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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH AND ROLE OF MASS MEDIA

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Abstract

Political participation generally refers to engagement with traditional mechanisms in the Indian political system, such as voting in elections and joining political organisations. Political participation is a central concern in the study of mass politics and democracy. The importance of active citizen participation in politics for the building of strong democracy has been the focal point of much debate amongst scholars, civil society organisations and government institutions across the world. Although perceived changes in political participation patterns amongst young people in recent years have attracted much academic research in democratic countries, especially in Europe, North and South America this remains an understudied area in India. As active political participation plays a vital role in the improvement of the quality of democracy, this gap needs to be addressed empirically as well as theoretically. Through political participation people can voice their needs, concerns, and problems to democratic institutions.

Keywords: Political participation, democratic institutions, Lokpal, Anna Hazare, youth politics, young voters

As pointed by many Indian scholars the situation in India stands in contrast to the experiences of western democracies (Yadav, 2000, Ahuja, 2006, Mishra 1986, Alam2004). They argue that the pattern of political participation in India, including voting behaviour differs crucially from the Western democratic experience. There are only small drop voter turnouts, especially among youth and people from lower socio economic status and Indian youth demonstrate a relatively greater degree of political socialisation and involvement, especially when we consider the conventional forms of political participation such as elections. Further, far from shunning politics, youth in India are also turning to more direct methods such as volunteering and protest. However there is little understanding of whether and how and why these have happened, despite extensive media coverage of youth role in politics, like the case of Anna Hazare's Lokpal anti-corruption movement.

Despite these differences between Western and Indian conditions, there are similar theoretical, conceptual and methodological challenges shared by scholars

interested in the study of the linkages between youth and political engagement. The paper will focus on factors that have influenced youth political participation in the past and those that play a role in India today. As a way of unpacking these themes, the study will draw on theoretical approaches that have informed empirical research in Western democracies and critically examine its applicability to India.

Theoretical Approaches to Political Participation

In Western, an especially European democracy a critical debate has developed regarding the decline in civic and political participation has emerged since 1970s and has intensified during the last decade. Some scholarly research has observed a sharp decline in participation, especially among youth (Dekker & van den Broek, 2005; Listhaug & Grenflaten, 2007). However there are few studies that have also questioned such a trend (Paxton, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Stolle & Hooghe, 2003). Similar studies conducted in the context of Latin and South America (Brazil, Chile) as well as East Asian Countries (South Korea, Japan), have found similar trend in declining participation.

The observation that people in established democracies are appearing to avoid traditional methods of political participation, such as voting and party membership has attracted a great deal of recent scholarly attention (Putnam 1993, 2000, Norris 2002, Mair and Van Biezen 2001). This observed empirical shift away from these formal types of political involvement is particularly acute in the case of young people who are often seen to be apathetic about or alienated from formal political processes (Putnam 2000, Norris 2002, 2003, Herm et al. 2002, 2005, Marsh et al. 2007, Sloam 2007). Authors such as Russell (2005) see such trends of declining participation among youth as a key element in the crisis of modern liberal democracies. For authors such as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002, 2005) Stoker (2006) the decline in participation among youth constitutes a serious political challenge that requires immediate interventions in the form of appropriate public policy intervention.

Much of the research on falling political engagement among youth in western democratic societies draws from the work of Robert D. Putnam (2000) in *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. In his study on engagement patterns in the United States, Putnam (2000) claims that a process of generational replacement is responsible for the bulk of the observed decline: as older and more civic generations are being replaced by younger age cohorts, participation levels decline systematically.

The conventional explanations for this are that low-status citizens attribute their social position to the political system, that the institutions have a class bias or that-as Putnam (2000) observed-the 'haves' are treated by others with more honesty and respect than the 'non-haves'. Further Putnam specifically attributes low civic engagement to media, especially entertainment television, which has the potential to constraint time available for more meaningful civic activities. Along with the fall in traditional forms of political participation, scholars have also observed an increase in non conventional forms of political engagement across all age groups. These include engaging in activities such as protest, or joining social movements (e.g. The anti-globalization such as occupy wall- street in America).

Unlike in Western democracies, in India, the nature and extent of political participation has more or less remained stable, if we consider only voting behaviour. Very little research and theorisation have gone into nature and extent of participation among youth. Some writers have even questioned if there is a need to consider a separate category of youth vote-arguing that such a social category might be merely an artifact of theoretical debates rather than an empirical reality.

This section will focus on identifying the theoretical basis for establishing a linkage between youth as a social category and political participation as a set of actions, meaningful to the participants. The perspective that are considered, provide partial explanation for the existence of "youth politics" or "young voters" as a distinctive social phenomenon as well as causes and consequences of changes in patterns observed within this demographically defined group.

Explaining Political Participation - The theory of alienation

Perhaps the most well held view, often implicitly, is that differences in levels of political participation can be attributed to the experience of alienation. Alienation as a sociological phenomenon has a long history dating back to Karl Marx. However only during the late 19th century the concept became a central piece of sociological analysis, especially in studying youth. Theoretical perspectives emerging from the concept of "mass society" had made alienation and its related concept of anomie a central indicator of modernity as society moves away from traditional value systems as a result of modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation. James Mackey and Andrew Ahlgren (1975) in *Dimensions of Adolescent Alienation* review the psychological, sociological and educational literature indicated that the various conceptualisations of "alienation" could be fitted into five tentative categories appearing to have considerable overlap, the key being -- "Personal Incapacity," "Cultural Estrangement," and "Guidelessness." They find that the patterns of

significant differences shown by analyses of variance among groups defined by community type, socio-economic status, ability, and sex, compared well with hypothesised patterns; the few exceptions were tenable.

Alienation can be defined as feeling that includes a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, lack of norms and social cohesion as a result of which individuals are estranged from society and social relationship that holds them together. These feelings might occur as a result of rapid social changes, especially during transformative periods, marked by high turmoil and uncertainty. Scholars have identified both individual level as well as structural explanations for a sense of alienation experienced by youth. A feeling of separation from the mainstream of political life, coupled with a sense of political powerlessness, is a potent combination working against political participation by the youth. Thus deprivation and marginalization is expected to increase a sense of alienation.

Fredric Templeton(1966,) in his classic paper on "Alienation and Political Participation: Some Research Findings" analyses the political implications and consequences of the alienation of deprived individuals. He gives particular attention to the "contrasts between the situation at the national and local levels observing that there are considerable regional level variation, in sense of alienation. Although much has been written on alienation, its political significance has been neglected." More recently Hoover, Michael and Orr, Susan(2012) in "Why Rock the Vote Hits the Wrong Note" argues that "those who employ a generational theory of political participation stress the importance of attachments to the political process citizens develop early in life. In other words, alienation from politics can become a lifelong phenomenon.

In "Two Categories of Political Alienation" Marvin E. Olsen (1969) defined political alienation as attitudes of estrangement from the political system, conceptualised it as falling into two broad categories: political incapability and discontentment. In the first instance, alienation is forced upon the individual by his environment, whereas in the second case it is voluntarily chosen by him. Survey data indicates that incapability occurs most commonly among persons occupying various disadvantaged social statuses, while discontentment is most prevalent among those comprising the "old middle class." Neither category of alienation is markedly correlated with any form of political participation, but they do differ sharply in their relationships to party preference and voting. However many other researchers have found a moderate relationship between alienation and political participation?

Very few studies in India seek to relate alienation to political engagement. An exception is an early study by Malik and Marquette (1975) titled "Democracy and Alienation in North India" where the author finds evidence of alienation in

selected communities and regions. However more recent studies on the subject is very hard to come by. In other notable early studies on alienation titled "Engagement and Alienation in Indian Politics" published in journal of Comparative Political Studies authors (1974) state that unlike in the western democracies, socio-economic deprivation has little relation to political engagement in India? Other scholars have argued that "changing human environment instead of the social reinforcements that encourage political involvement in more stable neighborhoods. And the immediate struggle for subsistence drains the reservoirs of emotional energy available for the distant and complex realm of politics." However they also find that these emotional estrangements might lead to more active forms of political engagement at local level of political spaces. In other words alienation might have a differential influence on political action and might lead to greater engagement.

The concept of alienation has not become a dated idea. Rather similar conceptual concern has been expressed under the idea of political efficacy-a sense of control over political processes that affects an individual. Verba, Schlozman and Brady show, for example, that individuals' political efficacy increases in direct relationship to their income, with the poorest individuals expressing attitudes almost a full standard deviation lower than the wealthiest; it is also significantly correlated with race/ethnicity, with Latinos at the bottom, African Americans in the middle and White respondents at the top. In their comparative study of United States, United Kingdom and India Shrivastava, Rashmi (1989) investigated the levels of political efficacy reported by college students and identify factors that influence political efficacy in each culture including educational faculty, gender, age, religion, language, residence, economic status, student's characteristics, interest in politics and party affiliation, and voting and union membership. Generally she finds a positive correlation between political efficacy and socio-economic factors. Political alienation translated into political efficacy to engender political participation.

Another key dimension of alienation and political efficacy is the extent of trust in public institutions as well as levels of interpersonal trust. Those alienated from society also tend to demonstrate a greater degree of trust in established political systems and institutions. These are underpinned by lower levels of interpersonal trust. Trust in public institutions and the role played by interpersonal trust has been received a great deal of attention from political scientist as well as political communication researchers. Most recent research has examined trust from the perspective of "social capital" theory. Thus researchers find that another significant dimension of alienation has evolved into a separate research tradition.

A feeling of separation from the mainstream of life, coupled with a sense of political powerlessness, is a potent combination working against political

participation by the urban poor. Attempts to measure alienation have paralleled the conceptualisation of the concept. Levels of alienation have been explored from psychological as well as sociological perspective. Scholars from political sciences have borrowed measurements from these fields from a psychological perspective. Alienation is conceptualised at individual state level measure, as a type of feeling, marked by specific sets of emotions such as anxiety, depression, social withdrawal marked by a sense of meaninglessness, deep pessimism, powerlessness, and heightened levels of interpersonal distrust. In "abnormal cases" alienation could lead to sociopathic behaviour. In these situations due to host of individual, physiological to contextual situational factor such as family background, feeling of alienation has shifted from state to trait, the sociopath. On the other hand, sociologists have seen alienation as either the result of social environmental factors or structural factors. For much alienation could represent a disorder of not the individual but as a reasonable response to unequal and deeply hierarchical society.

These conceptual debates have however converged on core set of indicators like mean world syndrome and lack of interpersonal trust. Further newer developments in mixed methodological approaches as have recommended strategies that could fruitfully incorporate both the structural and individual considerations. Political alienation, defined as attitudes of estrangement from the political system, is conceptualized as falling into two broad categories: political incapability and discontentment. In the first instance, alienation is forced upon the individual by his environment, whereas in the second case it is voluntarily chosen by him. Survey data indicates that incapability occurs most commonly among persons occupying various disadvantaged social statuses, while discontentment is most prevalent among those comprising the "old middle class." Neither category of alienation is markedly correlated with any form of political participation, but they do differ sharply in their relationships to party preference and voting.

Thus researcher can identify several dimensions of alienation that has a bearing on political participation. Firstly we need to consider the general levels of life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is a conceptual equivalent of Subjective well-being. An individual who is satisfied with life is generally considered to represent a greater degree of well-being. The notion of alienation can thus be contrasted with well-being. Alienation is opposing of the state of life satisfaction and thus represents a degree of life dissatisfaction. Secondly alienation is related to trust. Trusting others means depending on other people for social interactions and relationship. A general distrust of others and a cautious attitude might indicate a higher degree of alienation. Thus it could be hypothesised that the extent of

alienation, as represented by its many manifestations (life satisfaction and trust in others) has a direct bearing on political participation. But it's an empirical question as to how these effects are manifested. This study would consider the feeling of alienation as a key to explaining the degree of political participation among youth.

Explaining Political Participation- Political Information Use and Media

The fourth theoretical explanation that is considered for accounting for political participation relates to political information use. Especially news media plays a critical role in this process of acquiring relevant political knowledge to meaningfully participate in politics. Some studies have indicated that young voters reported lower levels of political knowledge and information than older voters, and with young citizens often attributing their abstention from voting to their lack of political knowledge. Other studies point out that specific types of political information affect young and older citizens' political information efficacy differently and that political information efficacy plays a significant role in voting or nonvoting for young citizens. The amount of political information that voters decide to acquire during an elections for example depends, among other things, on prior ideological beliefs about parties and/or candidates.

The amount of political information that voters decide to acquire during an electoral campaign depends, among other things, on prior ideological beliefs about parties and/or candidates (Holt, Shehata, Strom back & Ljungberg, 2013). Voters who are indifferent about the election attach little value to information because they perceive that voting itself will have little value. Voters who are very ideological also attach little value to information because they think that the news will hardly change their opinion. Thus, high incentives to be informed can be found at intermediate levels of partisanship. Moreover, the impact of increased political knowledge on turnout is asymmetric: new information increases the probability of voting of indifferent voters but decreases that of very ideological voters. (Larcinese, 2009).

Many researches on Western democracies have found that" young voters reporting lower levels of political knowledge and information than older voters, and with young citizens often attributing their abstention from voting to their lack of political knowledge. Studies have focused on the role that specific political information play in enhancing young voters' political behavior. Theory of political information efficacy, posits that different levels of information processing occur from different sources of political information. Findings reveal that specific types of political messages affect young and older citizens' political information efficacy differently and that political information efficacy plays a

significant role in voting or nonvoting for young citizens. (Kaid, McKinney & Tedesc, 02007).

Some aspects of democracy appear more sensitive than others to the availability throughout society of political information. Individual-level political engagement poses a puzzle in this regard. Few scholars treat the contemporary expansion in political information made possible by new information technology as a form of potentiality for active political participation. The relationship between information availability and political engagement has been widely explored. The findings suggest that moderate to low relationship exists; Other researchers suggest that (a) attempting to persuasion by political parties contributes to people's ability to give reasons in support of both their own preferred candidate and the opposing candidate and (b) persuasive cat interpersonal is a powerful channel for the spread of political information from conversation he more engaged to the less engaged c) new media presentations have an effect of agenda setting in terms of salience of an political issue. Further studies have found that the need for political information lead to increased information seeking among young people. The information seeking was apparently successful, results in increased "attitude holding" among the young people.

Other research based on 'uses and gratification' perspective of mass communication suggest that individuals who are close to voting age will develop a need to obtain political information in order to hold informed political opinion upon which to base voting decisions. There is evidence to suggest that the extent to which major sources of political information affect citizen learning.

With growing popularity of television news and its importance as a source of political information, the emphasis has shifted to news media. Recent empirical comparisons of mass media channels show, contrary to earlier research, that television news is informative for Indian voters, albeit in ways different from newspapers. Television news provides more information about candidates; newspapers, more about parties. Both are sources of issue information. Print media are consulted more often than television by people who are actively seeking information. Television reaches groups that tend to lack political information, such as young people, immigrants, and less interested citizens. Newspaper coverage does more to close knowledge gaps between socioeconomic strata. Newsmagazines and radio are receding as political knowledge sources, relative to television and newspapers.

Thus based on the above considerations it can be hypothesised that political information seeking behavior of young people is likely to be influence political involvement. Those who are more politically engaged are more likely to seek and use political information than less engaged, Further it could be also be suggested

that greater engagement with news media increases interest and importance attached to politics and as a consequence impact political engagement. However the sustainability of such influences--whether it is short or long lasting--is a matter of empirical question.

Conclusion

To summarize study can observe that dissatisfaction with life, distrust of others and the sense that others will take advantage increases importance and interest but reduces political participate, while perception of choice and control in life increases levels of interest, importance and levels of political participation.

The main thrust of the findings is that the failure of the Indian political system to engage millions of potential young voters is the product of the institutional structure by which persons can acquire necessary critical thinking skills (Crick, 2009). Existing structures discriminates most particularly against the poor and are biased towards meeting market demands for jobs and employment. And there can be no significant change in public participation in the electoral process until the political institutions takes the initiative to prepare eligible voters for critical reflections rather than place the onus upon individuals thwarted by outmoded state and local regulations (Van Dongen, Schraagen, Eikelboom, Brake 2005).

The success of the Indian political system has been its ability to reconstitute itself periodically to pass through times of national crisis. The success of the electoral system in involving the new generation as voters and participants would be a measure of the viability of the Indian democratic political process and a guide to the remaining millions of the actively connected. Chances are that the groups of young people most likely not to capitalize on the opportunity to vote will not differ markedly from the patterns for the adult population as a whole -- and for the very same reasons--the lack of critical consciousness and thinking abilities on political issues outside the traditional considerations of cast, religion and ethnic identity.

It is too much to expect that any except young people should be able to find within themselves the motivation to lend legitimacy to their political engagement (Tilley, 2002). The institutions of our society will have to be revised first. The incentive to participate in the political process may depend on some sign that the institutions of democracy are themselves capable of change. For such change to happen study need an educated critically conscious citizenry, among whom young people constitute a majority.

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