

Tech Power to the People

A clutch of political start-ups is empowering young voters to engage more actively with the electoral system

:: Jyoti Pande Lavakare

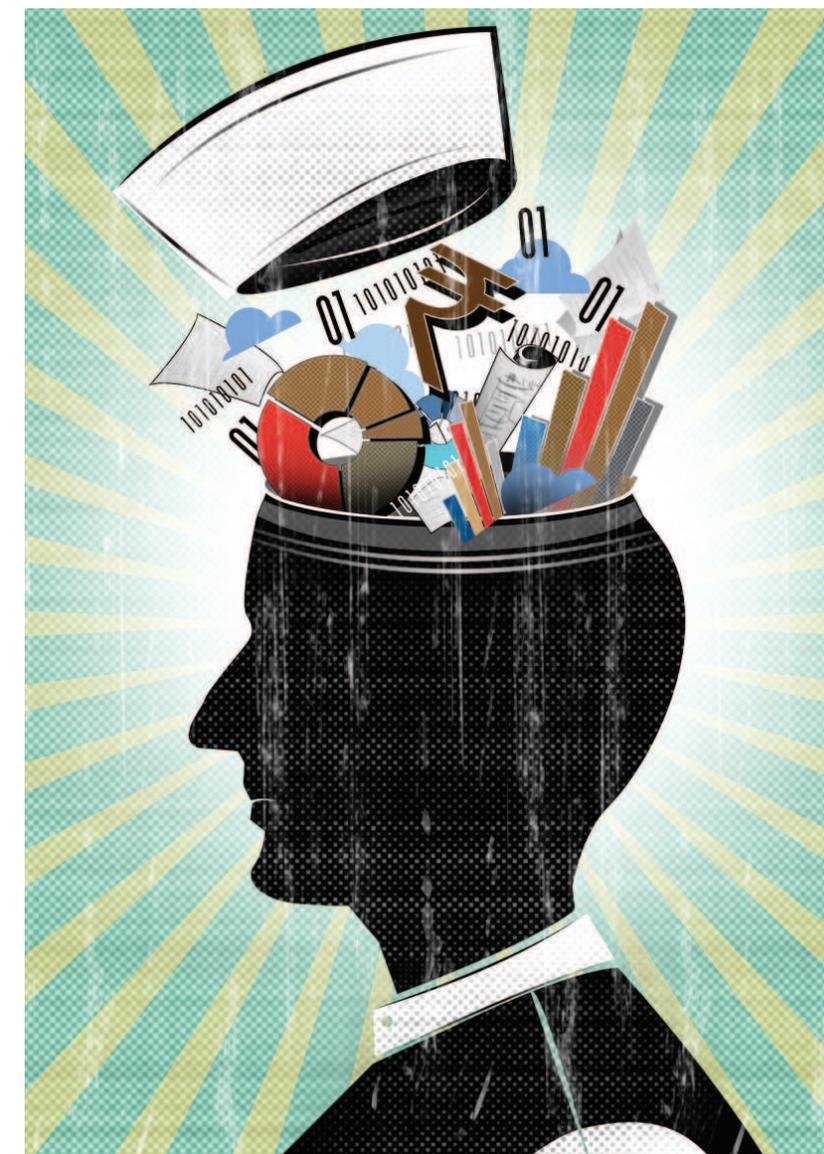
Whichever party or alliance forms the next government after the upcoming elections, one thing is certain. The run-up to India's 2014 general elections is going to see the combined power and influence of technology and youth more than ever before. In fact, technology is likely to be the real game changer, as both a younger and more tech-savvy electorate on one hand, and political parties on the other, begin to realize and harness that powerful and sophisticated tool to their advantage.

Call it the Obama effect. His 2008 campaign was powered mainly by the disruptive power of technology and youth. News reports about political parties in India beginning to harness big data to gather insight into their constituencies and what influences voters are beginning to pop up everywhere. Some have even set up special IT cells for this. But what I find even more interesting and want to focus on today is the obverse – the way India's *youngsters* are using technologies and algorithms to figure out their political universe – and engage with it. Young and idealistic political entrepreneurs are using SMAC (social, mobile, analytics and cloud) technologies to build and raise voter awareness, communicate their concerns and extract accountability from their representatives without the veils of religion and caste obfuscating issues that matter to them.

Most of these political start-ups, independent, youth-driven and non-partisan, help the uninitiated to engage with the current political eco-system – beginning with getting to know their existing (and potential) representatives as well as their own rights and responsibilities.

The great news is that there are many of these political start-ups – with interesting names like GrassRoute, Operation Black Dot, Jhatkaa, Haiyya, MumbaiVotes, Janaagraha, Know Your Vote and iForIndia, among others – which means they aren't isolated examples of some elite fad. In fact their strength is in their inclusiveness and proliferation.

The combination of that much touted "demographic dividend" of a young nation with increased literacy and improved internet penetration is creating a new sub-demographic. This – educated, professional, mostly urban, vigilant and usually tech-savvy youth – will make the middle and upper-middle classes more vocal and influential than ever before in any general election.



Making Politicians Answerable

Since most of these start-ups straddle the space between social and political entrepreneurial activity and are usually non-profit without a typical revenue-generating model and exit strategy, I'm going to focus on the one closest in character to a more typical start-up – iForIndia.

Started by Ankur Garg and Tarun Jain in 2013, iForIndia.org is a web-based

citizen engagement platform where anyone with an Indian mobile phone number can express her views on her elected representatives by rating them on issues such as law and order, basic infrastructure, electricity, sanitation, developmental investment and corruption. These are among the 24 metrics that Garg and Jain's secure, web platform collects, maintains and

analyses to generate a report card for the elected representative's performance – and make him accountable in real time, rather than waiting for the next election five years later. All people need to do is to use their mobile number to register on the website and fill out the survey. Garg's algorithms and backend analytics will do the rest.

"Our algorithms are such that we cannot manually alter or manipulate data," Garg says, explaining that if required, his back-end team can quickly authenticate registered mobile numbers to ensure users are genuine. And after these crowdsourced report cards are ready, then what?

"We will share the data with the media and invite the politicians and public for active engagements. The website will

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also serve as a mirror to inform the politicians where they stand in people's perception, which areas they are doing well in and which ones require more attention," he says.

But why would elected officials even care? The trick here is to *make* them care. Once they know this is authentic public opinion – delivered directly, in this case, through participation by citizens – they are more likely to care and respond. Additionally, because their report cards are public there will be greater pressure to perform. Of course, this tool becomes stronger with greater direct participation.

No Exit

The site has already had 300,000 unique visitors from the time it was launched, says Garg, though the number of registered users is much lower, at 25,000. Garg says that the site already has report cards on more than 98% of parliamentary and 73% assembly constituencies, covering all 28 states and two union territories.

Explaining the revenue model, Garg says, once they have enough insights and report cards, they plan to create unbiased television talk shows, paid reports for government and political parties, consulting services to politicians, licenced print content, online content, and (his least preferred), advertisements on the portal.

The start-up team is aware of the need for credibility, independence and transparency – and that's why it is wary of donations or any other sort of funding. "We're going to focus on asking only social-impact investors and credible high net worth individuals for funds; we want complete transparency in this area and don't want to end up becoming anyone's mouthpiece," he says. At present, the co-founders have spent around ₹35 lakh of their personal funds in financing the venture.

And unlike a regular start-up, Garg has no exit strategy planned. "An exit strategy is not what we really have in mind but instead get to a level of independent self-sustaining organization that can keep taking up various governance initiatives and the vision of iForIndia forward," he says. Another reason why regular venture capital won't work for iForIndia. ■



The author is an independent columnist and writer