The World’s Youngest Democracy

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Article at a glance

• In addition to being the world’s largest democracy, India is also the youngest – 54 percent of the population is under the age of 25.

• Unfortunately, many young people are struggling economically. They focus on day-to-day needs rather than on democracy and politics.

• Youth organizations should harness the power of technology and social media to get young people involved in elections and engaged in government.

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Introduction

“India is the world’s largest democracy” is now a phrase which I am sure you are bored of hearing. There is, however, a much less bandied about but equally true phrase: “India is the world’s youngest democracy.”

Today, 54 percent of India’s population is below the age of 25. Over seven out of 10 Indians are below the age of 35. The Population Council of India estimates that there are 315 million people between the ages of 10 and 24. It is estimated that there were 350 million Indians in the politically crucial age group of 15-34 in the year 2000. This number may rise to 485 million by 2030. By 2020, the average Indian will be 29 years old as compared to 37 in China, 45 in Western Europe and 49 in Japan.

This swelling population of young people in India was at the forefront of the recent protest led by Anna Hazare for an anti-corruption watchdog. The movement, which attracted global attention, has been described differently by different people. Some have called it a revolution, some a “people’s movement,” and Anna Hazare himself described it as a “second freedom struggle.” While commentators disagree on the lasting significance of the movement, they unanimously agree that the Indian youth were at the forefront of the movement.

For the first time in decades, young educated Indians were active, enthusiastic participants in a political movement. This is significant because it is this very section of the population that has been the most indifferent to politics since India’s economic reforms of 1991. From Delhi’s Ramlila Maidan (Ramlila Grounds) to smaller towns across the country, young Indians fueled the movement, be it on Facebook, Twitter, sending mass mobile messages, or distributing leaflets and pamphlets about the movement in public places. Suddenly, wearing caps with “I am Anna” written on them became fashionable with young Indians. Their enthusiastic participation has shown that Indian youth are indeed eager to actively take part in politics and nation-building.

To play a role in Indian politics commensurate with their numbers, however, will mean that the youth have to go beyond political demonstrations and become politically aware and empowered citizens who actively engage with democracy.

In this essay, I shall explore the following:

1. What do we define as “youth” and “role?”
2. The current role of the youth in Indian politics.
3. The causes for the youth’s disinterest in politics.
4. Ways in which young Indians can play a major role in politics and democracy, including how to empower the youth to play that role.

Defining “role” and “youth”

Before we discuss the participation of the youth, we need to understand what we mean by the “role” of youth, and the term “youth” itself. We can only do so in the context of Indian democracy.

On the one hand, India’s democracy organizes the world’s largest free and fair elections, and is hailed for eight percent GDP growth and its prowess in information technology. It is acclaimed as a powerhouse of economic growth and touted as one of the BRIC nations along with Brazil, Russia and China.

On the other hand, India is also a country where 800 million people consume less than 20 rupees (50 cents) a day. It is a democracy where more than 64 years after independence, hundreds of millions of people live without basic amenities such as electricity, water and roads. India is a democracy that ranks at a pathetic 134 out of 173 nations on the Human Development Index.

When we talk about the Indian youth, we need to remember that young Indians are not just English-speaking, educated, youth who live in big cities like Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai. They
are not just software engineers writing codes for globally renowned IT companies and students studying in America’s best universities. Youth are also living in rural areas and in the slums of big cities. For these youth, their biggest worry may be where to get their next meal from, and their greatest concern that they do not have a toilet at home. India’s “youth” includes hundreds of thousands of children working as domestic servants and on construction sites, and begging at traffic signals.

There are millions of youngsters for whom this essay is nothing but a page of hieroglyphics as they have never seen the inside of a school. The tragedy in India is that this segment of the youth is so busy struggling to survive that democracy and politics mean nothing, while the more affluent youth, who can bring about change, have until now been indifferent to politics.

The role of the youth is not just to cast their vote, though that is important. It is not only about more young politicians contesting and winning elections at different levels of government. Above all, youth playing a major role in democracy means that they are politically empowered and informed citizens who know their rights and duties and have the capacity and desire to constructively participate in democracy. To “participate” means to vote, contest, and win elections and seek to shape policies on issues that affect them, such as education, employment, health and family welfare, sex education, morality, environment, science and technology and citizenship. It means that young politicians seek to articulate the young Indian’s aspirations and distinguish themselves by their work, not just their age. It means that the youth are a constituency no politician can afford to ignore.

Now let us see what the reality is when it comes to the youth’s role in Indian democracy.

**Representation of the youth in Indian politics: realities on the ground**

Given the increasingly youthful profile of India’s population, the role played by the youth in its democracy will be ever more crucial for the country in the times to come. Unfortunately, while Indian youth have made a mark nationally and globally in fields ranging from information technology to music and from sports to English literature, their involvement in India’s democracy remains limited, if not insignificant. For example, in the 33-member national Cabinet of Ministers, the average age of ministers is 65 and the average age of the council of ministers is 60.

As many as 14 cabinet ministers, along with Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, are over the age of 70. Dr. Singh himself is 78. Rajdeep Sardesai, a popular news presenter on a leading Indian English news channel, points out: “A majority of India’s cabinet ministers were born before India attained its independence in 1947.” Only one cabinet minister out of 33 is below 50. The average age of a cabinet minister in India, 65 years old, is two and a half times India’s median age of 25.9.

Much the same can be said for the lower house of India’s parliament, the Loksabha (the people’s house in Hindi). In the 543-strong Parliament, the average age of a Member of Parliament (MP) is 53 years. There are only 66 MPs below 40, or 12.1 percent, and just 30 MPs below 35, or 6.44 percent. Though 70 percent of India is below 35, merely 6.4 percent of India’s parliamentarians are from that age group. To put this in perspective, 36 MPs or 6.6 percent are above the age of 70.

While these numbers may seem bleak, they conceal a more disturbing reality. Research done by the writer Patrick French reveals that 65 percent of the 66 MPs below age 40 in the Parliament come from political backgrounds, i.e. their father or mother was a major politician in his or her own right. A shocking 100 percent of all the MPs below age 30 have fathers who were in politics before them. These politicians are able to enter politics on account of their family connections. If you are young and wish to enter politics in India—the much praised “world’s largest democracy,”—you need to belong to a political family, otherwise your
chances of contesting and winning an election are pretty slim.

While youth wings of major political parties do exist, such as the National Students Union for the Congress or the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (Indian People’s Youth Movement), they are mainly used to expand the voter base for their parent parties and have little to do with articulating the concerns of the youth.

Even Rahul Gandhi, the great grandson of India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, son of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and widely seen as one of the frontrunners in the race to be the next Prime Minister of India, was frank about how difficult it is enter politics if you are not from a political family. In a speech to students in the central Indian province of Madhya Pradesh, he said:

“There are four ways of entering politics. First, if one has money and power. Second, through family connections. I am an example of that. Third, if one knows somebody in politics, and fourth, by working hard for the people.” Unlike many of the other young hereditary members of parliament, he recognized his position. “Main apne pita, nani aur pardada ke bina us jagah par nahin pahunch sakta tha jahan main aaj hoon (Without my father, grandmother and great-grandfather, I could never have been in the place that I am now.)”

So, why is there such low representation of youth in India’s politics?

By and large, young Indians have a negative perception of politics as a sleazy, corrupt field where nothing positive can be done. Few youth in India ever consider politics as a career option. The focus of young Indians has been on excelling academically, getting a professional degree in areas like medicine or engineering and getting a well-paying job. “Why should I care about who wins in the elections?” “Why should I vote? What difference does it make?” are common statements made by young Indians. Youth in India’s elite schools or colleges often have a better idea who Barack Obama is than who their representative is at the local, state or national level. When I asked 20 friends of mine, only two could name their representative at the state or national level, but all could name the President of Sri Lanka.

How can the youth play a major role in India’s democracy?

In this section, I offer some simple steps which I believe can empower Indian youth to play a much bigger role. They include: changing attitudes, using your vote wisely, articulating youth needs, using technology and social media, and educating students.

Changing attitudes, believing you can: The first and most important thing is for the youth to shed their apathy towards politics and believe that they can play a significant role in Indian democracy. My response to the question “Why should I care about politics?” is always this: if you are a shareholder in a company, would you not be concerned about the price of that company’s shares on the stock exchange? Would you not care what the company’s management does? Similarly, all 1.2 billion citizens of India, and particularly the 500 million youngsters, are the shareholders of Indian democracy. The quality of the governance we enjoy is the “price” of our shares in Indian democracy, and the politicians are the managers of our democracy. Youth may not consider politics to be fashionable or hip; but is it hip to have bad roads, irregular electricity and poor water supply? Is it fashionable to have filthy government hospitals and overcrowded buses that do not come on time?

We need to realize that politics affects every aspect of our lives and as citizens we get the government we deserve.

Using your vote wisely: The second step is to vote, and to cast your vote wisely. As democratic citizens, your vote is the most important tool in your hands. Hence, all youth above 18 (the minimum age for voting in India) should vote in elections, whether at the local, state or national level. Along with voting, youth should keep a record of their candidate in terms of the work he or she has done.
and the feasibility of his or her promises. The youth must avoid voting on the basis of a candidate’s caste, religion, oratory skills, or appeals to emotion, and instead base their votes solely on the candidate’s commitment to development. Once a large body of young voters emerges, politicians will have to cater to youth demands, as they do to other Indian groups such as the Muslims, the Dalits or the Scheduled Castes.

**Articulating youth needs:** Before every major election, whether at the local, state or national level, youth organizations should put together a “youth manifesto,” or list of youth specific demands relevant to that constituency. These demands might include introducing vocational or job-oriented courses at local colleges, opening a medical and engineering college, having English and basic computer skills training for youth, revamping public libraries, making curricula reflective of the job market, and so on. To create such a list, youth organizations can go to colleges and query youth above 18 on their needs and demands. Youth organizations can go to colleges and ask youth: “What do the elections mean for you as a young person?” “What do the youth want from politicians?” Then these manifestos can be submitted to the candidates, who should then be asked: “What are you going to do for the youth of your constituency?”

**Using technology and social media:** Like young people around the world, Indian youth are increasingly using social media platforms such as Facebook, Orkut and Twitter. There are over 30 million Facebook users in India and a substantial portion of users are youth. Social media can hence be used to promote youth issues and demands, both in English and in local languages. For example, social media played a major role in maintaining the momentum of the Anna Hazare-led protests that mobilized millions of young Indians. Mobile phones are another means of reaching out to the youth as there are 700 million mobile users in India today, many of whom are youth.

**Educate school and college students:** One of the biggest causes for the youth’s limited role in politics is their lack of basic knowledge about politics. To change this, youth should be made aware of their local Member of the Legislative Assembly, Member of Parliament, and representative in the city as part of the civics curriculum. Youth should participate in simple elections for class monitor or class representative, and learn what a budget is and how it is passed. Teachers should organize politics related quizzes to test students’ knowledge on local politics. To see how democracy actually works, groups of school children can be taken on field trips to the provincial assembly, parliament or the city municipal corporation when it is in session. In college and higher secondary school, professors can arrange for students to meet local politicians and encourage them to ask questions, even if initially they are shy or uncomfortable.

**Conclusion**

Democracy is not a perfect system. Sometimes corrupt and inefficient leaders get elected. Sometimes good leaders lose or are unable to get elected at all. If democracy is about rule of the people, the quality of a democracy depends on the people themselves, particularly the youth as they are the future citizens. Anna Hazare lit a spark in the hearts of young Indians across the country, but kindling that spark into a forest fire that will change India for the better is ultimately up to the youth. The future of Indian democracy depends on them.

**Endnotes**


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Dalits and Scheduled Castes are caste groups in India.


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