

# Coverage of Farmers' Issues in Newspapers during COVID-19: An Analysis of Major Kannada Dailies

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## Abstract

The largest livelihood source of India is agriculture with its allied sectors. COVID-19 pandemic has badly hit on the economy of many sectors, including the food market across the world. Farmers struggled to market their products and get support from the government during COVID-19. Many farmers protested against the government by destroying their agricultural products throughout the country. Not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also many other reasons grinding farmers of this country, such as lack of agrarian Labour, drought, middle man interference, policies by government, seeds, fertilizer, floods and natural calamities, etc. As per the N. C. R. B. Report, 10,281 farmers committed suicide in 2019; among them, 5,957 were cultivators, and 4,324 were agricultural labourers. In India, dry land agriculture occupies 68 per cent area, and 42 per cent of Indian land is facing drought as per DEWS 2019.

Karnataka is also diverse in its geographical area, and many farmers' of this state depend on rain-fed agriculture. The state has been affected many times by floods and natural calamities in recent years. Even farmers' in Karnataka are not getting reasonable support prices from the government for their agricultural products. State farmers faced many problems during the COVID-19 pandemic due to lockdown. The media covers some of these issues, and some are not. Hence, in this background, the present study aimed to explore the farmers' subjects covered in Kannada significant dailies, the presentation of the problems and which newspaper emphasizes more farmers' issues. The researcher used the content analysis method to find answers to the study's objectives. The present study would help to understand how the media is projecting the farmers' issues.

**Keywords:** Coverage; Farmers; Issues; Newspapers; COVID-19

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## Introduction

Many economic sectors have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among that, agriculture is one of the prominent sectors. In India, 50 per cent of working labourers are involved in agricultural activities, and 68 per cent of household income is dependent on agriculture. Because of COVID-19, they are suffering from marketing their product and earning money for livelihood [1].

The agricultural system of this country faced many issues after the independence. The green revolution in India has brought

a massive change in agriculture. The government promotes hybrid seeds and fertiliser to achieve the required food to feed the country's population. After that habit of conserving seeds among farmers decreased slowly, and they depended on private companies to get hybrid seeds to get high yields. The soil started unfertilized due to the heavy use of fertilizers and chemicals in hybrid farming. Today there were many farmers moment started to save our traditional seeds, which have a unique ability to grow in the native or local climate [2].

Climate change, such as natural calamities and floods, also continuously damaged the crops and farmers' restless efforts.

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Even though various programmers such as renting agricultural equipment, Kisan call centers to guide the farmers, PM Kisan Maan Dhan Yojana, etc., farmers struggle to get seeds and fertilizers quickly. After growing the crops, also he faced the better prize for his products.

Since its beginning, newspapers have played a vital role in drawing public and administration attention to many social issues. In the same way, newspapers also considered the farmers' issue as a significant issue in India and covered many farmers' issues. Journalists like P. Sainath of PARI and many other contemporary journalists like Priyanka Kakodkar, Editor (Special Projects) of The Times of India, working on farmer's issues in India [3].

## Statement of the Problem

This research aimed to show how the newspapers have played a key role in capturing the attention of educated and government officials to get a realistic narration of an issue in the present society. The researcher sought an answer to the following question: "Were newspapers able to capture the farmer's problems during the COVID-19? What type of farmers' issues was covered more in Kannada Newspapers?"

## Review of Literature

**Jackson 2021**, in his research paper "Media coverage of a pandemic's impacts on farmers and implications for agricultural resilience and adaptation", found that the national newspapers cover the issue in ways that differ from the agricultural trade journals. Specifically, newspapers were more likely to highlight disruptions to traditional commodity markets and increased demand for direct sales than A.T.J.s.

**Jenith Sekar 2020**, observed in their research article titled "Mainstream Media and Twitter Narratives: a case study of the farmers' protest" that, though all the mainstream media organizations construct their Twitter narratives around the farmers' protest, their content and intent vary according to their agenda setting priorities [4].

**Gawade 2017**, in their research article titled 'Analysis of Digital Media Compatibility with Farmers in Maharashtra and Recommendation of Service Provider Design Framework E-Krishimitra', recommended developing the mobile app and website to help more to farmers in day-to-day life. And opined that the barrier of language which causes major implementation issues in the Indian sub-continent.

**Nyareza 2012**, in their research article titled 'Use of community radio to communicate agricultural information to Zimbabwe's peasant farmers' concluded that community radio plays a credible role in transforming the information from agricultural research institution to the local language of a peasant farmer. This will help the farmers to develop agrarian knowledge.

**Jijina 2016**, I.C.T. and social media can contribute significantly to the agriculture sector for better production, marketing and thereby sustained development. Barriers to using social media include a lack of poor and costly internet connection and a lack of awareness and expertise. Systematic training, cheaper thin clients such as mobile phones, ubiquitous internet connectivity

and availability of apps with ergonomically designed interfaces will improve the current usage of I.C.T. in general and social media in particular for the betterment of agriculture, leading to a better life for farmers in villages.

## Scope of the Study

The present study would help to understand how the media is projecting the farmers' issues and whether the government was able to respond positively to the farmer's issues.

## Objectives

This study aims to explore the farmers' issues covered in Kannada's significant dailies, the presentation of the problems, the space given to the farmer's issues and which newspaper emphasizes more on farmers' issues.

## Methodology

The present study adopted the Content analysis method to find answers to the objectives. The analysis used the five parameters to analyses (Frequency of farmers' news in newspapers, photos covered, which issue covered more, number of articles published, and government response to farmers' problem). The research is descriptive and interpretative in nature. The researcher took two popular Kannada newspapers, Prajavani and Vijayakarnataka, for the study, from May 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, to July 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

The newspapers taken for the content analysis are Karnataka's leading newspapers with the highest readership in the state. Both newspapers have reported various issues, including farmers' problems during the second wave of COVID-19. During COVID-19, the inverted migration took place. Many people lost their jobs and returned to their villages to lead safe lives. Because of the inverse migration, villages get infected, and COVID-19 started spreading among village communities. Newspapers also focused on the COVID-19 situation in second-tier cities and how farmers face problems conducting agricultural activities. Shortage of seeds, poor quality seeds, unavailability of fertilizers, transport and market issues were firmly covered in these newspapers during the pandemic (**Table 1**).

Both the newspapers covered farmers' issues very frequently during 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of COVID-19 in Karnataka, but Vijayakarnataka was covered more regularly (80%) than Prajavani (67%). And Vijayakarnataka covered more articles (109) than Prajavani (89). However, regarding the size of the news items, the average size of the news of Prajavani is greater than the Vijayakarnataka (the size of the story 12X8 cm is taken as an average, Prajavani published greater size stories than Vijayakarnataka). Prajavani focused on more unique and/or byline stories and actual news style. For example, seeds qualities, selling fertilizers on the black market etc (**Table 2**).

There is a saying that one picture is equal to thousand words. Among the covered news items majority were presented with photographs, and the majority (80%) of the Vijayakarnataka newspaper articles were published with photographs compared to Prajavani (63%). Both newspapers published colour pictures (**Table 3**).

Table 1. Frequency of Story covered.

Frequency of Story covered								
	May (31Days)		June (30 Days)		July (15 Days)		Total	
Newspaper	Days	Articles	Days	Articles	Days	Articles	Days	Articles
Prajavani	24	34	21	45	6	11	51	90
Vijayakarnataka	26	36	22	50	13	24	61	110

Table 2. Photos covered in stories.

Photos covered in stories				
Newspaper	May	June	July	Total
Prajavani	21	29	6	56
Vijayakarnataka	31	39	17	87

Table 3. Content of Story covered.

Content of Story covered								
	Prajavani				Vijayakarnataka			
	May	June	July	Total	May	June	July	Total
COVID -19	4	2	-	10	2	4	-	6
Fertilizer and seeds issues	1	10	1	12	2	8	2	10
Natural Calamities and crop loss	5	3	2	10	3	3	1	7
Support Prize and Market issue	12	3	-	15	6	3	4	13
Farmer Protest	5	3	-	8	2	3	4	9
Government views about far	-	8	1	9	9	9	4	22
mers issues								
Support from others to create market	2	2	-	4	8	2	-	10
Success stories of farmers	-	7	2	9	-	4	-	4
Farmers suicide and loan	-	3	2	5	-	2	2	4
problem								
Others	5	4	3	12	4	12	7	23
Total	34	45	11	90	36	50	24	108

## COVID -19 and farmers

Among the content covered in both newspapers, Prajavani covered more news (10) on the number of COVID -19 and farmers' health-related news than Vijayakarnataka (6). In this category, hidden stories are set up of health and COVID care centers in villages for farmers, vaccine drives, COVID relief funds etc. [5].

## Fertilizer and seeds issues

Concerning fertilizers and seeds issues, Prajavani covered more news (12) than Vijayakarnataka (10). The second wave lockdown was declared during monsoon rain when the farmer started their agricultural activities; due to the lockdown and second wave of the pandemic, farmers struggled a lot to get seeds and fertilizers on time. Both the newspapers showed their interest in carrying this major issue. But Prajavani published more statistical information about seeds quality, shortage of fertilizers and black market than Vijayakarnataka.

May 22, 2021, Prajavani covered a story about indigos seeds conservation. Indigos seeds are the pride of our country, and it's essential to conserve them for the future. Native seeds have more medicinal, nutritional and protein values than hybrid seeds given by companies, but Vijayakarnataka didn't carry the story.

June 15, 2021, both newspapers carried news about seed distribution. A headline published in Vijayakarnataka

communicated that, as farmers rushed to get seeds, police took a lot of charge to maintain the situation. In Prajavani same story headline was written like, lite lathi charge by police as farmers rushed to get chilly seeds. Prajavani gave more importance to the story (12X12.5Cm) and carried news on the front page with colour photographs (12X6.9Cm), whereas Vijayakarnataka carried news on the second page (7.5X8 Cm) with photos (7.5X3.5Cm).

July 3, 2021, Prajavani carried news about how to duplicate areca troubling native areca seeds, but in Vijayakarnataka, areca news was not covered, but they covered farmers' rush for seeds. Prajavani carried farmers' issues with reality and objectivity; at the same time, Vijayakarnataka is more favorable towards seeds companies.

## Natural calamities and crop loss

Prajavani covered more (10) news related to natural calamities and crop loss news than Vijayakarnataka (7). Natural calamities are not a new challenge for farmers, but human greediness has affected the environment badly, and this causes many problems such as landslides, floods, soil erosion etc. Uncertainty of rain creates more issues in agricultural activities. Prajavani gave more space to these kinds of stories.

Both newspapers did not cover the same news stories during research; on May 20, 2021, Prajavani covered news about how

200 quintal onion crops were lost due to cyclone 'Tauktae'. But the story about 'Tauktae' was not covered in Vijayakarnataka. On May 1 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Vijayakarnataka covered news about crop loss by Bharani Rain. Both newspapers carried photographs of this story.

### Support prize and market issue

Prajavani covered more support prizes and market issues news (15) than Vijayakarnataka (13). Marketing of agricultural products during COVID-19 was one of the significant issues. The government gave no support in the beginning. Farmers also faced difficulties from intermediaries. Prajavani focused more on such issues.

Prajavani, in its May 13 and June 2 issues, carried stories about the Government not releasing the support price for the millet (Raagi) crop; on 6<sup>th</sup> June, it published that the government had released the support price for the millet (Raagi) crop. On June 21<sup>st</sup> Vijayakarnataka carried this issue. However, Prajavani responded first to the problem with statistics. On 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> June, Vijayakarnataka carried positive news like the 8<sup>th</sup> round of Kisan Sandman Fund was released, 51 Lakh amount transferred from PM Kisan to farmers.

### Farmers' protest

Vijayakarnataka covered more news (9) related to farmers' protests than Prajavani (8). Throughout India, many farmers protested against the new farmer bill. This was also covered in these newspapers. Due to lockdown, the grown products like watermelon, tomato, onion, flowers and other vegetables started rotting in the land. Hence, farmers protested against the government by destroying the products on the land itself. Vijayakarnataka carried farmers' protests against the new farmers' bill, but Prajavani carried more news about how farmers destroyed their products on the land itself in a helpless situation.

### Support from others to create market

Due to the lockdown as, all shops, hotels, and supermarkets were closed, and events like marriages, parties etc., were banned. Therefore, farmers' were not able to sell their products. In this background, many people and groups came forward to purchase these products to support farmers. This was covered in both the newspapers. Film artist Upendra, agricultural university and many other voluntary groups extended their hands in creating a market for farmers during the lockdown. These stories were covered more in Vijayakarnataka (10) than Prajavani (4).

### Government attitude towards farmers' issues

Vijayakarnataka covered more news-related government attitudes towards farmers' issues (21) than Prajavani (9). Vijayakarnataka carried government replies to fertilizers and seeds problems. These stories were biased as only the justifications of government were more significantly carried. Vijaya Karnataka, in the month of

May, carried news about various government statements like 'no shortage of seeds, fertilizers and aim of sowing 77 lakh hectares', 'government has increased fertilizers' subsidy, PM is happy due to increase in high yield in the country despite pandemic. In the month of June, carried state agricultural minister's statement story that government has a plan to sanction 20 crores loan to farmers. The same story was carried out in Prajavani as the government plans to release a short-term crop loan of 19.370 crores. On 28<sup>th</sup> June carried a unique story about how farmers suffer from loans.

### Success stories of farmers

Prajavani covered more news (9) of farmers' success stories than Vijayakarnataka (4). Prajavani covered these types of issues as unique stories. In this category, the main themes were Israel's model of agriculture, improvement in farmers' income by exporting the products, high yield, and increase in agricultural activities during COVID-19 to maintain the food system.

### Farmers' suicide and loan problem

Prajavani covered more news (5) of farmers' loans and suicide-related stories than Vijayakarnataka (4). Vijayakarnataka's stories favour the government by covering news such as support prices for agricultural products, subsidies, loan waivers etc., but Prajavani focused more on reality. Both papers covered farmers' suicide stories. Prajavani carried private loans and their impact, Government loans and their difficulties.

### Other issues

Other than these stories, Vijayakarnataka published 23 news former related news, and Prajavani published only 12 news such as indigenous seed conservation, monsoon guidelines for farmers, and Government. Programmed and experts' advice for farmers, fodder problems, etc.

### Conclusion

Despite COVID-19 news and political drama, the state newspapers covered farmers' issues significantly. Both newspapers covered farmers' problems frequently and Prajavani published greater size stories than Vijayakarnataka; some days, both papers dedicated half a page to farmers' stories and many of that stories were presented with photographs. Vijayakarnataka covered more news items than Prajavani; however, when it comes to content, Prajavani carried more certain news and presented news with statistics and objectivity. Vijayakarnataka carried less news on farmers' problems and concentrated more on government statements. Prajavani carried farmers' COVID concern issues along with regular farmer's issues. To inspire farmers, Prajavani carried more success stories about marketing. Loans are not a solution, Prajavani carried reality about farmers' loans, but Vijayakarnataka focused only on how the government introduced loan plans to farmers.

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