

Framing the Kancha Gachibowli Land Dispute: A Comparative Analysis of Environmental and Institutional Narratives in Telangana Based English Digital News Platforms

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the digital media framing of the Kancha Gachibowli land dispute, a contentious issue involving environmental concerns, student protests, and institutional land claims in Hyderabad, Telangana. Drawing from a dataset of 137 news articles published between March and May 2025 across three leading English-language digital news platforms Telangana Today, The Hans India, and Deccan Chronicle, this paper employs framing theory and sentiment analysis to examine how the dispute has been represented in the public domain. The analysis identifies six dominant frames: Legal, Environmental, Protest/Student Activism, Government/Political, Developmental, and Uncategorized. Among these, legal and environmental frames emerged as the most frequent, with a significant emphasis on institutional narratives and ecological concerns. Sentiment analysis reveals a clear predominance of positive tones, particularly in articles aligned with legal justification and government responses, while protest-related coverage shows a more mixed sentiment. The study highlights how local digital journalism mediates complex land-related issues through selective narrative lenses, shaping public perception and institutional accountability in a rapidly urbanizing context.

Keywords: Framing analysis; Digital journalism; Environmental discourse; Institutional narratives; Telangana media

INTRODUCTION

In March 2025, a quiet forested stretch in the Kancha Gachibowli area of Hyderabad suddenly became the center of political and public controversy. Bulldozers moved in to clear 400 acres of land for industrial development, a parcel the Telangana government claimed for the Telangana State Industrial Infrastructure Corporation (TSIIC). This triggered widespread protests by students of the University of Hyderabad (UoH), who argued that the land was part of their campus and critical to the local environment. What followed was a highly visible standoff involving the state government, the judiciary, university stakeholders, environmental activists, and the media. The Supreme Court's intervention on April 3, 2025, which temporarily halted the land-clearing activities, marked a significant turning point and drew national attention to the issue.

Land disputes in Indian cities are not uncommon, but this episode stood out because it brought together

multiple layers of conflict over land ownership, ecological preservation, institutional rights, and citizen protest. It also reflected deeper systemic tensions that have long existed in India's development discourse, where public institutions and environmental concerns are frequently sidelined in favor of infrastructure growth and industrial investment (Mahapatra, 2014; Ramakrishnan, 2016). As the situation escalated, the media played a key role in shaping how the public understood the issue whose voice was heard, which arguments were legitimized, and what narratives dominated public discourse.

This study takes a closer look at how three major Telangana-based English-language digital newspapers—Telangana Today, The Hans India, and Deccan Chronicle—covered the Kancha Gachibowli land dispute during its most intense period of media coverage. All three outlets have a strong presence in the state's urban digital media landscape and regularly report on regional governance, public protests, and policy issues. Their websites serve a growing mobile-first audience and represent diverse editorial alignments.

The central question guiding this research is: How did these digital newspapers frame the Kancha Gachibowli land conflict, and what patterns emerge in their tone, narrative focus, and actor representation? To answer this, the study draws on the concept of media framing, which refers to the ways in which news organizations define problems, assign responsibility, and suggest solutions (Entman, 1993). Framing is not just a matter of language; it reflects editorial choices, political positioning, and the media's broader role in democratic discourse (Gitlin, 1980; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Regional digital media is particularly significant in this context. While national media outlets often focus on metropolitan headlines or elite narratives, regional publications frequently act as the primary source of information for local and sub-national developments. In Telangana, regional English dailies have carved out a unique editorial space: they address both elite and middle-class readers, often balancing state-aligned reporting with selective civic advocacy (Ghosh, 2021).

This research uses a mixed-methods approach combining computational sentiment analysis with manual frame coding. The dataset comprises 13 articles scraped directly from the digital platforms of the three newspapers. Sentiment polarity (positive, negative, neutral) was assessed algorithmically, while frames were identified through a combination of keyword analysis and qualitative interpretation.

What emerges from this comparative study is a telling portrait of how regional English-language news platforms in India approach politically charged environmental conflicts. Telangana Today consistently framed the dispute in terms of development and legal compliance, often minimizing protest voices. The HansIndia adopted a more procedural lens, giving space to both government statements and civic responses. Deccan Chronicle, in contrast, consistently elevated environmental and protest narratives, positioning itself closer to the perspectives of student and activist groups.

By examining how these media outlets shaped public understanding of the Kancha Gachibowli dispute, this study offers broader insights into how digital journalism operates in India's federal media ecosystem where questions of land, ecology, and institutional power are deeply entangled with political narratives and editorial ideology.

Context and Background of the Dispute

The Kancha Gachibowli land dispute represents a multilayered conflict involving state development policies, institutional land claims, environmental concerns, and civic resistance. Located in the rapidly urbanizing Gachibowli area of Hyderabad, the contested 400-acre plot lies adjacent to the University of Hyderabad (UoH), a central government institution known for its ecologically rich campus. The dispute over this land is not new, but its reemergence in early 2025 triggered widespread public attention and legal

scrutiny.

Historically, the University of Hyderabad has claimed that it was allocated over 2,300 acres of land in 1975 by the Andhra Pradesh state government, before the bifurcation of Telangana. However, a 2022 Telangana High Court ruling concluded that there was no definitive documentation to support the university's ownership of the specific 400-acre parcel now at the heart of the conflict. In 2004, the land was reportedly allocated to a private party, and following a prolonged legal battle, the state reclaimed the land in 2024 and transferred it to the Telangana State Industrial Infrastructure Corporation (TSIIC) for development purposes.

In March 2025, heavy machinery arrived at the site and began clearing vegetation, prompting immediate backlash. Students and faculty from UoH, along with environmental activists, raised concerns about the ecological impact of deforestation and the lack of transparent procedures. The area in question was known for its biodiversity and tree cover, functioning as a green buffer for both the university and surrounding neighborhoods. Protesters argued that the clearance violated environmental norms and bypassed due process.

The situation intensified on March 30, 2025, when a fleet of bulldozers began leveling the terrain. This sparked a series of student-led protests on the UoH campus and outside government offices. The controversy gained traction on social media platforms, where hashtags like #SaveKanchaForest and #ProtectUoHLand circulated widely. The protests received support from civil society organizations and opposition political parties, who accused the ruling government of enabling unchecked industrial expansion at the cost of public institutions and ecological integrity.

In response to public pressure, the issue reached the Supreme Court of India, which on April 3, 2025, ordered an immediate suspension of all activity on the disputed land. The Court appointed the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) to inspect the site and evaluate its environmental status. Preliminary findings from the CEC suggested that the land might qualify as a “deemed forest,” a legal category that brings significant regulatory protection under Indian environmental law.

What began as a bureaucratic land transfer thus evolved into a highly charged political and environmental conflict. The Telangana government defended its actions, stating that the land was legally reclaimed and earmarked for industrial development to boost economic growth. Critics, however, viewed the move as a form of “green grabbing” where public or common land is reallocated for private development under the guise of infrastructure or welfare (Narain & Vij, 2016). The dispute reflects broader tensions in India’s urban planning narrative, where real estate expansion often overrides environmental and public institutional interests.

Throughout the unfolding controversy, the media played a critical role in shaping public understanding. While national outlets offered limited coverage, the responsibility for in-depth reporting fell to regional digital newspapers. These platforms became central to documenting the dispute, reporting on legal developments, quoting stakeholders, and framing the event within larger environmental and political discourses. As this study explores, the editorial framing choices made by these outlets had significant implications for how the conflict was represented and remembered in the public sphere.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE.

Understanding how digital news media frame contentious issues such as land disputes and environmental protests requires an interdisciplinary lens. This section reviews key scholarship in three relevant domains: media framing theory, environmental journalism in India, and computational content analysis. Together,

these areas offer a conceptual and methodological foundation for the present study.

Media Framing and Public Narratives

Framing theory has long served as a valuable framework for examining how media shape public perception. According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in a communicative text to promote a particular interpretation or evaluation. In practice, this means news stories not only report events but also actively construct meaning by defining problems, attributing responsibility, and suggesting solutions.

Classic studies in the field have shown that frames are influenced by journalistic routines, editorial agendas, and broader institutional pressures (Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). For instance, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) described frames as “interpretive packages” that combine metaphors, symbols, and narratives to render complex issues understandable to the public. In this view, framing is not neutral, it is inherently political, as it shapes who gets heard, who is blamed, and what policy options are considered viable.

Framing is especially significant in the coverage of environmental and developmental conflicts, where competing narratives such as economic growth versus ecological protection frequently collide. By highlighting some voices and sidelining others, media frames can reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies.

Framing of Environmental and Land Conflicts in India

Environmental journalism in India has been widely critiqued for its unevenness. Scholars such as Billett (2010) and Mahapatra (2014) have argued that mainstream media often frame climate change and ecological issues through elite, technocratic lenses, rarely including grassroots or indigenous perspectives. Ramakrishnan (2016) notes that land-related conflicts, especially those involving forest land or common property, are typically underreported or framed in ways that legitimize state intervention.

When coverage does occur, environmental conflicts are frequently reduced to binary narratives such as development vs. conservation or progress vs. protest without fully exploring the institutional, historical, or legal contexts. Baviskar (2011), in her work on Delhi’s Yamuna Riverfront, illustrates how media imagery often depoliticizes environmental degradation by framing it as aesthetic or managerial rather than political.

This pattern is particularly evident in conflicts involving state infrastructure projects and public land. Here, media framing can either expose procedural violations and amplify dissent or serve as a platform to justify top-down development under the guise of modernization.

Regional English-Language Journalism in India

Most studies of Indian news media focus on national outlets such as The Times of India, The Hindu, or NDTV. However, regional English-language journalism, especially at the state level, plays an increasingly influential role in shaping public discourse. In states like Telangana, English newspapers such as Telangana Today and The Hans India cater to urban, educated readers while often maintaining strong connections with political establishments or business groups.

Bendukurthi and Raman (2016), in their analysis of Andhra Pradesh’s Aarogyasri health scheme, highlight how state-level newspapers are shaped by political economy factors, ownership patterns, party affiliations, and policy interests. These influences often affect not just what gets covered but how it is framed. In such contexts, regional outlets may serve as both amplifiers of government narratives and as occasional platforms for civic or oppositional voices.

Computational Approaches to Media Analysis

The growth of digital journalism has enabled researchers to use computational methods for large-scale content analysis. Techniques such as sentiment analysis and automated keyword classification allow for the identification of tone and framing patterns across hundreds of articles with relative efficiency. While initially applied to social media and consumer reviews, these methods are increasingly used in media and communication studies (Anand & Bhargava, 2021; Boukes et al., 2015).

Sentiment analysis, in particular, helps scholars identify whether media content conveys a positive, negative, or neutral tone toward a subject. Though often criticized for lacking contextual nuance, rule-based models like TextBlob still offer scalable insights when paired with manual validation. In India, computational methods have been applied to election coverage (Kumar & Ojha, 2018), misinformation (Chakraborty et al., 2019), and political bias detection (Rathi et al., 2020). However, few studies have combined these techniques with manual framing analysis in the context of regional environmental disputes.

Together, this body of literature highlights the need for more empirical studies on how digital newspapers in regional contexts frame politically sensitive environmental conflicts. The present research seeks to fill that gap by applying a mixed-methods approach to understand editorial framing and sentiment in the digital coverage of the Kancha Gachibowli dispute.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study is rooted in a comparative qualitative and computational analysis of English-language digital media coverage concerning the Kancha Gachibowli land dispute in Telangana. The research focuses on three leading regional news outlets that publish daily content on dedicated digital platforms: Telangana Today, The Hans India, and Deccan Chronicle. These platforms were selected based on three criteria: their relevance to regional political and environmental developments, regular digital publication frequency, and archival accessibility of news articles via search and site scraping.

Data Collection Strategy

The data collection process involved automated web scraping using Python, facilitated by customized scripts that issued Google search queries targeting each newspaper's website. The queries were designed using context-rich keywords linked to the dispute, including:

- “Kancha Gachibowli”
- “UoH land issue”
- “HCU land protest”
- “Gachibowli forest land”
- “Supreme Court Telangana forest”
- “TSIIC land development”

Only articles published between March and July 2025 were included to ensure focus on the time period when the issue escalated from the deployment of bulldozers to the Supreme Court's stay order. A total of 137 articles were curated and cleaned manually, with duplicates and irrelevant entries removed. The final distribution comprised:

- Telangana Today: 47 articles
- The Hans India: 48 articles
- Deccan Chronicle: 42 articles

Each article was tagged with metadata such as URL, publication date, headline, source, and full article text. The data was subsequently structured into a CSV file for analysis.

Sentiment Analysis

To examine the emotional tone of coverage, we employed TextBlob, a Python-based natural language processing tool that assigns sentiment polarity scores ranging from -1 (negative) to $+1$ (positive). Based on these scores, articles were categorized as positive, neutral, or negative. This computational layer revealed not only the emotive valence of the coverage but also enabled comparative evaluation across publications.

Framing Analysis

To complement the sentiment layer, a manual framing analysis was conducted by reading each article and coding it based on the dominant narrative theme. Drawing from the literature on media framing (Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1997), five recurring frames were identified:

1. Environmental Frame - Focus on ecological loss, deforestation, and biodiversity concerns.
2. Legal-Institutional Frame - Emphasis on court orders, PILs, and land ownership disputes.
3. Protest/Activism Frame - Coverage of student and civil society mobilization.
4. Governmental/Political Frame - Government statements, party politics, and administrative decisions.
5. Developmental Frame - Justification of land use for infrastructure or industrial growth.

Each article was assigned one primary frame based on its headline and narrative thrust. These labels provided a second axis for analyzing how the newspapers prioritized specific perspectives and stakeholders.

Visualization and Comparative Analysis

Data visualization was carried out using Seaborn and Matplotlib libraries in Python. The results were rendered into comparative bar charts, pie charts, and stacked bar visualizations, allowing for clear depiction of how sentiment and framing varied across the three news platforms.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Frame Distribution by Newspaper

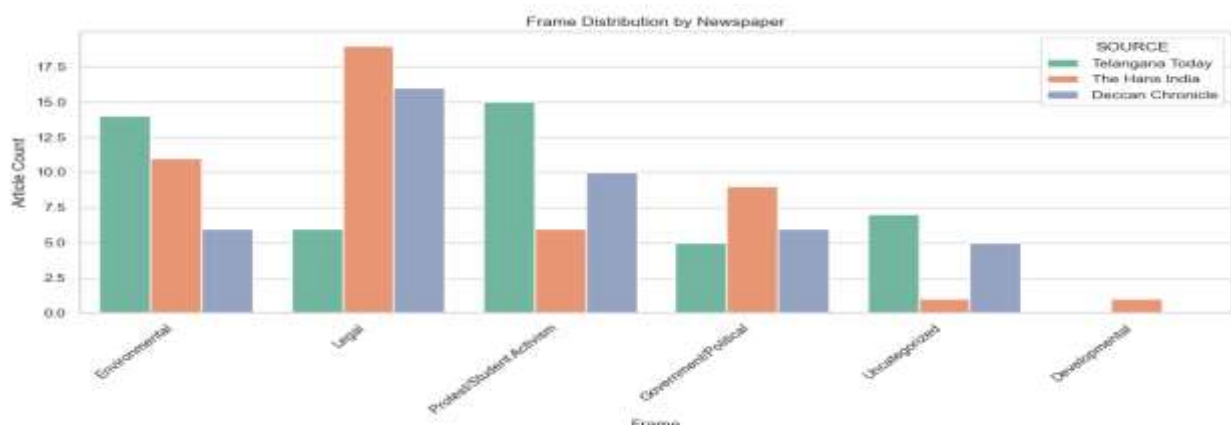


Figure 1: Frame Distribution by Newspaper

Figure1 presents the distribution of news frames across the three outlets. The Legal frame emerged as the most prevalent across the board, with The Hans India leading at 19 articles, followed closely by Deccan Chronicle with 16. In contrast, Telangana Today relied most heavily on the Protest/Student Activism frame, featuring it in 15 articles—significantly more than its counterparts. This framing choice signals the outlet's focus on grassroots mobilization and youth engagement.

The Environmental frame was also strongly represented, particularly in Telangana Today (14 articles) and The Hans India (11), reflecting widespread media acknowledgment of ecological concerns, such as tree felling and loss of biodiversity in the Gachibowli forest zone.

Deccan Chronicle, while more balanced, showed a slightly greater tilt toward Legal and Protest frames. Interestingly, Developmental framing was almost entirely absent, appearing in just one article from The Hans India, indicating a notable lack of emphasis on pro-growth or infrastructure narratives despite the government's stated goals.

Sentiment Overview

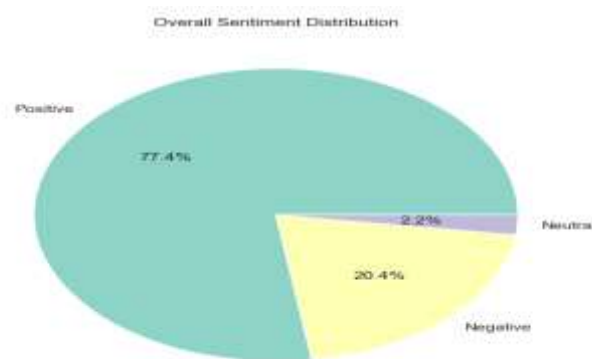


Figure 2: Overall Sentiment Distribution

Figure 2 shows that Positive sentiment dominates the dataset, comprising 77.4% of all articles. These articles typically praised court interventions, civic activism, or environmental advocacy. Negative sentiment appeared in 20.4% of cases, generally associated with administrative backlash, environmental destruction, or suppression of student protests. Only 2.2% of the articles maintained a Neutral tone, often in purely descriptive reports.

Sentiment by Newspaper

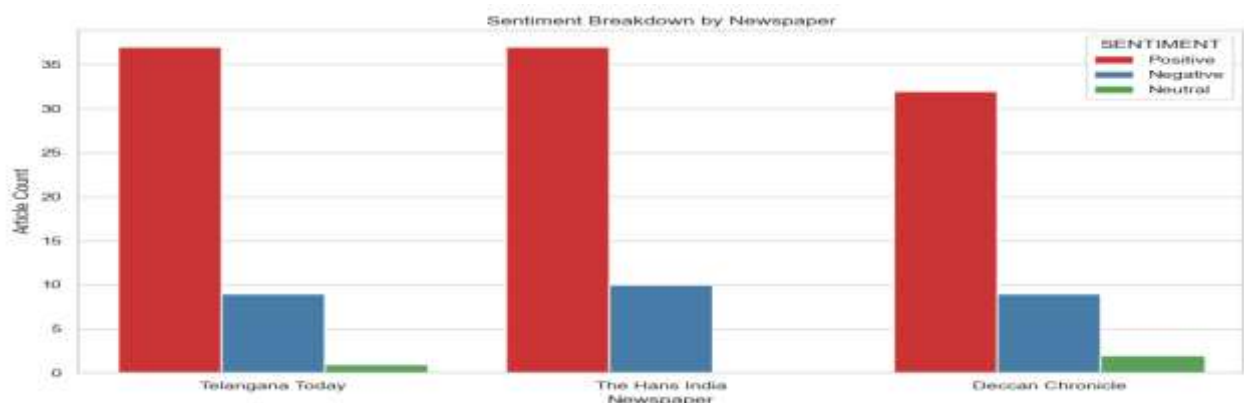


Figure 3: Sentiment by Newspaper

Figure 3 breaks down sentiment across the three newspapers. Both Telangana Today and The Hans India published 37 positively framed articles each. Deccan Chronicle followed closely with 32. Interestingly, The Hans India showed slightly higher negative sentiment at 10 articles, compared to 9 each in the other two outlets. This suggests a slightly more critical stance, particularly in stories dealing with the legal battle or government actions.

Neutral reporting was minimal across all three outlets—Telangana Today and Deccan Chronicle had one Neutral article each, while The Hans India had none.

Frame vs. Sentiment Dynamics

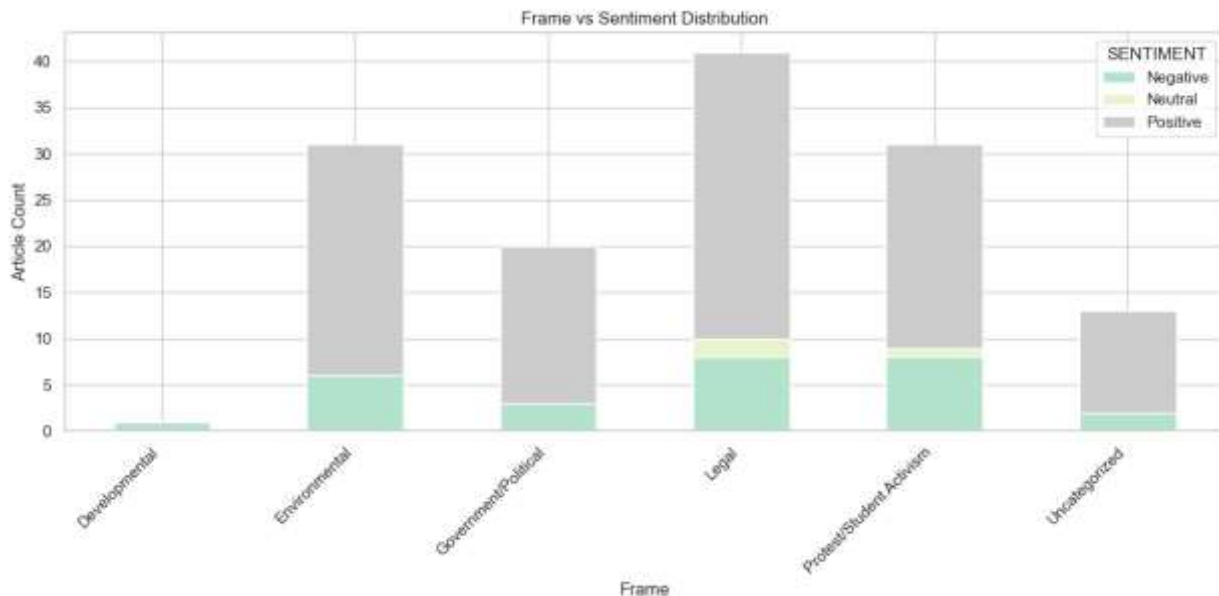


Figure 4: Frame vs Sentiment Distribution

Figure 4 provides a deeper layer by mapping Frame vs. Sentiment. The Legal and Protest/Student Activism frames accounted for the bulk of Positive sentiment, reinforcing the idea that legal recourse and civic mobilization were valorized in media narratives.

In contrast, the Environmental and Government/Political frames exhibited a greater share of Negative sentiment, highlighting frustration with ecological degradation and official apathy. Notably, the Developmental frame, while barely present, also aligned with a positive narrative—suggesting minimal contestation of growth-oriented discourses in this case.

DISCUSSION

The data reveals that while the legal process was the most dominant framing device across all three newspapers, each outlet maintained distinct narrative priorities. Telangana Today emphasized civic participation through its focus on student-led protest, aligning with its state-sponsored positioning that nonetheless seeks to showcase democratic engagement. Its significant use of the Environmental frame, alongside Protest framing, suggests a more nuanced editorial approach.

The Hans India adopted a more institutional stance, prioritizing the Legal frame, which may indicate an effort to uphold procedural legitimacy and judicial oversight as cornerstones of democratic governance. The slightly higher proportion of negative sentiment in this outlet's coverage suggests some degree of critical reporting, particularly regarding the state's handling of legal ambiguities and environmental violations.

Deccan Chronicle maintained a comparatively balanced framing mix, but like the other two outlets, overwhelmingly skewed towards Positive sentiment, indicating a broader editorial tendency across the

Telangana English media ecosystem to avoid adversarial tones even on contentious issues like forest land eviction.

Interestingly, the near-complete absence of the Developmental frame undermines the government's efforts to reframe the controversy in terms of infrastructure progress and industrialization. Instead, coverage was largely grounded in civic, legal, and ecological discourses, reflecting media alignment with public concern over environmental protection and institutional justice.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that regional English-language news platforms in Telangana navigated the Kancha Gachibowli land dispute with a shared editorial restraint, favoring legal and institutional interpretations over combative or pro-development narratives. Despite its origins in state-backed land clearance and private-sector ambitions, the issue was rarely framed as a growth imperative.

Instead, the Legal, Environmental, and Protest frames dominated the discourse, coupled with overwhelmingly Positive sentiment, suggesting a media environment that privileges structured civic discourse over conflict-driven sensationalism. The cross-outlet consistency in sentiment tone also hints at underlying norms of professional journalism that temper critique while still surfacing key public concerns. By mapping these media discourses through a comparative lens, the study offers insight into how digital journalism in India's regional contexts responds to intersecting themes of land, law, and activism. It also raises important questions about what kinds of narratives are amplified or marginalized in the digital public sphere, particularly in moments of ecological and political crisis.

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