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Manufactured Virality or Organic Dissent? Paid Influencer Networks and the Blurring Line Between Authentic Protest and Astroturfing

TIBISHA KHARE* AND ANUSHKA GUPTA**

ABSTRACT

Social media has become one of the most powerful forces shaping public opinion and collective action in India today, capable of turning localised grievances into nationwide movements within days. This paper examines that phenomenon through the lens of a recent student-led protest, beginning with an overview of how social media platforms operate, how algorithms determine visibility, and how these mechanisms influence public discourse more broadly. It then traces the trajectory of the protest itself, examining how it escalated from a localised concern into a nationwide movement, and the extent to which paid promotional content and coordinated influencer networks contributed to this rapid amplification. This section also discusses the broader controversy involving Meta during this period, including the temporary removal of an official government video, the parliamentary scrutiny that followed, and the eventual personal apology issued by Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, an episode that highlighted the significant influence social media platforms wield over political discourse and the accountability questions this raises. The paper then shifts to the legal dimension, finding that while India has a disclosure framework for paid commercial and monetised endorsements under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, the CCPA Guidelines, and the ASCI Code, no comparable disclosure requirement exists for paid or coordinated amplification of protest-related content specifically, leaving this category of political communication largely unregulated. Building on this identified gap, the paper puts forward regulatory suggestions intended to address it, while remaining carefully attentive to the constitutional right to protest, ensuring that any proposed measures target deceptive amplification practices without curbing the sanctity and legitimacy of genuine dissent. The paper concludes by consolidating these findings and reflecting on their broader implications for the regulation of digital political communication in India.

Keywords: *Astroturfing, Social Media Regulation, Paid Influencer Networks, Platform Accountability, Constitutional Freedoms*

* Author is a Student at National Law Institute University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India.

** Author is a Student at National Law Institute University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India.

I. THE CJP PROTEST AND THE QUESTION IT RAISES

In 2026, the question paper for the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET-UG), the examination that decides admission to medical courses in India, was leaked. About twenty-two lakh candidates were registered for the retest that followed, and at least twelve aspirants are reported to have died by suicide in the thirty-seven days between the cancellation of the examination and the retest.¹ For some weeks the anger over it had no organized outlet.

That changed through an Instagram account. The Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) began as satire, set up by a digital creator, Abhijeet Dipke, after a passing remark by the Chief Justice of India. It crossed three million followers within about seventy-eight hours and overtook the Bharatiya Janata Party's own Instagram following within four days, and Dipke returned to India to turn that following into a protest. The first demonstration at Jantar Mantar on 6 June drew small numbers. A sit-in began on 20 June. On 20 July thousands marched towards Parliament; the march ended in a lathi-charge and tear gas, and videos of it spread quickly. On 25 July, the protest was called off after the Union Education Minister resigned.²

India now has about 1.03 billion internet users, close to seventy per cent of its population, and roughly 500 million social media accounts.³ Grievance can therefore reach a national audience within days, without a party, a union, or a newspaper behind it. It can also be pushed towards that audience by people who have been paid to push it. When a protest grows as quickly as this one did, one question follows almost automatically: was the support real, or was it bought?

That question was asked about the CJP. One commentator pointed out that influencers who had ignored the paper leak for a fortnight all began posting about it at about the same time, though he put this down to people joining a bandwagon rather than to anyone being paid.⁴ No investigation has shown that payments were made. None has shown that they were not. Paid or

¹ Rajeev Deshpande, 'Cockroach' Revolt: Testing Times, OPEN MAG. (July 31, 2026), <https://openthemagazine.com/india/cockroach-revolt-testing-times> (giving the figure for candidates at the retest); *Ahead of NEET Re-Test, 12 Suicides in 37 Days Highlight Student Stress*, BUSINESS STANDARD (June 20, 2026), https://www.business-standard.com/education/news/ahead-of-neet-re-test-12-suicides-in-37-days-highlight-student-stress-126062000183_1.html (reporting at least twelve suicides among candidates scheduled to sit the retest); Harsh Mamnani, *Why Sonam Wangchuk's Fast Has Sparked a Wave of Instagram Activism*, THE QUINT (July 17, 2026), <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/cjp-protest-instagram-and-commodification-rage>.

² Deshpande, *supra* note 1; *Cockroach Janta Party Reaches 12 Mn on Instagram, Just 1.3 Mn Away from Beating INC's Record*, BUSINESS TODAY (May 21, 2026), <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/trends/story/from-a-joke-on-x-to-9-3-mn-followers-cockroach-janta-party-crosses-instagram-followers-of-bjp-in-just-4-days-532556-2026-05-21> (recording three million followers within seventy-eight hours of the handle opening on 17 May 2026 and nine million by 20 May 2026, against the Bharatiya Janata Party's 8.7 million).

³ Simon Kemp, *Digital 2026: India*, DATAREPORTAL (Nov. 5, 2025), <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-india> (noting that the figures reflect the latest data available in October 2025 and that social media totals represent user identities rather than unique individuals).

⁴ Mamnani, *supra* note 1 (attributing the surge to a bandwagon effect rather than to any coordinated arrangement).

automated support dressed up as ordinary public feeling is usually called astroturfing, and that is what this article is about.

The article has two arguments. The first is that astroturfing is usually indistinguishable from real anger to anyone outside the platform, because the systems that decide what spreads are private, and nothing about them is published in India. The second is that Indian law has been built around a different question altogether. It says a great deal about what a platform must take down, and almost nothing about what a platform pushes up, or about who has paid it to be pushed. What follows from this is not a case for censorship, but a case for disclosure. If the public cannot be told whether support was bought, the sensible answer is to make those who buy it say so.

II. THE ARCHITECTURE OF VIRALITY AND THE OPACITY PROBLEM

Social media feeds are no longer arranged by time. They are arranged by prediction. The system works out how likely a user is to watch an item, finish it, share it or comment on it, and order the feed accordingly. Whether the item is true, or whether it matters, is not part of that calculation.

One result is well documented. Material carrying strong moral feeling travels further than material that does not. A study of political messages on Twitter found that every extra moral-emotional word raised the rate at which a message spread by roughly twenty per cent.⁵ This is a feature of the design rather than a decision taken about any protest, and it works the same way for causes a reader supports and causes the same reader opposes.

The political consequence is that reach no longer depends only on who has chosen to follow an account. A new account with few followers can be placed in front of a very large audience if the system expects people to engage with it. Attention, not information, is the scarce thing in mass politics, and it is the ranking system that hands it out.

Three kinds of reach need to be kept apart. Organic reach comes from the ranking system responding to real interest. Paid reach is bought openly as advertising and is labelled as such. Between the two sits a third kind that is neither: an influencer is paid, or given something of value, to post what looks like an opinion. In India this third kind carries most of the suspicion, because nothing requires it to be disclosed when the subject is political rather than commercial.

⁵ William J. Brady et al., *Emotion Shapes the Diffusion of Moralized Content in Social Networks*, 114 PROC. NAT'L ACAD. SCI. 7313, 7313 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114> (examining 563,312 messages on three polarised policy issues and finding that the effect operated mainly within ideological networks rather than across them).

A fourth possibility is manufacturing support. Meta's own rules treat the wrong as deception about identity, false profiles, accounts that hide who is running them, rather than coordination, and the company says it applies the rule whatever the content or politics involved.⁶ That distinction is worth keeping. Students, unions and campaign groups coordinate openly all the time, and a rule aimed at coordination as such would catch ordinary political life along with the fakery.

The real difficulty is that none of this can be checked from outside. A user in India is told nothing about why an item is trending. There is no public record of who has paid to promote political content. There is no route by which a researcher can ask for figures on reach. In the CJP case an outsider could see follower counts and hashtag volume and nothing more: not how much of the reach came from recommendation rather than from following, not whether any of it was paid for, not whether the accounts behind it were real people. Both explanations of the influencer surge fit the visible facts equally well. The question is not merely unanswered. On what is published today it cannot be answered at all.

III. WHY INDIAN LAW CANNOT ANSWER THE QUESTION

The protest itself does not sit neatly on either side of the question it provoked. Its beginning was designed: one person turned a judge's offhand remark into a recognizable brand and then set about converting followers into a crowd.⁷ The grievance behind it was real, and so were deaths. Its middle stage was a mixture of the two, with posts drawing people to Jantar Mantar and pictures from Jantar Mantar producing more posts. Its later stage brought in organized actors, as Left student groups joined in, and opposition parties carried the issue into Parliament. Designed, genuine, amplified and adopted are not rival explanations. Each is true of a different week.

Indian law is not built to examine any of this. Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000 protects an intermediary from liability for what its users post, provided it acts once it has actual knowledge of unlawful material.⁸ The Supreme Court has read actual knowledge to mean a court order or a government notification, so that a platform is not made the judge of every complaint it receives.⁹ The Intermediary Guidelines Rules, 2021 add grievance officers, fixed

⁶ *Inauthentic Behavior*, META TRANSPARENCY CTR., <https://transparency.meta.com/policies/community-standards/inauthentic-behavior/> (last visited Aug. 18, 2026) (stating that enforcement against coordinated inauthentic behaviour applies irrespective of the content or ideology involved).

⁷ Deshpande, *supra* note 1.

⁸ The Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000, INDIA CODE (2000), § 79.

⁹ *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, (2015) 5 SCC 1, ¶ 117.

response times, and regular compliance reports.¹⁰ Section 69A allows the government to order blocking.

Every one of these provisions is about material coming down. Not one of them is about material going up. There is no Indian requirement that a platform assess the risks created by its own ranking system, submit to an independent audit, or open its data to researchers, all of which the European Union now requires.¹¹ The rules on paid endorsement sit in consumer law and were written for advertising, so a paid post about a face cream must be labelled while a paid post supporting a protest need not be. Election law reaches political messaging only during a notified election.¹²

What fills that gap can be seen in the weeks after the protest ended. A video posted by the Prime Minister on 23 July, addressing young people on action against paper leaks, was restricted on Facebook for about five hours. Meta said an automated system had made a mistake, apologised and restored the post. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology called that explanation inadequate for a company of its size, summoned senior Meta executives and held meetings on algorithmic bias and moderation on 5 and 6 August.¹³ The parliamentary committee on communications and information technology gave Meta's chief executive three days to apologise personally and said that safe harbour should otherwise come to an end.

Two things about that sequence are worth noticing. The first is what the committee could actually do. A parliamentary committee can question officials and make recommendations. It cannot impose a penalty, withdraw legal protection or order a prosecution; any of that would have to come from the government or the courts under existing law.¹⁴ The episode ran on political pressure rather than on any settled procedure.

The second is what the episode was about. The State moved quickly, and in public, over a single mistaken takedown. The questions about paid amplification that had been raised throughout the protest produced nothing comparable. There is an innocent reading of that difference: a

¹⁰ The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, Gazette of India, pt. II sec. 3(i), rr. 3–4 (Feb. 25, 2021).

¹¹ Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act), arts. 34, 37, 39–40, 2022 O.J. (L 277) 1 (providing, respectively, for risk assessment, independent audit, advertising transparency, and data access for researchers).

¹² The Representation of the People Act, No. 43 of 1951, INDIA CODE (1951), § 126; ELECTION COMM'N OF INDIA, *Voluntary Code of Ethics for the General Election 2019* (2019).

¹³ *Meta Won't Get Safe Harbour, Has to Follow Constitution: Parliament Panel Warns Amid Row over PM Video*, INDIA TV NEWS (Aug. 5, 2026), <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/meta-won-t-get-safe-harbour-have-to-follow-constitution-parliament-panel-warns-amid-row-over-pm-video-2026-08-05-1050392>.

¹⁴ Agence France-Presse, *India Panel Warns Meta over Modi Video Removal*, CHANNELS TELEVISION (Aug. 5, 2026), <https://www.channelstv.com/2026/08/05/india-panel-warns-meta-over-modi-video-removal/> (reporting that India's parliamentary standing committees can summon officials and executives but cannot themselves impose penalties, revoke legal protections or direct prosecutions).

wrongful takedown is a single event that can be checked, a claim about amplification cannot be checked with anything now available, and a post by the head of government will always draw attention. Even on that reading, the contrast shows where the machinery points. Indian law gives institutions a way to argue about one deleted video. It gives nobody, protester, journalist or researcher, any way to find out how a protest came to be seen by millions.

IV. THE REGULATORY LANDSCAPE

India's existing legal framework regulates several components of the astroturfing problem, but not astroturfing as a distinct phenomenon. The Consumer Protection Act, 2019 empowers the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) to act against unfair trade practices and misleading advertisements.¹⁵ Exercising that power, the CCPA notified the Guidelines for Prevention of Misleading Advertisements and Endorsements, 2022, which require an endorser to disclose any "material connection" with a trader, manufacturer, or advertiser where that connection could affect the credibility of the endorsement and is not something a consumer would reasonably expect.¹⁶ Violations attract penalties of up to ₹10 lakh for a first contravention and ₹50 lakh for subsequent ones, along with a possible bar on the endorser making further endorsements for up to one year, extending to three years for a subsequent contravention.¹⁷

Running alongside this statutory regime is the Advertising Standards Council of India's (ASCI) self-regulatory Guidelines for Influencer Advertising in Digital Media, first issued in 2021 and periodically updated, most recently to address AI-generated "virtual influencers."¹⁸ These guidelines require every advertisement published by an influencer to carry a clear, prominent disclosure label identifying it as an advertisement, with the responsibility for disclosure shared between the advertiser and the influencer, and with format-specific requirements. For instance, a verbal disclosure within the first ten seconds of video content in addition to an on-screen label.¹⁹

¹⁵ The Consumer Protection Act, No. 35 of 2019, INDIA CODE (2019), § 18.

¹⁶ Guidelines for Prevention of Misleading Advertisements and Endorsements for Misleading Advertisements, 2022, Gazette of India, pt. III sec. 4, cl. 14 (June 9, 2022).

¹⁷ Press Release, PRESS INFO. BUREAU, MINISTRY OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS, FOOD & PUB. DISTRIBUTION, *Centre Issues 'Guidelines on Prevention of Misleading Advertisements and Endorsements for Misleading Advertisements, 2022'* (June 10, 2022), <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1832906>; The Consumer Protection Act, No. 35 of 2019, INDIA CODE (2019), § 21 (providing for a penalty of up to ₹10 lakh, rising to ₹50 lakh for a subsequent contravention, and for prohibition of the endorser for up to one year, extending to three years for a subsequent contravention).

¹⁸ ADVERTISING STANDARDS COUNCIL OF INDIA, *Guidelines for Influencer Advertising in Digital Media* (2021, as amended); Kaustav Chowdhury, *ASCI Influencer Advertising Guidelines 2026: Disclosure Rules for Paid Content and AI Influencers*, SANSALLEGAL (May 19, 2026), <https://www.sansalegal.com/post/asci-influencer-advertising-guidelines-2026-disclosure-rules-for-paid-content-and-ai-influencers>.

¹⁹ ADVERTISING STANDARDS COUNCIL OF INDIA, *supra* note 18.

The limitation, however, is jurisdictional and conceptual. Political advocacy is not ordinarily a consumer transaction. A political influencer receiving payment from an advocacy organisation cannot necessarily be treated in the same manner as an influencer promoting cosmetics. Extending consumer law to political expression without legislative safeguards could therefore create serious constitutional objections. Second, the Information Technology Act, 2000 and the IT Rules, 2021 regulate intermediary obligations and online content governance. The framework provides mechanisms through which platforms are expected to undertake specified due diligence and respond to legally identified categories of unlawful content.²⁰ Yet it does not create a comprehensive disclosure regime for political influencer networks.

Constitutional law remains an overarching constraint. Article 19(1)(a) protects freedom of speech and expression, while Article 19(2) permits only specified categories of reasonable restrictions. The Supreme Court's decision in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* is particularly important because it invalidated Section 66A of the Information Technology Act for vagueness and overbreadth.²¹ The decision demonstrates that online speech cannot be subjected to restrictions merely because authorities consider it objectionable or undesirable.

What remains substantially under-regulated is the infrastructure of political astroturfing itself: undisclosed financial relationships between political actors and influencers, coordinated fake grassroots campaigns, paid engagement intended to simulate public support, networks of inauthentic accounts, and deliberate concealment of campaign sponsorship. The regulatory challenge is therefore not simply to create "more regulation". It is to create better-targeted regulation.

V. CONSTITUTIONAL LIMITS ON REGULATING ASTROTURFING

Any proposal to regulate paid amplification of protest content must contend immediately with the fact that the right to protest itself enjoys robust constitutional protection in India. The Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed that the right to peaceful assembly and protest flows from Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(b) of the Constitution. In *In re Ramlila Maidan Incident*, arising from the forcible eviction of Baba Ramdev's anti-corruption protesters, the Court described the right to freedom of speech and expression and the right "to assemble peaceably and without arms" as "a very valuable right, which is the essence of any democratic system."²² Subsequently, in *Amit Sahni v. Commissioner of Police*, arising from the Shaheen Bagh protests

²⁰ The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, *supra* note 10, rr. 3–4.

²¹ *Shreya Singhal*, (2015) 5 SCC 1, ¶ 119.

²² *In re Ramlila Maidan Incident*, (2012) 5 SCC 1, ¶ 11 (Swatanter Kumar, J.).

against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the Court reaffirmed the right to peaceful protest while clarifying that it must be balanced against competing rights, such as the right of commuters to unobstructed public roads, since “each fundamental right, be it of an individual or of a class, does not exist in isolation and has to be balanced with every other contrasting right.”²³ Read together, these cases establish that the right to protest is not absolute, but that restrictions on it must be narrowly tailored, reasonable, and untainted by executive discretion.

The distinction between deception and dissent should therefore be central. A citizen saying, “I believe the examination system has failed,” is political expression. An activist organisation paying a communications consultant to prepare social-media material is campaign activity. None should become unlawful merely because it is organised.

By contrast, an organisation that secretly pays individuals to impersonate unaffiliated citizens, creates fictitious grassroots organisations and purchases artificial engagement to represent manufactured support as spontaneous public sentiment presents a qualitatively different problem. The constitutional objective should consequently be source transparency rather than viewpoint control.

Requiring a paid political influencer to disclose the identity of the sponsor does not necessarily prevent the influencer from speaking. It enables the audience to evaluate the communication with relevant information. However, disclosure rules themselves must be carefully drafted. A requirement that every political post disclose every indirect association could become practically impossible to comply with and could deter ordinary citizens from participating in public debates. Similarly, requiring platforms to remove all “coordinated” content would be constitutionally dangerous because coordination is not synonymous with illegality.

The governing principle, therefore, must be transparency rather than suppression. Disclosure-based regulation asks only that paid or coordinated amplification identify itself as such, leaving the public free to evaluate the underlying cause on its merits. Content-based regulation asks the state to adjudicate the authenticity of political speech itself; a role the Constitution does not assign to it.

VI. REGULATORY RECOMMENDATION

Building on the identified gap and established constraint, this article proposes a narrow, disclosure-first regulatory model for the paid and coordinated amplification of protest-related content.

²³ *Amit Sahni v. Commissioner of Police*, (2020) 10 SCC 439, ¶ 16.

A. Mandatory Transparency of Political Influencer Campaigns

There should be a statutory provision for a transparency framework where influencers as well as political organizations and advocacy groups, are required to reveal significant payment-based political or policy-related campaigns. If any influencer gets payment in cash or in kind, then they must put a label on their video or post stating “Paid Political Promotion” or “Sponsored Political Content”, thus helping viewers differentiate between an opinion and sponsored advocacy message. At the same time, a political party, organization or campaigning agency that employs the services of influencers beyond a specified amount must keep record of payment, contract, list of influencers used and broad categories of content commissioned. The framework should impose proportionate penalties for deliberate or repeated non-disclosure, while expressly protecting ordinary citizens, student organisations and small advocacy groups from burdensome compliance requirements.

B. Public Register of Large-Scale Political Influencer Campaigns

Any organization that spends beyond a certain threshold for political/public policy campaigns involving influencers must be mandated to keep a digital register which will reveal the name of the sponsor of the campaign, the total expenditure made, the number of influencers involved, and the nature of the campaign. The threshold is needed to ensure that ordinary people and smaller advocacy organizations do not end up bearing unnecessary compliance burden. The suggested mechanism must target campaigns likely to create substantial artificial reach and not political expression itself. In case of election campaigns, the Indian Election Commission may be responsible for the said mechanism.

C. Graduated Penalties Instead of Immediate Content Removal

The regulation must take a graded enforcement approach. In case of a first-time failure to make disclosures regarding sponsorship, a warning or a monetary penalty could be imposed, depending on whether the violation is intentional or not, and in case of any fraudulent network of accounts, even stricter measures such as the suspension of the accounts must be taken into consideration. Content deletion should only be resorted to in extreme cases. This would differentiate between a case where the influencer has unintentionally failed to use the mandatory disclosure tag, and a case where an organization intentionally created thousands of fake accounts.

D. Strengthen Digital Literacy

Regulation cannot be used to counter astroturfing unless it helps improve the capacity of citizens to identify online-manipulated content. The government, schools, and social media websites

need to engage in digital literacy campaigns that will help people understand the difference between personal views, sponsored content, campaigns, bots, and manufactured engagement. Social media sites need to give users basic ways of recognizing paid political advertisements, sponsors, and significant connections. Educational campaigns need to also teach people that a high number of viewers, trending hashtags, and comments do not always translate to public consensus.

E. Independent Regulation of Deceptive Digital Networks

India needs a separate statutory body that can investigate and regulate any deceptive digital influence networks wherein fake accounts, automation systems, or coordinated inauthentic behavior have been used in order to create an illusion of grassroots political support. Such a body must be able to differentiate between a legitimate anonymous discourse and any deliberate impersonation and manipulation. Its domain needs to be limited to objective evidence of misconduct such as undisclosed sponsorship, networks of fake accounts, bot-driven activity and deliberate distortion of source and scale of public support and not the political opinion of the speaker itself. Such a body should be granted powers to investigate, penalize through monetary means and suggest platform restrictions and ensure due process procedures.

VII. CONCLUSION

The CJP protest cannot be sorted into “organic” or “engineered.” It began as satire, was fuelled by a real grievance, and picked up organised political actors as it went, not three competing accounts of the same event, but three phases of one. What the public could see was virality. What it could not see, and still cannot, is how that virality was produced, how much came from genuine interest, how much from a ranking system’s predictions, and how much, if any, was paid for. That is the opacity this article set out to describe, and nothing in the months since the protest has resolved it.

The law offers no way to resolve it either, because it was not built to ask the question. Section 79 and the 2021 Rules govern what a platform must take down once it has notice of unlawful content, they say nothing about what a platform amplifies, or who paid for that amplification. Consumer law disclosure applies only where the underlying transaction looks commercial, so a sponsored skincare post is labelled, and a sponsored protest post is not. The response to the Modi video takedown showed that the state can move quickly when something is removed. Nothing comparable exists for something that is pushed.

Filling that gap cannot mean giving the state a veto over which movements count as authentic, *Ramlila Maidan*, *Amit Sahni*, and *Shreya Singhal* rule that out. What it can mean is requiring

the source of paid amplification to be named, a disclosure label on sponsored political content, a public register above a spending threshold, penalties graded to intent rather than automatic takedown, digital literacy that teaches audiences to read engagement critically, and an independent body limited to objective conduct; fake accounts, undisclosed payment, rather than to anyone's opinions.

None of this settles whether the NEET protest, or any protest, deserved the following it got. That question is for the public to answer, and it can only answer it honestly if it knows who paid for what it is seeing. The law's job is to make that much visible; deciding what to do with the answer should stay where it has always belonged; with the public itself.
