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A Review of Youth Political Activism and the Changing Dynamics of Democratic Movements in Contemporary India

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Abstract
Young people make up a very large share of India's population and electorate, and their political conduct has been reshaped over the past decade by the spread of smartphones, social media platforms and messaging applications. youth political activism and democratic movements in India. Twenty sources drawn from communication studies, political science, anthropology and geography were organised into four themes: digital campaigns and electoral participation; protest movements and student activism; digital hate, misinformation and democratic risk; and everyday or prefigurative forms of youth politics. Three comparative tables summarise the studies reviewed. The literature shows that digital media widen the repertoire of participation and give previously marginal voices national and international visibility, yet the same infrastructures also carry polarising content and can reward broadcasting over dialogue. Evidence on whether online engagement converts into sustained offline action remains uneven, and most studies concentrate on urban, politically visible groups. The paper concludes that youth activism in India is plural rather than uniform and identifies directions for future research, including rural and vernacular-language youth, platform governance and longitudinal designs.
Keywords: youth activism; political participation; social media; protest movements; democracy; India

1. Introduction

1.1 Youth in the Indian Democratic Landscape

India is often described as a young democracy in demographic terms, and young people are a central constituency for every political party. The scholarship reviewed here shows that this constituency is far from uniform. Singh and Sharma (2021) report that Indian youth take part in politics on social media for utilitarian and hedonic reasons, and that information seeking and expressive behaviour shape their voting decisions. Neyazi et al. (2016) show that engagement in the 2014 campaign depended on party contact and campaign interest as well as on online sharing. The findings are a useful warning against treating young Indians as a single bloc that moves together.

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Debates about youth and democracy often turn on the idea of disengagement, and a persistent worry is that young people drift away from conventional politics. Indian scholarship adds nuance. Dyson and Jeffrey (2018), writing about a village in north India, show that young people who moved between towns and their home village acted as mentors, activists and social helpers, trying to change the attitudes of those around them in everyday settings. Participation, in this reading, is not confined to voting or to formal organisations.

This matters for how democratic movements are understood. If young people were uniformly disengaged, or uniformly loyal to one party, the task of explaining their politics would be simple. The evidence suggests otherwise: youth participation in India is shaped by party strategy, by media environments and by the places where young people live and work. A review of the literature therefore has to ask not only how many young people take part, but in which forms, through which channels and with what consequences for the quality of democratic debate.

The review that follows therefore treats youth political activism as a spectrum that runs from electoral engagement through street protest to everyday civic action, and it asks how digital media have altered each point on that spectrum.

1.2 Digital Media and the Transformation of Political Communication

The year 2014 is widely treated as a turning point for political communication in India. Ahmed et al. (2016) describe the general election of that year as the country's first experiment with social media for political campaigning, and their analysis of nearly 100,000 tweets from eleven parties shows that new and established parties used the platform differently. Chadha and Guha (2016) examine the BJP's online campaign through interviews with party functionaries and volunteers, and they take up the question of how far the considerable rhetoric about citizen participation matched the actual involvement of citizens. Kanungo (2015) frames the same election as a digital poll battle among parties, while Baishya (2015) studies the political work performed by the selfie in the 2014 campaign, an indication of how personal imagery entered electoral communication. Neyazi et al. (2016) place these developments within India's hybrid media system, in which older and newer channels operate side by side.

Beyond campaigns, scholars have asked what digitalisation means for political culture more broadly. Udupa et al. (2020) propose the idea of "millennial India" to describe two decades of expansion in digital media and the stakes of young people who turn to these media to articulate political concerns. They argue that a politics of civic action has grown alongside violent exclusions that also circulate through digital channels (Udupa et al., 2020). This dual character, in which the same tools enable both mobilisation and exclusion, runs through the rest of this review.

Messaging applications have added a further layer. Unlike open platforms, closed groups on services such as WhatsApp circulate content among people who already know one another,

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which makes it harder for outsiders to observe or correct what is shared. Banaji and Bhat (2022) list WhatsApp alongside Facebook, TikTok, ShareChat and Instagram among the platforms implicated in the spread of social media hate, and Banaji et al. (2019) focus specifically on WhatsApp misinformation linked to mob violence. For a study of youth activism, these accounts are a reminder that digital politics includes private and semi-private spaces as well as public timelines.

1.3 Protest Cultures and Student Politics

Alongside electoral politics, universities and neighbourhoods have been important sites of youth dissent. The events at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in February 2016, when sedition charges were brought against a small number of students, drew wide attention. Chattarji (2019) studies how media coverage of these protests created narratives of the "anti-national" student that helped to consolidate a particular sense of Indian identity. The episode shows that student activism is shaped not only by what students do but also by how it is represented to the public.

A second major episode was the opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed National Register of Citizens in late 2019 and early 2020. Sharma and Singh (2023) report that the Shaheen Bagh protest in Delhi began as a gathering of worried family members, neighbours, civil society individuals and students after police action against students at Jamia Millia Islamia, and that it grew into a sit-in lasting a hundred days. Bhatia and Gajjala (2020) add that the Shaheen Bagh protests were largely organised, led and sustained by Muslim women, and that residents, including young students, responded to the police action against university students. These cases matter for a review of youth activism because they show that young people act within wider coalitions in which gender, religion and place shape who is visible and who is heard.

Taken together, the JNU and Shaheen Bagh episodes also show how closely protest and public narrative are bound up. In the first, the central struggle was over how students were portrayed; in the second, it was over who could speak for a movement and how its presence was made visible beyond the neighbourhood. Both raise the question of whether digital media strengthen or weaken the position of young activists when powerful actors contest the meaning of their actions, a question taken up in the literature review below.

1.4 Concepts and Terms in Use

Several terms recur in this literature and are used here in the senses given by the authors reviewed. "Youth" is not tied to a single age band in this paper; the review follows the definitions adopted in each study, which range from young voters and social media users to young people in villages and neighbourhoods. "Political activism" is understood broadly, covering electoral campaigning and voting, street protest and everyday civic action.

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"Hashtag publics" refers to the networks of users who gather around a hashtag and, through their posts, make a cause visible; Gajjala et al. (2023) use this lens to study how the grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh became visible on Twitter. "Extreme speech" is a concept developed by Udupa and Pohjonen (2019) to describe digital expression that pushes against the limits of legitimate speech along the axes of truth and falsity and of civility and incivility, and that is better seen as a spectrum of practices than as a binary between acceptable and unacceptable speech. "Prefigurative politics" describes action in which people try to enact in the present the social relations they hope to see in the future (Dyson & Jeffrey, 2018).

The evidence base consists of twenty sources published between 2015 and 2023, most of them peer-reviewed journal articles, with one book and one research report included because of their direct relevance to India. The sources were selected through targeted searches for relevance to youth, digital media, protest and democratic practice in India, so the review is a structured synthesis and not an exhaustive systematic review.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Campaigns and Electoral Participation

Studies of the 2014 election form the largest group in the literature. Ahmed et al. (2016) analysed 98,363 tweets posted by eleven parties in the two months before the vote and found that new and emerging parties used Twitter mainly for self-promotion and media validation, whereas established parties used it to supplement their offline strategies. A related study of 205 candidates found that media coverage mediated the link between party establishment and Twitter use, and that candidates from fringe parties used the platform effectively (Ahmed et al., 2017). Taken together, the two studies suggest that social media lowered the cost of visibility for smaller actors, even if it did not remove the advantages of established parties.

Whether such visibility translated into citizen engagement is a separate question. Chadha and Guha (2016) interviewed party functionaries and volunteers to understand how the BJP engaged citizen supporters in its social media campaign, beginning from the observation that the rhetoric of citizen participation around the election was considerable and examining the nature of that involvement. Neyazi et al. (2016) approach the question through survey data from Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai. They report that party contact, sharing of campaign information and campaign interest were significant predictors of engagement, while the importance of other factors varied by party. The result suggests that online sharing matters but works alongside direct contact between parties and citizens.

Studies that focus directly on young people stress motivation and outcomes. Singh and Sharma (2021), using partial least squares structural equation modelling, report that social media political participation among Indian youth is influenced by utilitarian and hedonic motives, and that information seeking and expressive behaviour significantly affect voting decisions. Pal et al.

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(2017) show that style mattered as well as volume: their analysis of tweets from Narendra Modi's account identifies sarcasm and wordplay as strategies that built shared references with followers and worked to shift his image toward that of a polished communicator. Read together, these studies indicate that digital engagement is linked to electoral behaviour, but that the link depends on political context and is not automatic.

Earlier and adjacent work frames these findings. Kanungo (2015) treats the 2014 election as a contest in which parties competed on social media as well as on the ground, and Baishya (2015) shows, through the political work of the selfie, that campaign communication extended into personal and visual forms that ordinary users could reproduce and share. Neyazi et al. (2016) describe the wider setting as a hybrid media system, which is a useful reminder that tweets, selfies and posts did not replace television, print or door-to-door contact but operated alongside them. A recurring implication is that studies measuring only online behaviour are likely to overstate, or misread, what young people actually do politically. Table 1 summarises the studies discussed in this section.

Table 1: Studies on Digital Campaigns and Youth Electoral Participation

Study	Context and data	Main finding
Ahmed et al. (2016)	2014 general election; 98,363 tweets from eleven parties	New parties used Twitter for self-promotion and media validation; established parties used it to supplement offline strategies.
Ahmed et al. (2017)	2014 general election; tweets of 205 candidates	Media coverage mediated the link between party establishment and Twitter use; fringe candidates used the platform effectively.
Chadha & Guha (2016)	BJP online campaign in 2014; interviews with party functionaries and volunteers	Examines the nature of citizen involvement behind the rhetoric of participation.
Neyazi et al. (2016)	2014 election; survey data from Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai	Party contact, sharing campaign information and campaign interest predicted engagement.

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Study	Context and data	Main finding
Singh & Sharma (2021)	Indian youth; PLS-SEM model of social media participation	Utilitarian and hedonic motives influence online participation; information seeking and expressive behaviour affect voting decisions.
Pal et al. (2017)	Tweets from the @narendramodi account; analysis of political irony	Sarcasm and wordplay built shared references with followers and helped shift the leader's image toward a polished communicator.

2.2 Protest Movements and Student Activism

The protest literature is dominated by the anti-CAA movement. Bhatia and Gajjala (2020) draw on on-site interviews with Muslim women protesters at Shaheen Bagh and identify four themes: the visibility of Muslim women at the protest site, the use of social media for international visibility, resistance to fear, and care as a protest strategy. Their work shows that digital visibility and physical presence were intertwined rather than separate. Gajjala et al. (2023) extend this argument by examining how the "dadis" (grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh emerged as political subjects in transnational Twitter publics even though they did not themselves access social media directly. Their feminist close reading of Twitter data and interviews with associated actors maps how visibility was produced through digital publics without denying the agency of the women involved.

Sharma and Singh (2023) approach the same movement through prefigurative politics. They read Shaheen Bagh as a critical event of gendered activism in which religion, gender and spatial location together help explain its emergence and survival, and they argue against a linear or coherent reading in favour of attending to its fragmentary and contested forms.

Student protest has also been analysed through its representation. Chattarji (2019) examines how media coverage of the JNU protests and the sedition charges produced the figure of the "anti-national" student. This line of work shows that the fate of a protest depends partly on the narrative frames through which activism is made legible to the wider public.

Read alongside the Shaheen Bagh studies, Chattarji's (2019) analysis points to a tension in the literature. On one side, digital publics can carry the voices of participants who might otherwise go unheard, as Gajjala et al. (2023) and Bhatia and Gajjala (2020) describe. On the other, mainstream media framing can fix a protest in the public mind before participants have a chance to respond. The two bodies of work together suggest that the visibility gained through

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social media is valuable but contested, and that it does not by itself guarantee that activists control how their cause is understood.

A limitation across this section is that young people are rarely the explicit unit of analysis in the Shaheen Bagh studies, which centre on women, community and religion. Youth appear as participants within larger coalitions, so claims about youth activism specifically need to be drawn with care. Table 2 summarises the studies discussed in this section.

Table 2: Studies on Protest Movements and Student Activism

Study	Context and approach	Main contribution
Chattarji (2019)	JNU protests and sedition charges; analysis of media reportage	Shows how media narratives produced the "anti-national" student and consolidated a sense of Indian identity.
Bhatia & Gajjala (2020)	Shaheen Bagh; on-site interviews with Muslim women protesters	Identifies four themes: visibility, social media for international visibility, resistance to fear and care as protest.
Gajjala et al. (2023)	Shaheen Bagh "dadis"; Twitter data and interviews	Maps how subaltern women became visible in transnational digital publics without direct social media use.
Sharma & Singh (2023)	Anti-CAA/NRC protests; prefigurative politics lens	Reads Shaheen Bagh through gender, religion and spatiality and stresses its fragmentary, contested character.

2.3 Digital Hate, Misinformation and Democratic Risks

A third body of work asks what the same platforms do to democratic life. Udupa (2019) argues that critical assessments of resurgent right-wing nationalism have leaned too heavily on celebrity leaders understood as populists, and she proposes fun as a metapractice through which extreme speech and nationalism are expressed online. In the introduction to the special section that carried this article, Udupa and Pohjonen (2019) develop extreme speech as an ethnographically grounded concept. They make three linked arguments: extreme speech inhabits a spectrum of practices; the sociotechnical features of new media are part of the context; and the violence of such speech helps to produce identities in historically specific ways. Udupa et al. (2020) similarly note that a politics of civic action has grown at the same time as violent exclusions travelling through digital circulation. Udupa (2018) adds the concept of enterprise Hindutva, a form of Hindu nationalism reshaped by social media in urban India, which is argumentative, voluntary to join and able to hold contradictory positions within a single

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ideological project; she argues that its renewal owes partly to constant online arguing and the repeated circulation of simplified versions of its core principles.

Research on messaging applications adds empirical detail. Banaji et al. (2019) used focus groups and interviews to explore how citizens receive and circulate WhatsApp misinformation linked to mob violence in India, and their report treats the ideology of Hindutva as part of the social context. Nizaruddin (2021) studies three public Hindutva WhatsApp groups during the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown and shows how they circulated the "CoronaJihad" narrative within a wider ecosystem of hate, taking account of company policies and the sociopolitical situation. Banaji and Bhat (2022) draw on expert interviews and focus groups, together with case studies from India, Brazil, Myanmar and the United Kingdom, to argue that social media hate and the violence and discrimination it initiates are connected to the socio-political contexts, values and behaviours of platform users.

For youth activism, the implication is double-edged. Young users are both participants in civic mobilisation and potential targets or carriers of exclusionary content. The studies reviewed here seldom separate youth from other age groups, so the particular vulnerability or agency of young people in these networks is more often assumed than measured.

These studies also differ in how they locate responsibility. Udupa and Pohjonen (2019) stress the sociotechnical features of new media as part of the context in which extreme speech takes shape, while Nizaruddin (2021) points to company policies together with the sociopolitical situation, and Banaji and Bhat (2022) emphasise the contexts, values and behaviours of users. Taken together, they caution against explanations that blame either technology alone or individual users alone. For researchers of youth activism, the practical lesson is to study platforms, policies and social settings jointly. Table 3 summarises the studies discussed in this section.

Table 3: Studies on Digital Hate, Misinformation and Democratic Risk

Study	Context and approach	Main contribution
Udupa (2018)	Hindu nationalism and social media in urban India	Introduces enterprise Hindutva as an argumentative, voluntary and spectrum-like formation.
Udupa (2019)	Online nationalism in India; critique of populism-centred accounts	Proposes fun as a metapractice of extreme speech.

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Study	Context and approach	Main contribution
Udupa & Pohjonen (2019)	Special section introduction; global digital cultures	Defines extreme speech as a spectrum of practices shaped by sociotechnical context.
Udupa et al. (2020)	Special issue introduction; two decades of digital media in India	Proposes "millennial India"; civic action grows alongside violent exclusions.
Banaji et al. (2019)	WhatsApp misinformation and mob violence; focus groups and interviews	Examines how citizens receive and circulate misinformation within India's social context.
Nizaruddin (2021)	Three public Hindutva WhatsApp groups during the first COVID-19 lockdown	Shows how the "CoronaJihad" narrative circulated within an ecosystem of hate.
Banaji & Bhat (2022)	Book; expert interviews, focus groups and four country case studies	Links social media hate to socio-political contexts, values and user behaviours.

2.4 Everyday Politics and Prefigurative Action

Not all youth politics is visible on screens or in the streets. Dyson and Jeffrey (2018) study young people in the village of Bemni in Uttarakhand and develop the idea of everyday prefiguration, in which people try to demonstrate in the present the kind of social relations they want to see in the future. They show that migrants who moved between cities and the village mentored others and acted as activists and social helpers, using spatial knowledge and social skill to build alliances that sustained prefigurative work, and that a local notion of atmosphere (mahaul) shaped the belief that young people could change their surroundings. This framing widens what counts as activism, and it fits the broader suggestion that youth politics extends well beyond parties and elections.

The prefigurative lens has also been applied to a very different setting. Sharma and Singh (2023) treat Shaheen Bagh as a source of new vocabularies for thinking about alternative democratic futures. Both studies therefore regard the present enactment of a desired social order as political in itself, whether in a village or in an urban sit-in.

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Digital practices appear in this strand mainly as a background condition. Udupa et al. (2020) suggest that the democratisation of public participation through the self-activity of online users sits alongside older structures of political action, so that digital infrastructures bring continuity as well as disruption. This is a helpful corrective to accounts that treat digital media as a complete break with earlier political practice. Village mentoring, neighbourhood sit-ins and party contact all predate social media, and the studies reviewed here suggest that digital tools have been absorbed into these older forms rather than replacing them.

Across the four themes, three patterns stand out. First, digital media widen participation and visibility, particularly for smaller parties and for groups such as the women of Shaheen Bagh whose presence travelled through transnational publics (Ahmed et al., 2017; Gajjala et al., 2023). Second, the same infrastructures carry polarising and hateful content, and company policies and sociopolitical context shape how such content circulates (Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Nizaruddin, 2021). Third, offline contact and presence remain important: party contact predicted campaign engagement (Neyazi et al., 2016), and the Shaheen Bagh protests were sustained by the physical presence of residents at the sit-in (Bhatia & Gajjala, 2020).

3. Conclusion

This review has brought together twenty sources on youth political activism and democratic movements in India. Four conclusions follow. First, digital media have enlarged the repertoire of participation. They lowered the cost of visibility for smaller parties and candidates, they gave motivated young users new ways of seeking information and expressing opinion and they allowed protest communities to reach audiences far beyond the protest site

Second, the same media environment carries risks for democratic life. The work of Udupa and Pohjonen (2019), Banaji et al. (2019), Nizaruddin (2021) and Banaji and Bhat (2022) shows that extreme speech, misinformation and hate circulate through the platforms that young people use for civic and political purposes. A review of youth activism cannot treat these platforms as neutral channels.

Third, youth cannot be treated as a single political bloc. Singh and Sharma (2021) and Neyazi et al. (2016) show that engagement depends on motives, party contact and campaign interest, and the studies of everyday and prefigurative action show that much youth politics takes place outside parties and elections. Fourth, digital and offline politics are intertwined. Party contact predicted engagement in the 2014 campaign, and the visibility of Shaheen Bagh depended on both bodily presence and digital circulation.

The review also has limits. The evidence base is small and uneven. Many studies concern the 2014 election or the anti-CAA protests, and several do not separate young people from other participants. Most research is set in major cities and in English-language or widely visible digital

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spaces. The conclusions here should therefore be read as a map of current knowledge and not as settled findings about all Indian youth.

For practitioners and policymakers, the literature carries a cautious message. Efforts to engage young people through digital channels are likely to work best when they are linked to direct contact and to credible local settings, and efforts to protect democratic debate need to pay attention to closed messaging spaces as well as public platforms. For scholars, the main task is to bring youth into sharper focus, so that claims about young people's political lives rest on evidence gathered from and about young people themselves.

4. Future Work

Several directions emerge from the gaps noted above. The first is more precise attention to youth as a category. Future studies could disaggregate survey and social media data by age, education, caste, gender and region, so that claims about young people rest on evidence about young people. Longitudinal panel designs would be especially useful for testing whether online engagement in one election or movement predicts later offline participation, a question that cross-sectional studies such as those reviewed here cannot settle.

The second direction is to widen the settings studied. The sources reviewed concentrate on large cities, elections and a few protests. Rural and small-town youth, speakers of regional languages and young people with limited internet access remain under-studied, although work such as that of Dyson and Jeffrey (2018) shows how much can be learned from village-level research. Other mobilisations, including the farmers' protests of 2020 to 2021 and the 2022 protests over military recruitment, are not well represented in the sources reviewed here and could serve as comparative cases for youth participation beyond the anti-CAA movement.

Third, research on platforms and governance needs to expand. Closed messaging groups are difficult to observe, yet they appear central to the circulation of political content (Banaji et al., 2019; Nizaruddin, 2021). Future work could examine how company policies, state regulation and fact-checking practices affect what young people see and share, and whether digital literacy programmes change their behaviour. Studies of more recent elections, with attention to youth media use, would also update an evidence base that largely concerns 2014.

Finally, methods can be combined more often. The combination of a feminist close reading of Twitter data with interviews in the work of Gajjala et al. (2023) offers a model for mixed-methods studies that keep the voices of participants in view while handling large volumes of social media data. Ethical safeguards for researching activists, who may face surveillance or harassment, should be built into such designs from the start.

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