

Politics, parties and new media technology

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Abstract

The 2009 elections to the Indian Parliament were characterized by the extensive use of New Media tools such as websites, blogs and twitter which were used for both electoral campaigning as well as social media campaign for generating voter awareness. While the style and the content among competing actors varied, the impact of the same on the final results remained rather limited. The present paper attempts to look at the NMT penetration in Indian politics in the recent times and attempts to understand whether it will prove to be a critical factor in shaping the electoral outcomes. The paper argues that the NMT penetration and impact though limited as the 2009 results show, can still be an effective medium to expand the domain of deliberative democracy in India.

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New Media Technology and Politics: Some General Considerations

The penetration of New Media Technology (NMT) has been one of the more recent themes in the discourses on contemporary political communication and articulation, which has already led to a serious debate on the manner in which it shapes and influences political opinion. Even as the theories in political communication were coming to terms with the advent of mass media and its print, visual and web applications, NMTs have perhaps again brought into focus the remarkable potential of technology in shifting the spaces and dimensions of political interaction. The shift from the 'old to the new' media is not merely the medium (the technological dimension)- it also has a specific bearing in the message (the substance) of politics as well. It implies a greater ability at a more interactive communication where the actors can perhaps have a virtual real time assessment of the way the ideas are being received and the potential they have for future political projections.

The point shall become clearer after a brief elaboration of what constitutes the new media and the way it impinges on contemporary political behaviour. The following provides a basic explanation and differentiates in what could be termed as the new and the old.

New media is a broad term that emerged in the later part of the 20th century to encompass the amalgamation of traditional media such as film, images, music, spoken and written word, with the interactive power of computer and communications technology, computer-enabled consumer devices and most importantly the Internet. New media holds out a possibility of on-demand access to content any time, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content. What distinguishes New media from **traditional media** is not the digitizing of media content into bits, but the dynamic life of the "new media" content and its interactive relationship with the media consumer. This dynamic life, moves, breathes and flows with pulsing

excitement in real time. Another important promise of New Media is the "democratization" of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content.¹

As a form of political communication, New Media decisively redefines the rules of the game by a) increasing coverage of the actors and constituents , b) multiplying the quantum of information and exchange that can take place between the actors, c) Provide a platform for exchange, interface and processing in the least possible time and d) Creating content and image within a targeted group which may provide the much needed space for deliberation for future policy. In more precise operational terms especially with regard to electoral politics, it may include the following:

- a) RSS- A Syndication format which allows the users to aggregate the content of their choice from a multitude of sources. By adding RS feeds to their publishing portfolio, political parties and individuals can assimilate information of their choice and present it in the form they want to a wider audience.²
- b) Web logs- The most suited medium for direct communication between an individual and mass audience, capable of continuous updating and feedback from across multiple followers. A number of political leaders are known to be joining the bloggers bandwagon to put their views across and get to know the response of the audience.
- c) Twitter- More popularly identified as a micro-networking tool which enables individuals to remain connected with their followers on a real-time basis. Though not a comprehensive medium for detailed exchange, twitter can still provide an instantaneous response to an unfolding scenario.
- d) Social Networking- With the onset of multiple social networking sites such as MySpace, facebook, Orkut etc, the internet has opened up immense possibilities of parties and individuals. These networked communities allow exchange of personal information, databases and multimedia applications that help expansion of domain and intensity of interaction.
- e) Mobile-phones- With the new media with its web based applications catching up, the mobile applications could certainly not be left behind. Mobile communication through its numerous applications including the sms- has emerged as a critical tool not only for canvassing, but also for feedback-poll.
- f) Visual- Media- The more conventional visual media landscape in its new avatar is often seen much more than a forum for election publicity, coverage and analysis. In the more recent times, it has also been seen as an effective social medium which focus on bringing out the generally passive urban voter to be more pro-active participant in the electoral process.

The conventional treatment of New Media in the existing political communication literature is rather limited with a few exceptions. For instance the victory of the Labour in

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_media

² Tech Talk : Technology and the Indian Elections : Key Technologies ,
http://archives.emergic.org/collections/tech_talk_technology_and_the_indian_elections.html

the 1997 British elections heralded as more an outcome of one of the most well designed strategic management campaigns with conventional role of media and press rather than role of newly emergent techniques.³ More recently, the 2008 US Presidential campaign, is regarded as a defining depiction of 'new media' penetration in electoral politics as the Democratic candidate Mr Barack Obama is stated to have raised a whopping 'half(sic)500 million US \$ online during his 21 month long election campaign'.⁴ This perhaps followed a trend that had been set by the earlier two presidential elections where the power of the web was seen definitely as innovative, but certainly not path-breaking.

In a more recent perhaps the most exhaustive compilation on the thematic of Internet Politics, it is argued that while scholarship in the area of politics and new information and communication media: the television, radio and press, is vibrant, that related to internet and politics has grown substantially and significantly. For instance, in a survey conducted on the number of articles published on the two themes between 1996 and 2006, from a near convergent numbers in 2001, there was a deep difference in 2006 when articles featuring TV and politics were just 113 whereas those featuring internet and politics shot up to 424.⁵ It is at the same pointed out that it would be wrong to interpret the internet as replacing television in terms of its appeal and impact:

The Internet is not television. Despite the hype, it has not changed campaigning in the same way. For example, unlike television ads that reach potentially tens of millions of voters in the midst of entertainment programming, an average campaign website attracts a relatively small audience that chooses to go and use that resource. However, that does not mean the internet has no value in the campaign. By using internet for research, communicating with supporters and activists, mobilizing voters, and raising funds, campaigns have carved out a critical niche for the website.⁶

Given the general landscape with regard to NMT and politics, it now becomes pertinent to locate it in the Indian context.

New Media Technology and Indian Politics

To the discerning observer, the structures and the processes of Indian politics can at best be described as shaped by 'tradition' and 'convention' where perhaps there are more constants than variables except for the dramatic outcomes that perhaps the electorate can periodically give rise to. Even then, the receptivity to a certain change in the processes irrespective of its penetration has always been highlighted. In one of the seminal works on Indian Politics, Rajni Kothari maintains in a broader context that '...the major stimulus for the far reaching changes in India's social and political structure and the consequent re-ordering of its traditional identities has come from its exposure to

³ <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/OnMessagech1.pdf>

⁴ Swati Prasad, A Web2.0 upgrade for Indian Politics, http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/apr2009/gb20090415_757677_page_2.htm

⁵ Andrew Chadwick and Philip N Howard, The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics, Routledge, New York, 2010, p.3.

⁶ Richard Davis, Jody C Baumgartner, Peter L. Francia and Jonathan S Morris, The Internet in US Election Campaigns in Andrew Chadwick and Philp Howard, n.5, p.23

modernist impacts in ideas, communications. Institutions and technology.....(and) tradition comes in at the stage of responding to the new stimuli, not as their source.’⁷ Therefore tradition rather being a causative factor becomes an intervening (and or reinforcing) factor and certainly not a hindering one.

Locating it in the context of electoral politics and election campaigns, the traditional modes of communication during electioneering have consisted of printed manifestos in English and vernacular languages outlining the parties plans and priorities, public speeches by candidates and their supporters in village and street corners interspersed with colourful imagery of banners and posters and private canvassing with implicit caste and religious appeal.⁸ Given such a landscape, it is quite natural that technology’s penetration in the realm of Indian politics could at best have been peripheral or may be subordinate to the larger ‘conventional’ idioms that have defined the politics. More so because despite the visibility and the audibility of such a penetration in contemporary Indian political landscape, New Media barely touches a mere 6 percent of the total Indian electorate.

There are two ways in which the perceived role of New Media in the domain of Indian politics can be visualised. First in terms of the institutions of governance and politics which underscore the role of NMT in making governance more transparent, efficient and accountable. One could therefore think of initiatives such as e-governance, mobile-banking, and information kiosks etc which have been tried in several parts of urban as well as rural India. Second, and more pertinently from the perspective of the present paper- the processes of politics- which focus more on the way NMT help in changing the existing modes of political communication and mobilization, both in the public-electoral domain and the individual -personal domain of political leaders who chose to embrace this technology. We are more concerned with the second aspect given the mandate of the paper, while acknowledging the point made about the peripherality of the same in the contemporary political discourse.

If one tries to locate the seeds of NMT penetration as part of the larger political discourse, perhaps a crucial reference point could be the pattern of the Congress mobilisation post 1984 elections which brought Rajiv Gandhi to power with an unprecedented majority in the Parliament. The slogan of the nation marching into the 21st century followed by the ushering in of the telecommunication revolution and the ensuing promise of ‘computerization’ brought in a technology oriented debate which the nation perhaps had not been earlier used to. Even as India embarked on the economic reforms during the post 1991 Congress revival, the technological appeal for politics remained overshadowed by the economic results which the new economic policy brought upon in the hitherto regulated industrial and foreign trade sectors. At best the decade of the 1990s can be described as the one that saw a boom in the satellite and cable TV networks, which perhaps brought before the Indian electorate saw the phenomenon of live news coverage which later was to acquire a 24 by 7 character. L.K Advani’s much publicised Rath Yatra, accompanied by hordes of videographers, and the tapes being circulated in

⁷ Rajni Kothari, Politics in India, Orient Black Swan, New Delhi, 2009, p.98

⁸ Paul R. Brass, The Politics of India Since Independence, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p.97

urban neighbourhoods with a probable distribution by the local cable operator were symbolic of a new found method of political penetration where perhaps the medium mattered as much as the message. At the time when telecom sector was still being opened up and mobiles and pagers were considered a mark of luxury and world wide web unheard of in our part of the world, it did appear that Indian politics too would remain rather distant to more imaginative modes of mobilization and appeal and technology would at best remain subservient to the larger discourse rather than shape it.

It was more the 1996 elections which perhaps brought a more decisive end to the Congress domination at the Centre which unleashed a new set of actors as well as the processes which gradually altered the technological trajectory of the political discourse. Media management and spin doctors were enlisted for the first time as the political alignments and affiliations across caste, class, region and religion underwent a dramatic flux and the traditional vote depositories perhaps could no longer be taken for granted. Interestingly all this took place against the backdrop of a fairly proactive election commission which put fairly decisive curbs of electoral malpractices of which excessive expenditure and laid strict norms for electoral conduct. During such a time, the internet coverage silently entered the Indian elections, through NRI operated web portals, with most of the traffic too being located outside India.⁹ Such coverage had two main aspects- pre-voting- focussing more on candidates, political parties, voters and results of previous elections; and counting which included constituency wide results, overall picture, votes received by each candidate etc. The later was already subject to high traffic and primarily relied on the feeds provided by the election commission. The elections of 2004 were in some ways the first elections when almost all major political parties realised the importance of internet as medium and had a dedicated website of their but were yet to realise the significance of the much that was to unfold in the next elections in 2009.

New Media Technology (Web 2.0) and the 2009 Indian Elections

The 2009 elections can certainly be regarded as a path breaking one if one is to look at the nature and spread of New Media penetration, its limited reach notwithstanding. More popularly (and often controversially) coined as Web 2.0, the NMT has redefined the contours of web as a medium for both intervention and exchange, which has made the electoral arena of Indian politics more urbane and techno savvy. Web 2.0 described as an addition/improvement over Web 1.0 (the conventional world wide web) offers much wider avenues for community creation, mobilization, exchange and feedback.¹⁰

⁹ Tech Talk : Technology and Indian Elections, the Story so Far, February 2, 2004
[http://archives.emergic.org/collections/tech talk technology and the indian elections.html](http://archives.emergic.org/collections/tech%20talk%20technology%20and%20the%20indian%20elections.html)

¹⁰ The Concept of Web 2.0 as coined first by Tim O'Reilly in 2003 outlines seven key principles of internet politics that includes : internet as a platform for political discourse, the collective intelligence emergent from political web use, the importance of data over particular hardware and software applications, perpetual experimentalism in the public domain, creation of small scale forms of political engagement through consumerism, the propagation of political content over multiple applications, and rich user experiences on political websites. For further details see Andrew Chadwick and Philip N Howard, *The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, Routledge, New York, 2010, p.4

With an expanded internet base in the recent years, nearly 40 million cell phone users, 70 million telephone lines and around 100 million televisions, India definitely stood at an interesting point in NMT intervention in 2009 and the run up to the polls as well as the post poll developments indeed supported the logic that time for NMT in Indian politics had come. There are two ways in which the last elections can be depicted as being different in terms of the New Media usage: a) Electoral Campaign b) Social Media Campaigns relating to elections. Both are elaborated as follows.

Electoral Campaign : The election campaign during 2009 saw for the first time the most extensive use ever of NMT by political parties as well as individual leaders who targeted the young urban voter, who perhaps could be more concerned with the style and content of campaign rather than the primordial identities that have generally appealed to the electorate. The most significant of these campaigns was the one started by the BJP Prime Ministerial candidate, Mr L.K Advani, an octogenarian himself, who in the inaugural version of his blog wrote about the IT vision of the BJP and how the new technology had made the people more empowered to be watchful over the leaders they were supposed to elect. In his next blog, he was more forthcoming on why he chose the new medium. He wrote:

My young colleagues who have created this website told me that a political portal without a blog is like a letter without a signature. I quickly accepted this compelling logic. I am excited by the idea of using the Internet as a platform for political communication and, especially, for election campaign. As someone who has had the good fortune of participating, either as a campaigner or as a candidate, in every single general election in India since the first one held in 1952, I have seen how the tools of communication have evolved. As far communication is concerned, I am technology-agnostic. My philosophy in this matter is simple: anything that works, deserves to be welcomed. In my own political life spanning six decades, I have enthusiastically embraced every new communication technology - from the early simple Casio digital diary to i-pod and i-phone.¹¹

Going by the responses the blog received, it was an instant hit, with respondents from places far and wide with suggestions as far ranging from national security, education policy, BJP vision, China and Pakistan factor, Gujarat etc engaging the people who were generally appreciative of the new initiative. A full fledged website on Advani himself was floated in both English and Hindi on 8th November, 2008, his 81st birthday, to reach out to the young voter. It has been pointed out that the website 'LKAdvani.in had about 150 videos, over 300 photographs and more than 700 pages of textual content. The portal allowed users to register to receive email and SMS alerts of the leader's events. Volunteers desiring to work on the campaign could also submit their applications through the portal¹².

¹¹Electioneering: From Handbill to the Internet, <http://blog.lkadvani.in/blog-in-english>

¹² <http://sampadswain.com/2008/11/is-indian-politics-going-barack-obamas-way-of-using-internet-social-media/>

There were many others who joined the bandwagon including both old and young. Among the politicians who created websites (And some blogs) of their own included VK Malhotra, MK Stalin, Murli Deora, Narendra Modi, Jyotiraditya Scindia and Priya Dutt. Some youngsters like Milind Deora and Sachin Pilot created profiles on social networking sites like Facebook, Orkut and MySpace mobilizing supporters. At one point, Facebook alone had around hundreds of Indian Political Groups with BJP and Congress both trying to get as many voters to their lists. Both the political parties also had a similar group JoinBJP and JoinCongress which had more than 100 friends on their lists.¹³

In a way the race for one-upmanship in virtual space had begun amidst political adversaries and the forays in Web 1.0 were followed up more aggressively on Web.2.0 as the boundaries got redefined by the Twitter- the micro blogging site which allows exchange limited to 140 characters and here again it was the BJP which was to forge ahead of the Congress as the party updated the tweets on a regular basis, besides uploading the latest information.¹⁴ Infact post 2009, twitter has been the latest fad to have engulfed the Indian politicians with the following list being indicative as on September, 2010 with regard to twittering politicians :

- 1.) [@ShashiTharoor](#): Shashi Tharoor, a respected politician from Indian National Congress and former Minister of State for External Affairs. He currently has 645, 715 followers that are counting each day.
- 2.) [@narendramodi](#) : Narendra Modi – Chief Minister of Gujarat has 11,152 followers. Modi is one of the most tech-savvy politicians of India and is often seen with his personal assistants carrying his laptop and palmtop at all times. He is known to spend major hours browsing the internet on either the laptops or his high end mobile phones.
- 3.) [@ksudhakaranMP](#): K Sudhakaran ex-minister Kerala, now a congress MP from Kannur has 6926 followers on Twitter. The politician has a mass political base and is open to the use of latest technologies. When Dubai crisis was ominous, he fervently used Twitter to comfort the Indians saying that the country could not be affected by the crisis and cited the thoughts of NRIs and other business men.
- 4.) [@SMKrishnaCong](#): SM Krishna, currently serving as the Minister for External Affairs. He has 7973 followers on Twitter.
- 5.) [@rajeev mp](#) : Rajeev Chandrasekhar is an Independent Member of Parliament in the upper house of Rajya Sabha. He represents Karnataka state and Bangalore Urban district. He is very active on the internet, with his website, and of course, tweets and currently has 1435 followers on the microblogging site.
- 6.) [@mallikasarabhai](#) : Dr Mallika Sarabhai, independent candidate for Lok Sabha Elections 2009 from Gandhinagar. Gujarat-based activist, development worker, social entrepreneur and performer, Mallika Sarabhai is a multitasking lady, well recognized for her works in the country as well abroad. Since she has used every medium—dance, theatre, television, film, writing and publishing for her work, Twitter was another medium added to the list. She currently has 893 followers.

¹³ <http://pulls.sulekha.com/blog/post/2009/02/new-media-s-role-in-2009-indian-elections.htm>

¹⁴ Political Advertising : Indian Politics reaches twitter,
<http://marketingchitchat.wordpress.com/2009/03/30/political-advertising-indian-politics-reaches-twitter/>

7.) [@CaptainGopinath](#) – Karnataka’s Independent Candidate Captain Gopinath’s Twitter profile has an obvious green kite (his symbol) used as the background. But after he lost the in the recent elections, his tweeting frequency is just coming to a little halt. He has 400 followers at present.(no active tweets)

8.) [@meerasanyal](#): Mumbai’s Independent Candidate Meera Sanyal. She is a professional banker for the past 25 years and is currently the Chairperson and Country Executive for [ABN AMRO](#) Bank. She has 383 followers on Twitter.

9.) [@krishnabgowda](#): Karnataka Politician Krishna Byre Gowda is one of the promising upcoming politicians from Karnataka. He is currently the Youth Congress President for Karnataka, and serving his third term in the State Legislature. He has 359 followers on Twitter.

10.) [@kalmadisuresh](#): Suresh Kalmadi is also a politician and businessman from India. He has 123 Twitter followers.

11.) [@rajeevgowda](#) : Karnataka Politician Rajeev Gowda’s Twitter Page. He is Professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore and now a member of the Congress Party. He currently has 91 followers.

12.) [@bjp](#) : Bhartiya Janata Party Twitter page has 1075 followers and gives you the latest press releases, new campaigns and the news surrounding the political party.

(Reproduced from <http://apac.globalthoughtz.com/index.php/indian-politicians-on-twitter/>)

Added to the online campaign of the BJP was the extensive use of mobile telephony enabled services, such as short messaging services, sms, which expected to reach through sms’s the 250 million of India’s 450 million mobile subscribers. Netcore Solutions, the company managing BJP’s mobile campaign is said to have bought an inventory of 1 billion smss for the campaign as the telecom operators were expected to earn an additional 10 million dollars through the extra traffic of 3-4 billion smss to be used by other political groups as well.¹⁵

In the electoral arena therefore, it was quite evident that NMT had made a definite intervention and it continues to be an effective tool of communication even in the post 2009 Indian political scenario.

Social Media Campaign

The 2009 elections were perhaps the first of its kind where new media was also used to spread the social message relating to citizen’s electoral rights and duties. They combined the power of mass media and the penetration of virtual media to convey some important ideas that could inform the young urban voter. Some of such campaigns included:

Jaago Re Campaign- A joint initiative of Tata Tea and Jan Aagraha, Jaago Re started as a voter’s registration drive among colleges and corporates in 35 cities across countries and registers 4 million voters. The registration was supposed to be done through an interactive platform on the website from where a registration sheet was to be downloaded and submitted to the nearest registration centre and sms was received after registration. The hugely successful campaign was able to enlist about 5, 84,000 voters . Jaago Re also

¹⁵ <http://mobileactive.org/sms-in-2009-indian-elections>

has active social media presence with over 16,000 members on face book and 13000 members on Rout.

Vote Report India- An initiative aimed at citizen powered election monitoring program where the users could submit email, sms, twitter on violations of Election Commissions Code of Conduct. An aggregation of such reports with actual news and input is done to enable greater transparency and accountability in the electoral system.¹⁶

Several of these organizations are active on social networking Web sites, where the Public Interest Foundation's *No Criminals in Politics* campaign, for instance, has over 5,000 supporters on Face book.

Thus new social media have become fairly important tool in both the domain of electoral campaign as well as social media campaigning. What remains to be seen is the extent to which it may be instrumental (if not decisive) when we go on to the new media and its multiple manifestations.

Whither a new Grammer of Politics

Having done a survey of the nature and manifestation of NMT penetration in Indian Politics since the 2009 elections, it becomes pertinent to reflect on whether it amounts to a new phase of political communication and mobilization which is in some ways going to rewrite the rules of the game, or whether it will merely remain as one of those continually evolving strategies that the candidates/leaders may employ to exhibit their penchant for innovativeness and modernization, but would fall back on conventional (and time tested) modes when it comes to the final lap. The answer to that in the author's view would be more bordering more on the latter than the former and the following considerations may be put forward.

First, is the issue of actual coverage and reach. NMT in all its manifestations has a reach over not more than the six percent of the total electorate most of which is young and urban. This segment perhaps gets attracted more by the style and the content rather than primordial affiliations that have guided Indian electoral politics. It is precisely to cater to this audience that the use of new media becomes attractive and appealing. The symbolism associated with Mr. Advani making use of these tools and the media coverage of his visit to the gym underscores the point that the NMT is more about style and to a lesser extent about substance. Hence the use of such media remains useful for those who have access to it and does not make any difference for those who are outside its ambit.

Second, given the actual results of the 2009 elections, it is quite apparent that there may be a clear divergence between the personal appeal which such NMT use may create for a particular individual or leader, it is difficult for the same appeal to percolate down to the entire party in terms of the electoral success. In this regard some of the responses seen on the twitter analyzing the election results make a very interesting reading :

¹⁶ Gaurav Mishra, <http://mobileactive.org/sms-in-2009-indian-elections>

@maheshmurthy #indiavotes09 BJP campaign used the right medium: social/digital – but offered no relevant message. They were tuned out

@Danishk: The issue with BJP campaign as I see it was they forgot that most people looking at those ads are learned people unlike masses.

@Amit3D: 30 million people access internet daily in India. Approx 10 mil voted and saw BJP's digimedia campaign. Don't think that was enough.

@mudittuli: BJP campaign managers are always disconnected with reality, they tried to do a Obama but got slapped in the face #indiavotes09

@Gauravonomics: BJP has lost in spite of its brilliant campaign, not because of it. #indiavotes09

@ShashiTharoor: I have won with a majority greater than any Congress candidate in Tvm in 30 years... Truly humbling. Now the real work begins

Source : Gauravonomics : India Votes for No Change : Indian Bloggers and Twitter Users react to #IndiaVotes09 Election Results

Third , if one goes by the personalities and leaders who have adopted the new medium, they apparently already have a certain presence and recognition and NMT only becomes a medium to supplement or recreate it rather than generate it among those who perhaps won't be part of election rallies. It implies that NMT can at best have a supplementary yet effective role, which cannot replace the conventional modes of appeal and campaigning. A point that was not lost to the Congress during the last elections.

Finally, NMT appears more relevant in shaping the syntax and not the grammar of Indian politics and perhaps carries more weight in the domain of social media campaign rather than electoral media. With the vast reach of mobiles and television, NMT appears to be better placed in sensitization the general public on the importance of voting, checking electoral malpractices, identifying issues of national concern than perhaps shaping people's perceptions on the suitability of the candidate and the party. The conventional idioms in Indian politics are still too strong for the grammar to be rewritten, but a beginning can be made by correcting the syntax and that is where NMT can help.

Conclusion

The Indian political system has always accepted change as an intervening variable rather than a causative one. Any new intervention therefore helps in adaptation, reformulation and reorientation of the existing practices and does not work to transform it. The advent of NMT penetration in Indian Politics is a minor, yet a significant intervention which certainly cannot at this stage redefine Indian Politics either through its style or substance. But it can certainly provide an opportunity for opening a space within the electoral arena for debating and discussing the substance, more so among the young Indian voter who will be the most significant single category, which all the electoral players would be focusing on.

