effects may have varied across aspects such as raising awareness, coordination, execution and decision-making.

Formal/informal/semi-formal farmer unions and organisations have played a vital role in the movement. Some of these umbrella groups were formed earlier [AIKSC], while some were created specifically for this movement [SKM]. Several groups of various sizes constituted these umbrella groups. The constituent groups already had some hierarchical structures in place. Thus, the larger spontaneous movement had a core with some hierarchical elements, which meant that some organisational capacity existed, unlike purely spontaneous mobilisations. The imposition of internet shutdowns did not obstruct the movement as much as expected, implying coordination and execution capacities were not adequately disrupted.

Similarly, organising ‘mahapanchayats’ in different parts of the country also speak to coordination and execution nous developed during past agitations. Advance communication of protest plans, formal representatives at negotiations with government representatives, limited splintering indicate that decision-making capabilities have continued to function. Typically, such hierarchies expose networked movements to infighting risks, splintering among factions, and governments co-opting some leaders. So far, the farm bill opposition movement has succeeded in limiting these. Crucially, the existence of these capacities could have helped the movement stave of ‘tactical freeze’ – inability to change course after the initial expansion phase (Tufekci 2017). Farmer union leaders are looking to build on this by announcing their intentions to march to the Parliament (PTI 2021b) and continue the movement in West Bengal since political leaders are focused on assembly elections in the state (PTI 2021e).

Existing networks cleaved along political identities amplified and supported the movement and state responses based on their alignment. Like the anti-CAA protests, this played out across social media posts and live streams by framing news stories, television news debates, and op-ed pages. Importantly, these networks are perennial with quickly changing short-term causes under an overarching political alignment. While not strictly hierarchical, each of these networks is characterised by the co-existence of accounts with large follower bases (typically political leaders, public figures, media professionals/journalists and influencers) followed by layers of smaller accounts with successively reducing levels of influence or follower counts. In most cases, these are directly proportional though not always. They engage in daily cross-network tactical narrative battles, often combining organic and inorganic/automated/inauthentic activity.

VII. Implications

Prior analyses of networked movements based on the RNS framework have identified the challenges associated with the liberty versus security trade-off and hierarchical government structures’ ability to respond to rapidly mobilising groups (Pai and Kotasthane 2016) (Kewalramani and Seth 2020). Expanding this framework’s use to look at networked movements as composed of multiple, overlapping radically networked societies brings up additional challenges for the state and society to address.

The combination of recurring mass protests and expanding networks and alliances over time can result in deeper bonds and improved organisational capacities. With successive iterations, the network movements will be able to build greater resilience to inherent issues such as ‘tactical freeze’, commonly deployed state responses and improve.

Faced with this increasing resilience, states could further escalate existing response pathways such as use-of-force and exemplary, punitive action against participants of networked movements to deter broader and future participation. In the specific case of the farmers' protests, so far, this has taken the form of counter-blockades using tactics such as digging trenches, installing barbed wire fences, deploying heavy vehicles like public transport buses or construction equipment as barricades. Any attempts by mobilising groups to circumvent can be portrayed as aggressive behaviour and, therefore, a pretext for the use of force.

In addition, states will seek to establish greater control over digital spaces of interaction through regulation and surveillance. Internet restrictions in the capital adjoining areas, the public face-off with Twitter, legal requests to YouTube, Google, Zoom, Instagram (specifically in the 'toolkit' investigation) demonstrate this. Hybrid counter-mobilisation (online and on-the-ground) by the state and individuals/groups/entities aligned is also likely to be encouraged. This was evident in the overlapping use of narrative pegs among ministers, members of the BJP and participants of the counter-RNS and instances of police indifference to on-the-ground actions by the counter-RNS.

The existing political identity-based networks are always 'ready-to-go' and quickly enter into a state of conflict comprised of many simultaneously occurring engagements ranging from well-reasoned, good-faith arguments to whataboutery, ad hominem attacks, sealioning, overstating or minimising perceived harms and outright fabrication/falsification of information. These conflicts often overlap resulting in perpetual cycles of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation even as immediate causes shift.

Governments will also have to continuously straddle expectations for fast and decisive action with the essential democratic practice of consensus building. Once networked movements take root, the continuing ossification of political identity-based networks will result in diminishing incentives for negotiation/compromise.

With the identity-based networks transcending international boundaries due to various interacting identity-types and global information flows enabled in particular by social media platforms, encrypted messaging services, such networked protests immediately capture attention across the world. Thus, states should expect greater scrutiny and sharper criticism of their response to it, as well as their track record of dealing with similar movements in the past. As a result, the costs of relying on attrition over time will increase. Conversely, repeated eruptions of protests with short/no intervals over time can also lead to a flattening of global responses and attention. In which case, the costs of relying on attrition may gradually decrease.

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