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Abstract

This article explores how youth in India understand, get involved in and actively use information and communication technologies (ICTs) in civic engagement. Despite a variety of opportunities for civic engagement, young people in India today show little interest in politics. Many cite a perceived inability to effect changes in India's corrupt political system as the reason for their apathy. Indian youth do, however, engage in other forms of civic engagement. Helping the needy outside of work and college is a common form of community work for young Indians. Others engage with their communities through paid work at non-governmental organizations (NGOs). ICTs are used in the everyday lives of Indian youth for personal purposes like entertainment and social networking, but relatively little for activism. Of all ICTs in India, mobile phones are arguably the most important, with laptops a key ICT at NGOs.

Keywords

Civic engagement, community work, ICTs, India, political disinterest

Introduction

This article explores how Indian youth understand, get involved in and actively use information and communication technologies (ICTs) in civic engagement. The article is an attempt to contribute to the ongoing debate between, on the one hand, the popular wisdom that youth have played a significant role in recent uprisings around the world, and, on the other, academic observations that today's youth are apathetic, apolitical and individualistic. In

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2011, *Time* magazine selected 'the protester' as its 'Person of the Year', accompanied by a supportive article that declared the protestors to be 'disproportionately young, middle class and educated' (Andersen, 2011). By contrast, existing scholarly literature (Andolina et al., 2002; Bakker and de Vresse, 2011; Carpinì, 2000; Youniss et al., 2002) depicts today's youth as a generation that does not read or watch news, does not vote, is individualistic and disinterested in politics, and has no faith in the democratic process.

Recent writings have, without belittling public discontent as the main reason for recent protests and revolutions (Gustin, 2011; Srinivasan, 2011), repeatedly credited the role played by ICTs in bringing protesters together and in strengthening protests through the easy and efficient sharing of information. Such writings build on earlier work by Bimber (2000), who observed that ICTs have brought down the cost of information and communication needed to mobilize people, while warning that the result would be 'greater fragmentation and pluralism in the structure of civic engagement' (2000: 332). It is not yet clear whether ICTs have brought such pluralism and fragmentation to the civic engagement of youth in India. This article aims to further clarify the answer to this question through a qualitative study.

India presents an interesting case as the world's largest democratic country, one in which youth form the largest group in the working-age population. However, the country is troubled by rising unemployment and rampant corruption. India has been holding multi-party democratic elections since its independence in 1947. It is also hailed for the non-violent freedom movement led decades ago by Mahatma Gandhi, who today still inspires global leaders. The people of India enjoy relatively more freedom of expression than other Asian countries. For instance, India ranks 122nd in the Press Freedom Index 2010 compiled by Reporters Without Borders, compared to Singapore at 136th and Malaysia at 141st.¹ India is also experiencing positive changes in other areas. For instance, the literacy rate grew from 65% in 2001 to 74% in 2011 (Government of India, 2012), which suggests the population has enhanced information processing potential.

India is expected to become the next major power, with its economy growing at a significant rate, 8.2% and 9.6% in 2009 and 2010 respectively. However, it is plagued by a wide variety of social problems. India ranks 134th in the Human Development Index 2011.² And 68.7% of its 1.02 billion people live on less than \$2 per day.³ Corruption is a major problem, with India (95th) doing worse than Singapore (5th) and Malaysia (60th) in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2011 compiled by Transparency International.⁴ The unemployment rate was 3.8% in 2009–2010 (Mishra and Nanda, 2012), and is felt mostly among young people. In summary, India is growing economically at a fast rate, but simultaneously widening the inequality in society. In this transitional phase, the situation of today's youth in India appears precarious.

The government of India defines youth as those aged 13–34 years. According to the 2001 census, 38% of the 1.02 billion people in India are in the youth category, out of which 27% are literate. Among the literate youth population, only 7.6% have undergraduate or higher degrees (Mishra and Nanda, 2012). An estimated 64% of young people are located in rural places. A 2004–2005 report by the National Sample Survey Organization found that 87.2% of unemployed people in the country are youth (for more details on youth in India, see Government of India, 2006). Given such conditions, youth seem to be the most affected, as they face corruption and are deprived of employment

opportunities. A significant number of the country's rural youth will most likely be left out of India's growth due to a lack of adequate skills.

Such conditions force us to examine whether perceptions of systematic inequality might lead Indian youth to unrest and possible mobilization for political change, and what role ICTs might play in that process. Any predictions of the role played by the ICTs in youth mobilization must be examined against the ICT infrastructure now present in the country. Though there were around 771 million wireless phone subscribers in India in 2011 and national mobile tele-density was 65%, rural areas are clearly lagging behind, at just 31%, compared to 143% in urban areas. Internet penetration is relatively poor, with only 11.21 million broadband subscribers as of 31 January 2011 (Government of India, 2011). Private researchers have estimated that there were 2 million mobile internet users in 2009 (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2009). Rough estimates from various agencies (including Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2011) argue that there are more than 10,000 cybercafés, which are most likely located in urban areas. Programs like common-service centers, where all citizens are connected through a hierarchy of internet networking systems,⁵ might appear to resolve the problem of the digital divide, but they are still in the early stages. The extant condition of the ICT infrastructure seems to favor the urban population, resulting in the possible marginalization of rural youth.

This study thus attempts to understand how ICTs are used, if at all, by mostly urban youth in India to perform civic activities. The article starts with a literature review of the concept of civic engagement and its manifestation in youth activism in India. Based on 26 in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions, the article examines three key issues: whether Indian youth are as disinterested in politics as their western counterparts, and if yes, for what reasons; how Indian youth perceive different political institutions; and lastly, how Indian youth engage in civic activities, and how ICTs are used in that process. This article concludes with a proposal for solving, once the appropriate political and technological conditions are present, the riddle of limited online activism in India.

Literature review on civic engagement

This article uses the concept of civic engagement to analyze the participation of youth in activities that can be termed as activism or actions that aim to effect social change. Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004: 113) define civic engagement as 'the degree to which people become involved in their community, both actively and passively, including such political and organizational activities as political rallies or book or social clubs'. The concept is broadened to civic competence by Youniss et al. (2002: 124), encompassing behaviors like voting and 'less obvious actions such as community service'. Using an inductive approach, Andolina et al. (2002: 193) included even minimal volunteering work like 'giving a car ride to a friend' as part of civic engagement.

In an authoritative review of the concept, Adler and Goggins (2005) argue that it has evolved from focusing on specific domains – such as community service, political involvement and social movements – to broad definitions that include activities that are both informal/private and formal/public. These authors propose a definition by which 'civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future'

(2005: 241). They also list three sets of indicators of civic engagement: 'indicators of community-focused activities' that include volunteering and raising funds for charitable causes; 'indicators of participation in the electoral process', which include voting and working for a candidate or a political party; and 'indicators of political activity' that cover supporting or opposing particular issues or policies (2005: 241–242). As this article is not designed to arrive at a new definition of civic engagement, the broad definition set by Adler and Goggins (2005) is followed.

Carpini (2000) reasons that civic engagement is possible due to three things: motivation, opportunities and capabilities. People need to be motivated to engage in civic activities, a process that can happen when they identify an existing problem as theirs and feel compelled to collaborate with others for a common purpose. When people are motivated, there need to be opportunities or avenues that permit them to participate. These opportunities can be provided by the government, or if it proves itself unable or unwilling, by others who are not oppressed by the government. The third aspect deals with the capabilities of the people. In addition to people's motivation and opportunities, they should possess capacities in terms of access to resources, time and information to engage.

The linkage between ICTs and community building or social capital formation still needs to be conclusively drawn (DiMaggio et al., 2001) and some of the extant research is skeptical that ICTs will fundamentally alter civic engagement. For instance, Bimber (1998: 136) argues that while the internet 'will certainly change the informational environment of individuals, it will likely not alter their overall interest in public affairs or their ability to assimilate and act on political information'. However, ICTs have a significant role to play in providing alternative information to that provided by the authorities or the elites through inexpensive mass media. ICTs also provide opportunities for participation through personal technologies, such as mobile phones, rather than through specialized infrastructure, such as visiting a political party's office. With the decreasing cost and increasing proliferation of ICTs, people appear to have greater capabilities to perform civic engagement. But Bimber (2000) cautions that knowledge brokers and mobilizers are still required to process the abundant available information to fit the citizens' needs.

Assuming that people are motivated and capable of exploiting the opportunities for civic engagement, there is no guarantee that everybody will become an activist. According to Bimber (1998: 143), 'the participation and involvement are highly uneven, with large portions of the public quite inattentive to most issues and quite unsympathetic to involvement most of the time, and with only small groups of interested activists and other issue publics coming close to fulfilling the traditional conception of active citizenship'. This applies to youth participation in civic activities as well.

There is adequate evidence of youth participating in the political mobilizations during India's post-independence period in 1947. And youth in India played a major role in Jeya Prakash Narayan's movement against emergency rule imposed by the central government of Mrs Indira Gandhi in 1977, and were instrumental in toppling her government in the subsequent national elections (Shah, 2004) by way of political mobilization and participating in elections. Similar mobilizations were seen in various provinces as well. Students were major participants in the anti-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu in the 1960s, the anti-immigrant movement in Assam in the mid-1980s and the separatist movement in Andhra Pradesh in the mid-1970s and 2000s. In the early 1990s, students agitated against the reservation policies of

the government in higher education institutions and public employment. Youth mobilizations appear to reflect the observation of Youniss et al. (2002) that the youth are more concerned with current issues that are closely related to them, than with other issues that may be of national importance but are not directly related to them.

In contrast to the aforementioned evidence, contemporary research, especially nationwide surveys, has showed that the youth in India seem to be disinterested in knowing about politics and government. A 2009 study (DeSouza et al., 2009) of 62,126 young people in India showed that 47% showed a low interest and 16% are indifferent with respect to politics. Only 22% of urban youth have participated in some element of political protest, although only 2% said their belief in democracy is weak. Among various political institutions, political parties are the least trusted, scoring 49 out of 100. Another study of 7570 youth in India (Acharya et al., 2010: 557) showed that 80.4% of men and 74.6% of women 'reported disillusionment with the commitment of political parties' and thought that there had not been any improvement in their village or neighborhood.

Amid the contradictory evidence, this study re-examines whether Indian youth are catching up with their global counterparts in rising up to effect change in the political arena, or are remaining an indifferent group. It also attempts to understand whether Indian youth are being affected by the ongoing social and technological transformations in terms of their involvement in activism, and if yes, how and why. Such an analysis will provide insights into potential comparisons with global trends and, in the process, contribute to the understanding of the concept of civic engagement with contextualized knowledge in India.

Method

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 26 young people and six focus group discussions (FGDs). The interviews were conducted between January and May 2010, and the FGDs were conducted between January and May 2011. Interviewees were selected through a purposive sampling process. Those who met one or more of the following criteria were included in the study: (1) writing blogs about any social issue; (2) working full-time or otherwise associated with a non-governmental organization (NGO); (3) serving in any community service organization; (4) has participated in any social protests, such as fasting or marching; and (5) has participated in any student elections on behalf of a political party.

The 26 interviewees comprised 12 women and 14 men. Fifteen interviewees were based in New Delhi. Eleven respondents came from different parts of the country and were interviewed by telephone. With two respondents, interviews were conducted in two phases over a two-day period. There were 22 unmarried respondents. The average age of the interviewees was 26.1 years ($SD = 3.9$ years). On average, the sample had 16 years of formal education ($SD = 1.6$ years), with 12 of them having a postgraduate degree and nine a university education. Twenty of the sample group followed Hinduism, and the rest were Christians.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide. The guide consisted of only open-ended questions that covered the following areas: the nature of civic, community and political activities defined by the interviewees, their experience and opinions about various political institutions, their ownership and usage of ICTs, their civic engagement or political participation and how they are different from their parents or earlier generations. In addition, a one-page structured questionnaire of

14 questions was given to respondents to find out their demographic details, use of the internet and various aspects of political attitudes and behaviors. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and was recorded using a digital audio recorder. The interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Hindi.

Additional data were collected using FGDs conducted with six different groups: all males who are activists defined by their full-time employment in NGOs; all females who are activists defined by their full-time employment in NGOs; all males who are doing some kind of community work but not working in NGOs; all females who are doing some kind of community work but not working in NGOs; all males who are not doing any community or NGO work; and all females who are not doing any community or NGO work. Each of the FGDs lasted approximately 90 minutes. A mix of Hindi and English was used as the medium of discussion, which was digitally recorded as well. The questionnaire for the interviews served as a moderation guide for the FGDs, with some additional questions on political apathy and custom-made questions for individual groups.

In each of the FGDs, an average of seven members participated, with a total of 40 people. Twelve participants were from NGOs, seven from the business outsourcing industry, five from the information technology industry and three were active political party members. The rest of them belonged to diverse occupations, including two doctors. The average age of the FGD participants was 27 years ($SD = 3.6$ years). Ten of the participants were married.

All the audio data were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Questions in the questionnaire and the moderation guide formed the basis for the primary coding of themes. Each of the themes was reread and further coded for understanding trends and patterns seen in the responses. During the first round of analysis, themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews were compared with those from the FGD data, and it was found that there were no differences. The observations from the FGDs reinforced the interview data, serving as a methodological triangulation in the study (Hall and Rist, 1999). This article thus does not differentiate between the two datasets, and excerpts from the interviews and FGDs are used interchangeably.

Findings

Lack of strong political interest

Although this study purposely sampled active youth, out of the 26 interviewees, seven said that they were very interested in politics, compared to 10 who said 'somewhat interested', seven 'not very interested' and two 'not at all interested'. When asked about the amount of attention paid to news about politics and government in the last week, nine of the interviewees responded 'quite a bit', seven said 'a great deal', seven said 'some' and three had paid only 'little attention'. On questions related to political efficacy, 14 of the respondents agreed that public officials did not care much about them. Ten of them did not trust the people who run the government to do what is right. Thirteen of them found that politics and government are too complicated to understand. Twenty-two felt that people like them have 'a say about what the government does'.

When asked about how many days they discussed politics with strangers whom they met online or offline, the response was, on average, none. Friends are the people with whom

politics is most discussed. Out of 19 who discussed politics with friends, six discussed all seven days a week, followed by four who discussed five days a week and five at least one day a week. It was seen that respondents did not generally choose to discuss politics with people at work or family members, as 14 respondents did not engage in any political discussions with colleagues or family at all. Only four respondents discussed politics with family members on all seven days, and with people at work only one day a week.

During this study, the respondents were probed further to understand why these otherwise active youth did not show a strong interest in politics. One of the most cited reasons for lack of a strong interest in politics and government is perceived corruption and the selfishness of politicians. In the words of one postgraduate student and member of a student union in college:

Elections are manipulative. Whatever I have observed, right from each and every process to the end step, I have seen that the system is totally corrupt. Right from the nomination, filling up the forms, you give bribes. After that, when you have filled [everything in] and when you are waiting for the elections, you have to spend a lot of money. You just have to keep pouring money into the market, otherwise you will not get the vote. What do you expect from these politicians after winning the elections?

Another respondent, who teaches street children on weekends, noted the everyday experience of a lack of faith in the government:

You can see that [corruption] everywhere. There are small, tiny things in your life. Like, if you are on the road and see a bribe being taken. Also, police are arresting people for wrong things. That puts a thing in your heart that this is not going right. And then you actually lose your faith in the police system and other systems. It's like that.

To some respondents, politics has become a game for a group of professional politicians to play for their own benefit. As one doctor, who runs free health clinics in rural locations, said:

Nowadays politics is very professional. No minister goes to the villages and listens or cares for the poor. The only thing they think or the only thing they are concerned about is that if I am spending 15 Lakhs [INR 1.5 million] for my election then I would earn in Crores [INR 10 million] later. It has become a very professional field now.

The notion that politicians are corrupt is very much internalized by the youth. One active NGO worker stated: 'I guess we are better off than politicians. At least we are doing something for the society.' The respondents also feel that the bureaucracy has joined hands with the politicians and is part of the corrupt system. Another respondent shared a joke about the way government functions:

When the [American] President George Bush Jr came to India, he asked [Indian Prime Minister] Mr Manmohan Singh what is that *juggadd*⁶ that you have in the country? I would like to have that. Mr Singh said that the government runs entirely on *juggadd*. This just shows that even though there are laws, rules and regulations, they are not followed. They have a

different way of doing stuff. It makes it difficult for people to adjust every now and then. Government is more like traffic rules. Traffic lights are there, but nobody actually follows that.

Despite a lack of faith in the politicians and government, the youth still believe in voting in elections. According to the respondents, the most common way of participation in the political institutions is voting in elections; as one of the respondents stated, 'voting is the only political thing I am involved in'. Another respondent declared:

One thing is that everyone should vote. Elections, whatever it is, I mean, you should vote. I take it very seriously, I guess. I am like, if I have the right to vote and I have the voting card and if you have a voting card, go ahead and vote. All I can say about election[s] is go and vote.

Another respondent, who is a research scholar, equated voting with civic activity:

I always vote for the right candidate. For me I just do this for my country and for me it is civic activity. It is like our view, and that is our vote, and it wouldn't be political because ... it means that it is for a particular group. I think those who are part of elections [as candidates or campaigning] and what they are doing can be called political activity. We are deciding to go vote and decide who should have power. What we do – voting – is civic activity.

Three of the respondents who are doing regular social work felt that youth should enter politics. In a way they are a step in front of the other respondents, contributing to community or society through their work even after realizing the inefficiency of the government. They are conscious of the potential role that could be played by youth in political activism. As one respondent said:

Politics is what politicians present and they are just representing the people and the public of their area. We have elected the politicians and their actual responsibility is to represent all of us to the higher authorities, to the parliament, to the country. Today young people think that politics is not their cup of tea, just because they think it's all dirty. We should not enter into this. It's all about *gundaraj* [the crime syndicate] and all these things. But I think that educated people like us should enter into [politics] and we should try everything to change the system. If we are working for it, say for 5 years or 10 years, definitely people among us would come up as politicians and people among us would elect us as a politician and we would definitely be able to change the system of our country.

Similar views were expressed by another respondent:

I would like good people to get into politics. The wrong that is going on there has to be stopped. By helping the orphanage and the poor people, I want young people like these to come and get into politics and work sincerely and make things right and help the country to go forward and do well.

In summary, those surveyed did not show a strong interest in politics, and did not discuss politics with strangers. The youth feel that the representatives of the people, the politicians, are corrupt, and are difficult to displace due to the youth's lack of money. Civil servants are perceived to be corrupt as well. It appears that some of them still

believe in certain political institutions, such as voting, and wish to have increased participation from the youth in replacing corrupt politicians.

Attitudes towards political institutions

Among various political institutions, the youth believe that local NGOs and mass media are more open to youth engagement. Different reasons were given by the youth. One respondent felt that opportunities to get 'spoiled very easily' are found in the mass media, whereas NGOs are 'actually for your upliftment and that can actually enhance a person's quality and their growth. If the youth goes and [does] something for the betterment [of society], it makes sure that they can be good citizens in the future as well.' Another respondent rated NGOs better than mass media, as they 'are open to youth engagement and lots of working opportunities are also there. They are the good avenues for the youth to be involved in.' The respondent added that mass media are also open, but unlike NGOs, difficult to enter as one needs 'communication skills and some special expertise'.

Some respondents said the reason NGOs are open to youth engagement is that volunteers do not cost anything:

The NGOs! Because it helps them to have volunteers. Because a lot of NGOs that have already made their roots in the market, they work on a contract basis or project basis. When they have permanent employees, it becomes difficult for the local NGOs to pay them, especially if they are small NGOs, as they lack funds. So volunteers do help, and it is open to every person irrespective of who he/she is.

Mass media are the next institution that the youth choose to explore and engage with. According to the respondents, mass media create 'a vast amount of awareness related to social, political or economic issues among the people'; 'have great potential to uplift Indian society'; 'are willing to listen to the youth'; and 'have the power to form the opinion of the public whether positive or negative'. Youth also find a career in mass media to be rewarding and challenging.

Among the various political institutions, the police remain a difficult one for youth engagement: 'The selection process is very corrupt. There are incidences of paying money and getting into the police. That's the reason they are not trustworthy.' Another respondent, meanwhile, said that the judiciary is not open as it is a 'very closed institution for anybody to get in except for lawyers and judges'.

Entering politics or being part of a political party is not a viable option for youth engagement for most of the participants in the study. The major barriers for youth to enter politics, according to the respondents, include lack of political lineage, monetary power and openness of current leaders. As one respondent stated:

Politics would be difficult for youth engagement because leaders are here for the past 10–15 years. We even faced this problem being members of youth congresses. There are certain [Members of the Legislative Assembly] and certain big people in the parties. They do not like youth to come forward just because they think that they are here for the past 10 years and for

so long and youth who are into this for just a couple of years and they are gaining a good public image. So they do not like all these things. So it's difficult for youth to enter into politics.

In summary, among the existing political institutions, the youth consider NGOs and mass media organizations as open to civic engagement. The youth felt that NGOs are better than the government or politicians in serving the people. Government institutions are not preferred for collaboration for civic purposes. None of the respondents cited the Ministry of Youth Affairs as an institution for possible involvement with civic work, despite its various initiatives in engaging youth.⁷ Involvement in political parties to be a part of civic engagement appears to be difficult, with entry barriers in terms of money and political muscle.

Involvement in civic activities

The youth who are not working with NGOs perform various activities that can be termed as activism. These people undertake these activities during the weekends and holidays. Some of the activities involve teaching slum kids, providing medical help to the needy or representing tribal groups to the government. These activities are directly aimed at bringing social change. Other youth are working in NGOs as paid employees. Their job is to perform activities that are similar to the ones listed above, but on an everyday basis, sometimes even during odd hours. Similar to the earlier group, they do not consider themselves activists, but as people doing noble social work for the development of society. Though there is the possibility that some of them worked purely for money, none of the respondents in this survey appeared to be doing so. Wages at NGOs are relatively low compared to private sector jobs, which highlights the need for passion to sustain NGOs' workforce.

Youth who participate in community work consider themselves to be doing 'social service'. In the words of a respondent working at an NGO:

This is full-time social work. What I feel is this is social work. My feelings that are attached to it say that it's not just an activity, but a contribution to society. Had it been just an activity. I would have joined a government job, where you follow a routine. Like I'd have become a school teacher. I'd have gone to school and come back and be free, and that could have been an activity. But in this work sometimes we are involved 24/7, either physically or mentally for work. I am fully dedicated to it. I have very less free time as compared to government jobs, as I am fully dedicated to my work. I take it as social work because it is completely different from the routine work. It is connected to the rights of people and humanity. So, my conscience says I am contributing to social work.

The element of personal satisfaction or gratification from social work is repeatedly cited by the youth in the sample. As one respondent put it:

I don't think I am doing this for others. It's for my happiness I am doing this. It gives me satisfaction. This work gives me joy and the feeling that I am doing it for myself only. I am not doing some favor for someone by doing this work. I feel it is satisfaction for me and not others. If I can put two Dalit [disadvantaged group] kids in school, it is my satisfaction as I could shape their life. They'll feel good in their life as I'll be able to change their life by doing so. I'll feel I have done something good.

Another respondent found different words to express the same sentiment:

Just wanted to do something good for the society. Nothing has really motivated me to do this. It's completely my will. I know after doing this I can proudly say that I have contributed to a noble cause, which also gives me satisfaction that I am doing something good in my day-to-day life.

Youth who are working in NGOs also place personal satisfaction before recognition. In the words of one respondent:

[Work at my NGO] is giving me immense satisfaction. This is the most important thing. And the recognition and the other things will come gradually. But they will come in the later part of your career, after completing a few more assignments and doing and achieving the goal of your project.

Most of them have started community work as part of the National Service Scheme, a government program wherein students in schools and colleges are expected to perform some stipulated amount of voluntary work as a part of their curriculum. The recollections of one respondent attest as much:

In standard 10, I remember we had this small activity in our school, in which you had to give like, 20 hours per year. You had to do some social work. We had to show that certificate. So I did that at that point of time, but later, now, I mean, two years back I just started off doing it again. Just, like, from your heart you have this calling. You know! Just to do something for other people. Because of that. That was the motivation. When I was busy with life, I was not able to do it. Since I have time, I am going here and doing it – that's it.

Another respondent who runs an NGO that provides education to slum kids in the evenings spoke about the trend of community work becoming part of college life:

See, it's all youth, because the organization was started as a youth-driven organization. The kind of volunteers we have are all youth. Most of them, 99% of them, are college-going students. On average, according to our calculations, every volunteer, in three months, is able to give 34 hours. That is the average.

Therefore, the core part of civic engagement is found in the realm of community work – or 'social work', as the respondents call it. Youth are either serving needy people during the weekends, if studying, or working as a full-time employee in NGOs for relatively little money. Personal satisfaction is cited as the most important reason for civic engagement. Interestingly, young people have started performing such community work as part of a government-initiated scheme at the school level.

Use of ICTs in civic activities

The data from the present study and extant literature suggest that youth in India have access to an adequate ICT infrastructure and that this could be exploited for civic

engagement. A recent study (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2011) conducted among 19,000 households, 68,000 individuals, 1000 small and medium enterprises and 500 cybercafes showed that 24% of urban households use the internet. Nearly three-quarters, 72%, are young people and students. But youth are using the internet primarily for general information and entertainment. Cybercafes are still the dominant access point for using the internet (37%). A limited disaggregation of preference of online services showed that 20% of school-going children, 30% of college students and 52% of working people use email. The next highest preference is for seeking 'various kinds of information' (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2011: 10), a use of the internet cited by 45% of school-going children, 37% of college students and 16% of working people.

According to the 26 interviewees in this study, the internet is used as a source for news about politics and government only two days ($SD = 2.7$ days) per week. Newspapers are used the most often, at 5.3 days per week ($SD = 2.7$ days), closely followed by television, at 5.1 days per week ($SD = 2.4$ days). Radio is the least used news source, at only 1.8 days per week ($SD = 2.5$ days). The low use of the internet for news is surprising given the relatively long duration of internet use ($M = 10$ years) among the interviewees. The frequency of internet usage was relatively high for 19 interviewees, who logged on 'several times a day'; four used the internet 'about once a day', two went online '1–2 days per week' and one logged on '3–5 days per week'.

All participants used mobile phones and had access to computers and the internet. Some of them owned laptops as well. They declared ICTs to be important in their everyday life. They used mobile phones every day in their work and in personal interaction. Those who are working had access to the internet in the office. Most of their information-seeking activities depended on the internet. The internet was also used extensively for personal use, such as entertainment and social networking. Of all ICTs, mobile phones were considered very important and influential. Participants declared mobile phone to be effective tools in communicating to others who are part of their activities.⁸

For those who are employees or managers of NGOs, ICTs were deemed to be very important, as they helped compensate for a lack of necessary office facilities. In the words of one NGO worker:

[A laptop] helps in a lot of ways. What happens is, like now, we don't have an office space, but we have a laptop. It saves us a lot of paperwork, as it stores a lot of data in one small device and retrieves it whenever required. It's good because then you don't have to use cabinets and folders and sort out all the files and all.

ICTs were also used to coordinate volunteers and collaborative work:

We have a complete database. We have the volunteers' names, phone numbers and addresses. We also have the names of students who are coming to school. We have to contact them or email them. In that way we use the laptops and cell phones. Cell phones are used for calling and contacting people anytime and anywhere. So, they are quite useful to us.

Another respondent highlighted the use of texting in coordinating with volunteers:

Volunteers, at times, we message them because not all of them are able to access me all the time, so what we do is we send them bulk mail from the cell phones that we have; that is also very important to us, [and is] related to work.

Youth were also using ICTs to build communities of people who can form a base of support and to liaise with other like-minded organizations. They also observed that information can be passed to NGOs' various stakeholders – volunteers, coordinators and recipients of their services – easily and freely through ICTs. As one college-based community worker put it:

I started the work by searching on Google. That's how I started. That's how I made some contacts, and that's how I did all the work, just by typing on the computer, getting printouts, sending it out. . . . For example, if I have to organize a blood donation camp, I do not need to meet anyone before that. I just look up their number from their websites, give them a call, and have an exchange of telephone calls. That's how I organize blood donation camps. That's all I will [have to] do. I will just search for the information on the internet. That's how I do for ICT. Whatever activity we do, we take some photographs, write a blog, article, and put that up on our website, on our blogs along with the photographs and send to all on the mailing list.

Youth who are either studying or working elsewhere, but working with NGOs during weekends, did not use ICTs much in their activism, apart from receiving information on their mobile phones. As most of their work is delivered in person, ICTs are used only at the personal level. Youth who are working in NGOs full-time as a paid job or in the field of politics as a career used ICTs extensively in their job and performed social, political and civic activities on a daily basis. One respondent justified the use of ICTs as follows:

If in today's time we used bows and arrows to fight a war, what would happen? So we have to and we must use the technologies that are there in the present time. They have been made to benefit you, but it's sometimes misused too. I would have used them if I could. I would rather carry a CD than a book.

Another respondent similarly underlined the importance of ICTs:

I think laptops, computers, cell phones, fax machines, these are found even in the smallest NGOs, and they have become a necessity, even if it is just starting out . . . even if they have only a computer with an internet connection and a cell phone. Without this it would be difficult to work [today].

Other forms of virtual engagement among youth are limited to a small number of activities. This online activism involves signing petitions online or forwarding chain emails to create awareness about social issues among their friends. They do not follow up these issues with other activities. These youth do not use ICTs to raise mass consciousness, either by aggressive online campaigning or through discussions.

In summary, the ICT infrastructure seems to be adequate for urban youth and mobile phones are extensively used both for personal and civic activities. The low use of ICTs to access information related to politics or to engage in online activism corroborates the

lack of a strong interest in politics among India's youth. Instead, ICTs are mostly used for community work by volunteers and NGO workers as a logistic tool, rather than to mobilize people around a cause.

Conclusion

India appears to be a fertile ground for civic engagement among youth, who constitute more than one-third of the total population and are struggling with a corrupt political system and a rising unemployment rate. The findings of this study, based on 26 in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions, are counter-intuitive. Most of the respondents, despite their involvement in some kind of civic activity, did not show a strong interest in political proceedings, citing as their reasons corruption and a perceived inability to effect political change. Among the various forms of civic engagement, community work such as helping needy people during non-working hours or after school predominate among the youth. There are also young people who engage with the community as paid work through NGOs. Those who currently participate in community work were often introduced to it during their school years. Personal satisfaction is cited as the primary motive for participation in civic activities.

The sample for this survey had access to mobile phones, computers and the internet, which they used in their everyday lives but did not fully exploit for activism. The internet is used extensively for personal purposes like entertainment and social networking. Among all ICTs, mobile phones were considered the most important and used for communication needs like coordinating with fellow volunteers or NGOs. The NGOs helped compensate for their infrastructure inadequacies through ICTs, especially laptops. However, the use of ICTs for political uprising or online activism is not evident among the youth interviewed in this study.

This study's findings reinforce the scholarly observation that today's youth are apolitical, but with some notable deviations. Though the youth are disinterested in politics, they expressed faith in elections and opined that one needs to exercise one's vote. They also wished that more youth could participate in election politics. The lack of online activism in translating this wish into action could possibly be explained by the youth's lack of motivation to rise up. The extant motivation is a result of the perception that political participation beyond voting is not possible due to young people's lack of financial strength and the resistant power of incumbent politicians. However, this does not rule out the possibility of future activism, as the youth are capable and opportunities are available. The conditions in India would seem to reorder the stages in Carpinì's (2000) definition of activism, in which motivation precedes opportunities and capabilities.

This study found that among the youth in India, the community service dimension of civic engagement is greater than the political activism dimension. Although community work falls into the broader conceptualization of civic engagement (Adler and Goggin, 2005), it is important to understand why other forms of engagement are not emerging. Despite rising inequality, unemployment and marginalization, and despite endemic corruption, the youth in India are not resorting to political means to effect change. One possible explanation is the level of freedom in India's democratic system, in which the youth can air their frustrations in various ways, including voting. However, the option of

changing the political landscape through voting is perceived as difficult, as all politicians are perceived to be bad. Direct participation in elections as candidates is also ruled out, due to high entry barriers. As a consequence, the youth tend to have weak political interests and instead turn to a more receptive field for their contributions – namely, community work. Active NGOs in particular are able to harness this energy and encourage significant youth engagement in community work. That is why the extant ICT infrastructure is being used for these non-political activities.

This study did not find any support for Bimber's (2000) argument that by aiding a single individual in participating in multiple causes simultaneously, ICTs produce civic engagement marked by pluralism or fragmentation. Even if one focuses only on community work, the number of activities Indian youth get involved in is not all that pluralistic. Because the community work is locally oriented, the level of mobilization required is minimal, as is the need for large-scale information processing. In other words, the overall use of ICTs in activism is relatively limited. As a result, the nature of civic engagement will remain as it is today, and youth-driven political upheaval – with or without ICTs – appears unlikely in India for the foreseeable future.

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Notes

1. For further details see: en.rsrf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html.
2. hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/IND.html.
3. povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/IND.
4. For details see: cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/.
5. For further details see: www.csc-india.org/.
6. *Juggad* is a Hindi term for manipulation or doing something as a quick fix, but not necessarily legal. In this context this is has a negative connotation. In the emerging innovation literature, *juggad* is also used as positive term denoting frugal innovations.
7. The Ministry has various programs that either enhance the skill capabilities of young people or harness the power of young people in nation-building activities. Some of them include the National Youth Corps, which engages young volunteers in nation-building programs as decided by the respective regional governments, and Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan, which generates employment opportunities by encouraging self-employment among youth. Students at schools and colleges are encouraged to complete a stipulated number of hours doing community work under the National Service Scheme. However it is not clear whether these programs have created the desired impact among the youth.
8. Another good example of mobilizing people through ICTs for social protests is Anna Hazare's movement, India Against Corruption, 2011. However the movement was not able to repeat the success of mobilizing people in the second phase (see indiatoday.intoday.in/story/gandhian-anna-greeted-by-asparse-gathering-in-mumbai/1/166128.html). The third phase ended with limited participation and without meeting its stated objectives.

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