



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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New Delhi citizens protest the ruling of Jessica Lal's murderer, 2006

21 February

2006

to: 20 December

2006

Country: India

Location City/State/Province: *New Delhi*

Goals:

To get the Indian courts to change its acquittal of the arrested suspects and charge them as guilty for taking part in Jessica Lal's murder.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions › A 24-hour news channel collected over 200,000 cellphone text messages petitioning for a retrial.
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › At Parliament Street students held poster critiquing the government.
- 034. Vigils › Students held a candle-lit vigil at the capital's monument, India Gate.
- 038. Marches › Students held marches and rallies in the streets of New Delhi
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › 150 College students poured into Parliament Street to protest with signs.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › India's urban middle class began protests regarding the court's decision.

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals › Tehelka, a news amgazine, aired a show on television that showed the suspects bribing witnesses to retract their intiail testimonies. This airing angered New Delhi citizens.

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 010. Newspapers and journals › Newspapers ran titles provoking the government to hold a retrial.
- 011. Records, radio, and television › Televisions ran titles provoking the government to hold a retrial
- 019. Wearing of symbols › New Delhi citizens word temporary tattoos that read "Justice for Jessica" made by a Brazilian cosmetics company.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- New Delhi citizens
- newspapers and television workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Students

Partners:

Newspaper and television workers

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Newspaper and television workers
- Students

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 7 weeks*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The Indian court system, the Indian government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The protests grew and gained the media's support, and they were able to convince the government to hold a retrial and charge the suspects as guilty.

On 30 April 1999, at 2 am, Jessica Lal was shot dead at an unlicensed bar in New Delhi. Lal, a 34-year-old model at the time, had been working as a barmaid at a party filled with actors, politicians, and other socialites. A little after midnight, the bar had run out of alcohol. At 2 AM, Siddharth Vashisht, known as Manu Sharma, along with some of his friends, Alok Khanna, Amardeep Singh Gill, and Vikas Yadav, asked Lal for some alcohol. Sharma offered to pay Lal 1000 Rupees, but she refused. He then took out a .22 pistol and fired it twice, killing Lal with a bullet in the head.

Sharma and many of his friends avoided the police for several weeks. It was not until 4 May 1999, that the police arrested Sharma's accomplices, Khanna and Gill. Then, on 6 May 1999, the police arrested Sharma himself.

On 3 August 1999, the police charged Sharma with murder and destruction of evidence, while they charged his accomplices, Khanna, Gill, and Yadev with destruction of evidence, conspiracy, and harboring a suspect.

Despite these charges, Sharma and his accomplices did not face trial for several years. India's judicial system is quite slow, and its conviction rate is below 30%. In addition to this, Sharma was the son of a wealthy and influential Congress-nominated Member of Parliament, Venod Sharma. His family's wealth and power made it more difficult for the police and court to avoid corruption and bribery.

On 21 February 2006, the court acquitted the arrested men, claiming that the police had failed to present a legitimate case because they could not locate the weapon. Although Sharma had confessed to the police, he had then retracted his statement claiming that it was taken without following legal procedures. Additionally, many of the witnesses that had originally reported the murder changed their stories, claiming that they did not see what happened.

Following the announcement of this acquittal, India's urban middle class rose in protest, angry at the inadequate law enforcement and the ease with which the rich and famous manipulated the courts.

University students sent SMS messages around New Delhi, urging citizens to rise up and protest against the faulty law system. The protestors wanted to get justice for Lal's death. They called the acquittal the "miscarriage of justice."

A 24-hour news channel, NDTV, started a campaign urging viewers to petition for a new trial. A few days after this campaign began, the station had received more than 200,000 cellphone text messages urging retrial.

Indian citizens went to the streets for marches and rallies. On 4 March 2006, students held a candlelight vigil at the capital's monument, India Gate. This action was inspired by a movie, "Rang de Basanti."

On 7 March 2006, a pack of 150 college students poured onto Parliament Street in New Delhi to protest. They chanted "Jessica,

Jessica” and pumped their fists. They also held up signs that read “Wake up from Ur Insane Slumber” and “We are in a country where you can get away if your dad is a politician.”

Surya, a Brazilian cosmetics company, passed out “Justice for Jessica” temporary tattoos. The company also ran a website, “Justice for Jessica” that produced names and e-mail addresses of thousands of Indians who registered their support for the protests.

Newspapers and televisions ran headlines that read “No one killed Jessica.” In addition to the candlelight vigils that models, fashion designers, friends, and relatives held at India Gate, citizens held a week long t-shirt campaign in which they wore t-shirts that read “we support re-investigation of Jessica Lal’s murder, let the truth come out.”

In response to this media pressure and protests, the police, headed by police commissioner KK Paul, petitioned the High Court for a review of the case. On 22 March 2006 the court issued warrants against the nine defendants that had stood trial.

On 9 September 2006, *Tehelka*, a news magazine, aired a show on the television that showed that witnesses had accepted bribes to retract their initial testimonies. Venod Sharma was a part of these bribes.

On 15 December 2006, the High Court ruled that Sharma guilty based on existing evidence.

On 20 December 2006, the courts gave Sharma a sentence of life imprisonment. The courts had answered to the public’s pressure.

On 19 April 2010, the Supreme Court of India approved the sentences and confirmed that Sharma was, without a doubt, guilty.

Research Notes

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Aileen Eisenberg, 07/04/2013

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