ICTs AND POLITICAL ORGANIZING IN INDIA

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Abstract

Indian electoral politics has increasingly become the province of the corrupt and the criminal. Yet, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), including the Internet, could enable independent-minded or idealistic political aspirants to break into electoral politics. This is possible because of the increase in the absolute numbers of the Indian middle classes, who also have better access to ICTs.

This paper describes three initiatives that attempted to harness ICTs for political mobilization. One involves the formation of a new political party that drew substantially on ICT use for its initial impact. Another involves the virtual management of political mobilization against a government policy. And a third is focused on an attempt to engage educated, middle class voters in the electoral process in a constituency designed for them.

Each of these initiatives proved unsuccessful. Part of the reason is the apathy and disengagement of the urban educated classes from electoral politics. Another aspect is the importance of an offline presence to balance out the online initiative—that is a key comparative advantage of existing political parties.

Overall, there are various lessons to be learned from these early Indian e-political initiatives. Yet ICTs retain the potential to become a transformative force that may enable the construction of a virtual vote bank with tangible political impact in select Indian constituencies.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2002, the Indian Parliament passed legislation mandating that candidates for political office declare their financial assets and liabilities, education, and criminal record (if any). This legislation was passed in response to a civil society-initiated public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of India. Political parties across the ideological spectrum, in a rare show of unity, had initially opposed the Supreme Court's ruling strongly. However, they decided to pass legislation in parliament to preempt the Supreme Court's more active involvement in the issue (Gowda and Sridharan, 2007).

This episode is worth narrating because it illustrates two features about Indian politics: 1. The fact that candidates for political office have to declare their possible criminal antecedents reflects the dramatic decline in the quality of political actors in India; 2. The fact that an activist civil society group could find a way to use the legal system to bring about political reform suggests that the Indian political system still has effective self-correcting mechanisms.

Overall, however, electoral politics in India has increasingly become the playground of the corrupt and the criminal. One factor that promotes corrupt politicians over their clean counterparts is the opacity of political funding and the escalating costs of elections. Krishna Murthy and Patidar (2005) quote the Indian Supreme Court: *The political parties in their quest for power spend more than [250 million dollars] on the General Election (Parliament alone), yet nobody accounts for the bulk of the money so spent and there is no accountability anywhere.* When it comes to fielding criminals as party candidates, no major political party seems immune. Bannerjee and Pande (2007) state that in 2006, 30.4% of members of India's parliament in the age group 36-45 had criminal records. Further, in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh the fraction of "candidates with criminal records increased from 3.5% in 1969 to 7.69% in 1980 and 16.28% in 1996."

The Indian public seems to demonstrate its disgust with the political system by regularly voting out incumbents. Unfortunately for the electorate, while they throw one set of "rascals," the lack of alternative political actors who differ qualitatively from the rejected set ensures that they do not really get a different outcome with the new set of elected representatives. Just as India seems set to become an economic power to reckon with, the quality of its political leadership seems to be declining drastically, leading a commentator to note that: "India has a virtuous cycle working in economics and a vicious cycle working in politics" (Friedman, 2004).

Can this sorry situation be turned around? Can technology provide a way for aspiring politicians who are clean and without criminal antecedents to level the political playing field? Can E-Politics help transform the Indian political context? This paper examines the experiences of three initiatives that attempted to change the nature and content of Indian politics by harnessing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in politically innovative ways. After considering these experiences, we discuss the challenges and possibilities for harnessing ICTs to generate a political base and to use them to break through into the political realm.

The very presence of e- initiatives in Indian politics may elicit surprise, given the extremely low penetration of ICTs in India—by Keniston's (2003) estimate only 1 Indian in 200 has Internet access. Another digital divide arises from ICT-based activity being generally in English when the vast majority of Indians are literate, if at all, only in native languages (Keniston, 2003). However, India includes urban pockets where ICT penetration is higher than the national average, where substantial numbers understand English, and where the knowledge workers with whom India is becoming synonymous worldwide are concentrated. It is in these limited but influential contexts

where e-political initiatives are emerging. (For further discussion of some of the applications of ICTs in the Indian political realm, see Gowda, 2007).

II. ICTs AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW POLITICAL PARTIES

India has recently witnessed the emergence of a political party that attempted to mobilize support, funds and publicity through the Internet. Lok Paritran, (www.lokparitran.org) was formed by a small group of well-educated urban youngsters who came into contact with one another in elite institutions such as the Indian Institute of Technology and New York University. These youngsters shared a common motivation to bring about social transformation. However, their individual experiments with voluntary work with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) left them dissatisfied on account of the limited scale and impact of such operations. Even though most were engineers and only a couple had training in Economics, and none had any history of political involvement, they decided that the best way they could have a transformational impact on India would be through the route of active politics. They formed a political party, applied for formal recognition from the Election Commission in November 2005, which was granted on February 24, 2006.[1]

When questioned on the timing for the emergence of this political party in the absence of some political crisis or movement, Shukla emphasized that the party was an "outward/physical manifestation of an undercurrent that society is experiencing." The unique feature of this party is that it has decided to bypass the other stages in the emergence of political parties and plunge into electoral politics directly. While composed of youngsters with no electoral experience, and limited in their grassroots base, the party has deliberately chosen to go to states where elections are scheduled, recruit candidates and campaign, even without any prior presence in that state. The party leadership's argument is that elections represent pivotal events akin to the "*samudra manthan*" (the churning of the ocean in Hindu mythology), from which capable leaders will emerge to take on the leadership mantle in the future. Elections also bring a tangible focus to efforts at voter and fund mobilization, and bring with them an excitement about being involved in active competition that is attractive to volunteers.

The Internet, along with traditional media, played a crucial role in spreading awareness about this fledgling party and enabled it to gain legitimacy. The first article about the party appeared in the print media in the Mumbai (Bombay) edition of the Times of India on January 20, 2006, followed soon after by an article in the Bangalore edition of the same newspaper. This coverage focused on the novelty of graduates of the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology entering the political arena. The newspaper articles also triggered substantial television coverage on national and regional news channels.

The digital version of the first story in the Times of India was passed around innumerable times around the world through the Internet phenomenon of "chain mail," Chain mail is the process whereby an e-mail is forwarded by one person to his/her circle of friends, who, in turn, pass it on their corresponding circles of friends. Within a few iterations, the mail circulates exponentially and has the potential to reach millions of e-mail users. (However, unless the e-mail content is embedded with some sort of counter, it is not possible to track the actual reach of such chain mails). Lok Paritran found that wherever they went or campaigned, people had heard of them; this was also the case across the state of Tamil Nadu, where they had embarked on fielding candidates for elections to the state legislature.

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[1] Substantial portions of this article are based on an interview with a member of Lok Paritran's founding team, Ajit Shukla (who has since left Lok Paritran to found a similar party of which he is President).

The number of hits on their website also showed a rapid rise after the publication and broadcast of news stories and the circulation of chain mails, and the e-mail address listed on the party's website also registered substantial traffic. According to Shukla, in the first three weeks after the news coverage, the party received 5000 e-mails at that address. During the election period, the e-mail traffic shot up to 1000 a day. The party found its resources stretched to even attempt to respond to these e-mails. However, e-mails were more of a supportive nature urging the party to go ahead with its good work, and did not necessarily require active responses. A number of e-mails were emotionally charged in their content indicating that the party had touched a chord among citizens around India and abroad.

Another development was the emergence of online communities focused on the party. The Internet has recently spawned networking community sites such as Ryze and Orkut. These, along with older Internet features such as Yahoo! Groups, allow people with common interests to come together online to share ideas and information. According to Shukla, one online community set up by a Lok Paritran volunteer on Orkut has reached 7500 members. Various Yahoo! Groups have also been formed, with some geographically focused on the actual legislative constituencies where Lok Paritran candidates were contesting the polls; some online groups opposed to the party have also emerged. Lok Paritran also embarked on an online membership drive. Party leaders travel around the country to conduct meetings where online members are invited to formally join the party.

Lok Paritran also used the Internet to raise funds for the elections. Volunteers circulated appeals for funds on different online groups and communities. According to Shukla, this resulted in the party being able to raise nearly Rupees 200,000 online (Rupees 25,000 was the single largest contribution and Rupees 300 the smallest). During the actual elections, the party spent only Rupees 400,000 in total in all the seven constituencies in which it fielded candidates; they raised the rest of the money through individual contributions of small amounts. (Incidentally, these election expenditure figures are minuscule when compared to the resources devoted to elections by mainstream political parties). While Lok Paritran likely has sympathizers among the Indian *diaspora*, the party was not in a position to raise funds using e-payment platforms such as PayPal, as the party did not have the requisite permission from the Foreign Currency Regulation Board to receive funds from Indian citizens abroad (Non-Indians are not permitted to contribute to Indian political campaigns).

In its electoral debut, Lok Paritran decided to field candidates in seven legislative assembly constituencies in Tamil Nadu state: five in Chennai city, and two in rural constituencies around the state. Through Internet-based mobilization, the party was able to secure numerous volunteers who took time off from their professional careers to campaign door-to-door. The party also conducted roadside public meetings as well as bicycle and pedestrian rallies. Shukla opined that while the e-media and print media primed the voters, it was vital for the party to connect directly with voters on the ground, as people wanted to see their candidates in person. The campaign also witnessed significant circulation of SMSes (short message service or text messaging feature on mobile phones) through volunteers, as bulk text messaging is prohibited in the state for political purposes.

In three of the seven constituencies that Lok Paritran contested, the votes they polled turned out to be decisive in affecting the results, leading to the defeat of candidates from mainstream parties who were earlier favoured to win (Sify.com, 2006). In two constituencies, their candidates secured more votes than a national party, the Bharatiya Janata Party. Overall, the party secured 34,000 votes across the state.

After the elections, the party continues to concentrate on membership drives and on upgrading its online presence through planned official blogs and forums. Currently, there are many unofficial blogs and online communities that discuss the party and its activities. After the election, some of the party's candidates in Tamil Nadu split from the party alleging caste discrimination. Some members of the founding team have returned to careers in the United States of America and some others have launched their own party. The party continues to use its website for its announcements and reports. This suggests that it will continue to be targeted at e-enabled individuals around the country, while also being accessible to the Indian diaspora.

Analyzing the election performance of the fledgling party, we can conclude that the widespread media coverage, offline and online, given to the party enabled it to make its presence felt. While India's democracy is celebrated, justly, for bringing in hitherto disenfranchised groups into the political space (Yadav, 1999), this party can be credited for having re-enfranchised some of India's apathetic and electorally disengaged educated middle classes. The numerous supportive e-mails and blogs visible through an Internet search suggest that the party has tapped a latent yearning for change. The party's performance in Mylapore, where its neophyte candidate was able to secure around 10,000 votes, suggests that Lok Paritran was able to walk away with the protest vote against "politics as usual." However, the party has not been able to repeat this level of performance in any of the other elections it has contested after its initial electoral foray. In spite of its efforts at enrolling voters online and then trying to engage them offline, the party may be too much on the fringe of politics to really catch on beyond its novelty value.

It does not help that the party has hardly spelled out a detailed ideology or articulated positions on issues. People seem to be positively disposed towards it, based significantly (or solely?) on the educational credentials of the party's founders. On the one issue where the party has staked out a position—its opposition to quotas for people from disadvantaged backgrounds in educational institutions—it has the ideological space to itself because no mainstream political party in India has taken such a stand and it could cash in on this issue (which may generate fleeting support—see the next section). Yet, overall, the party's ability to launch its political activities in the electoral arena owes a lot to the Internet and to ICTs.

III. ICTs AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION: YOUTH FOR EQUALITY

Youth for Equality (YFE)[2] was formed as an umbrella organization to mobilize youth for the 2006 anti-reservation protests. It was formed by students of some medical colleges in New Delhi to counter the Government of India's move to implement 27% reservation (quotas) for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in prestigious institutes of higher education (twenty central universities, the Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, and nine premier medical colleges including the All India Institute of Medical Sciences).

YFE attacks not reservations or quotas for disadvantaged people but the fact that this policy is implemented using caste as a yardstick. YFE was able to mobilize students and professionals, and it claims that it has nearly 20,000 members across more than 1,000 cities (including outside India) and across more than 9,000 institutions. Right from the beginning it resolved to be a loose organization without visible leaders and its activities were coordinated by a core group of leaders whose names never appeared in the press or on their website. This core group was dispersed across the country and so their meetings were typically virtual. The organization did not also issue a call for funds in

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[2] This section is based on material available on the YFE website (www.youthforequality.org) and an email interview with Kumar Gaurav, a key YFE leader during the height of their agitation.

the initial days of the movement. However, costs were kept low because YFE was able to coordinate online and offline activities, including e-petitions, strikes, and other demonstrations entirely through the use of ICTs. The movement received tremendous coverage on English language television channels, some of which seemed to be advocating the YFE's position openly. (For a commentary on the caste biases of India's media, see Varadarajan, 2006).

YFE's activities were very successful initially and its call for a strike received nation-wide support crippling the medical infrastructure of India. In addition to a complete roll-back of the proposed reservation scheme, the striking protesters had demanded the establishment of an expert committee comprising members from non-political organizations to review the existing reservation policy and find out whether reservation for OBCs was required at all.

The talks between the Government and the students failed. Despite its earlier assurances, the Government decided to proceed with reservations of seats on the basis of caste. As a concession, the Government increased the number of seats in affected colleges in such a manner that the absolute number of unreserved seats remained the same, even though about 27% of seats were now earmarked for OBCs (The mathematics worked out in such a way that class sizes needed to be increased by nearly 52% in order to maintain the same absolute number of unreserved, open seats.

YFE is now continuing its fight in the law courts. It is now facing the consequence of not having organized formally and not having raised funds. The Mumbai (Bombay) unit of YFE has since registered itself as a non-profit organization and is trying to raise funds to meet the legal expenses involved in challenging the Government's decision (the appeal is available on its website: http://yfemumbai.blogspot.com/). While YFE was able to draw people out to support their agitation—particularly online—where participation is relatively costless, they now seem to be confronted with the well-known free rider phenomenon.

YFE members have also begun to engage varied electoral processes. A member of YFE contested the elections to the Mumbai local government and placed fourth. YFE also put up candidates for the elections to the Delhi University Students Union and none of these candidates were successful. One may regard this lack of success calls into question the claims of YFE to represent a significant section of public opinion. However, a more charitable reading of the results is that YFE possibly would have had more success if elections were held at the time of their main agitation. At that time, its virtual mobilization had indeed succeeded in getting sections of the typically apathetic middle classes to come out on the streets to demonstrate. Now, however, these activists are back to their traditional routines, which do not seem to involve political action—especially for a cause that seems to be lost. Thus what seemed to be a massive mobilization of voters through the use of ICTs has ultimately not demonstrated staying power for the long haul.

IV. ICTs AND VOTER MOBILIZATION: CITIZENS INITIATIVE

India has a bicameral parliament and a federal structure. However, only five of India's states have a bicameral legislature. Karnataka is one such state with a permanent upper house—the Legislative Council. Among the different ways in which a person can be elected to the Legislative Council is through the Graduates constituency. The electorate in such a constituency comprises of graduates who reside in the geographic area covered by that Graduates constituency.

The Bangalore Graduates constituency covers a geographic area with a population of about 8 million according to the 2001 census. While exact figures on the number of graduates who reside within the constituency's geographic boundaries are unavailable, given Bangalore's prowess as a

centre of the knowledge economy, we surmise that there are about a million graduates residing in this region. The Graduates constituency provides an opportunity to this large group to participate in the election of their own unique representative.

However, during the election held in June 2000, the number of votes polled was around 25,000. That is, approximately 2% of the entire graduate voter pool in Bangalore participated in the election where they had an opportunity to elect their own unique representative. This is in total contrast to voter turnout in direct elections to parliament and state assemblies, which typically see voter participations of upwards of 50%. The phenomenally low voter turnout by educated voters in a constituency uniquely available to them is intriguing.

A major cause of the low participation appears to be the cumbersome registration process for the Graduates constituency. There is a crucial difference between being a voter in a general election versus being a voter in the Graduates constituency election. For the former, voters are registered directly by the government; for the latter, voters have to register on their own initiative. Every six years, the list of voters for the Graduates constituency election is prepared afresh. A potential voter has to apply along with proof of graduation.

In order to overcome the very low participation by educated voters in electing their own unique representative, a voter mobilization campaign was launched in Bangalore using both online and offline efforts. This campaign was initiated by a neutral, non-partisan platform called Citizens Initiative (www.citizensinitiative.org), with which the author was actively involved. Under this banner, five eminent citizens of Bangalore endorsed a voter enrolment campaign titled "End the Apathy." Citizens Initiative concentrated significantly on the online component of the campaign, particularly for cost reasons, as its was a voluntary, non-funded effort. Offline strategies were used to enable comparison of different tactics' effectiveness and to ensure that more voters were enrolled. Ultimately, as the exercise evolved, numerous practical challenges, including the difficulty of tracking e-mail flows, or the entangling of online and offline efforts, made it difficult to obtain precise data on the results attributable to different strategies.

As the focus was on the graduate population in the Bangalore region, and easy access to proof of graduation was required, Citizens Initiative decided to focus on locations where large numbers of graduates could be reached easily. Hence corporate offices were the first targets, for the following reasons: Corporate offices are an ideal location to find large numbers of graduates. It is possible to obtain all necessary documents for enrolment from the company's Human Resources department potentially making the registration process less cumbersome. Employees typically have access to the Internet, thus making companies the perfect setting for the E-voter registration experiment.

However, entry into these companies involved a great deal of preparation on various fronts. To begin with, most companies were wary of allowing any kind of political mobilization/activity on their campuses. This is where the non-partisan Citizens Initiative banner opened doors, and its appeal to voters to enrol was eventually circulated through Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) to employees through official e-mail channels.

In parallel, Citizens Initiative launched a website (www.citizensinitiative.org) to announce the campaign and its mission. The website served two functions: 1. To spread awareness about the Bangalore Graduates Constituency election and thereby improve voter enrolment; and 2. To e-enable the registration process partially, by providing a form on the website that could be filled online, that also reduced the tediousness of filling the form. The website was also linked to a database so that Citizens Initiative could collect contact information, including e-mail addresses.

This was later used to inform people about the date of the election and to provide non-partisan information on all candidates.

The company enrolment drives were systematic with a well-planned poster and e-campaign. The campaign was initiated with an e-mail from the Citizens Initiative to the CEO. The CEOs, in most cases, connected the Citizens Initiative team to their colleagues who were put in charge of conducting the drive internally. The actual execution typically began after detailed discussions with these internal representatives, and often involved considerable time and coaxing before implementation. The employees were sent e-mail via their internal network informing them about the campaign. The email was circulated with attachments including the registration form (later fillable online), "End the Apathy" message and Frequently Asked Questions. Posters and drop boxes were strategically placed in some company campuses to reinforce the message and encourage participation. From this stage onwards, Citizens Initiative took care of the registration process. Overall, the process was designed to be as smooth and effortless for company employees as possible.

However, this initiative resulted in the enrolment of just upwards of 3000 voters, while the message had reached upwards of 60,000 potential graduate voters. In comparison with these innovative online methods, traditional political parties utilized large numbers of party cadres or volunteers to conduct voter enrolment drives. They started the process much earlier than Citizens Initiative. Without a grass roots mobilization effort of the scale employed by political parties, Citizens Initiative was limited in its impact.

On analysis, one reason for the failure of the Citizens Initiative drive could be that there was a significant lack of awareness about the constituency (Shile, 2006) on the part of graduate voters. Further, it is possible that the "End the Apathy" campaign of Citizens Initiative contained a general, "do-good, be-an-active-citizen" type of message. But this was a message without a messenger, in the sense that there was no candidate for the potential voter to identify with. Hence, voters did not generally put in the effort to register, even though the process was made as simple as was feasible. In contrast, regular parties enrolled voters on behalf of known candidates and that led to a certain focused commitment from their target voters.

Ultimately, the voter turnout in June 2006 was about the same as that at the election six years earlier, indicating that educated voters in Bangalore are not significantly interested in the election of their own representative, even when the registration process has been made simple and ICT-enabled through a civil society initiative. It takes more than technological enabling to ensure the participation of Bangalore's educated voters. Still, the initiative taken by civil society to harness ICTs to enable the educated to participate in electing their own representative provides insights into the practical challenges of mobilizing voters online.

V. TO E OR NOT TO E?

Politics is significantly about power. Any political player who wants to be taken seriously needs to demonstrate that he or she commands some aspect of power, e.g., the support of a sizeable section of voters for whatever reason. (In India these reasons could include ideology, family track record, fame because of success in public service or other fields, star status from films or sports, caste, religion, etc.) A political player would be able to generate respect from other politicians when those others see this player as one who can not just garner votes for him/herself but as one who can transfer votes to other candidates in different elections where the same region figures as part of a constituency (federal, state and local level elections). In sum, a political player needs to command a vote bank in order to be reckoned with. Such a vote bank need not involve a majority of voters in a

constituency—as long as the vote share commanded is larger than the historic average margin of victory, that vote bank will help a political player win friends and influence politics.

So the challenge becomes one of constructing a vote bank and demonstrating political power. It is in this arena that ICTs can enable a political aspirant to break through many of the traditional barriers to political mobilization—the need for men, money, and materials. ICTs may enable the formation of online communities that match offline constituencies. They may enable a virtual vote bank to be formed. The challenge for the aspirant is to demonstrate to the political world that such a vote bank indeed exists and can be harnessed to political advantage. This may require the fine-tuning of the virtual vote bank in order to ensure that it maps to political constituencies on the ground. This may also require that an online campaign along the theme of "Make your vote count" is actually implemented offline. This may require the formation of a political community with decentralized leadership where each key voter is in charge of exhorting a handful of other voters to come to the polls to translate their armchair idealism into tangible votes in support of their agendas.

Thus, while e-mobilization has potential when matched with offline activities, it also can give rise to many conundrums: 1. E-activity, far from being costless, can be extremely expensive in terms of establishment and maintenance of websites. In multilingual India, it would be imperative to maintain a web presence in at least two languages to avoid being characterized as elitist. Paradoxically, then, the costs of e-activity may make it a possible option only for well-heeled candidates; thus it hardly acts as a leveler of the electoral playing field. 2. E-activity involves numerous "pathologies." Voters and supporters may often expect personalized email responses from candidates, or at least some level of email response. Given the numbers of voters involved in Indian elections, just handling email may need to be outsourced to a customer service firm! Further, online discussions often require monitoring to prevent abuse and flame wars. And passions, once expended online, may not result in voters trudging to the polling booth on election day.

Thus one central challenge for creative and committed leaders is to harness the Internet to build a politically-engaged and electorally effective community. Drawing on the lessons from numerous candidates and initiatives worldwide, candidates "could draw on the interactive elements of new media technologies to create a new style of personalized, accessible and ongoing relationship with voters" (Ward, Lusoli and Gibson, 2007; 211). But if there is a central lesson from the three Indian e-political initiatives discussed above, it is the importance of an off-line presence. This seems to be the comparative advantage of political parties in India—the ability to get some section of voters to overcome free-riding tendencies to participate actively in the electoral process. Without the ability to draw people out, at least to vote, e-mobilization may be in vain.

And there remains one more, larger challenge—that of engaging India's middle classes on political issues. Wessel (2004), building on commentary by scholars of the middle class such as Bidwai (1984) and Varma (1998), points out that "solidarity with the poor and leadership of the nation towards prosperity for all are a middle-class responsibility, yet this responsibility is not assumed since it is incompatible with the middle-class orientation towards personal economic success and consumption." (108) Her informants do not "see their class privilege as obliging them to work for the greater good of the nation." (108). Any candidate aspiring to mobilize the e-savvy middle classes needs to bear this in mind before attempting to storm the barricades of the political system.

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