

Social Media and Political Participation among Indian Youth

Samreen Alvi

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

Abstract

Social media has become a routine part of everyday life for young Indians, yet whether that everyday use has translated into greater political participation remains an open empirical question rather than a settled one. India's youngest voters came of political age exactly as internet access moved from a minority experience to a majority one, and campaigns, parties and civil-society actors have often treated reach on a platform as though it were the same thing as engagement with politics. This paper asks whether the growth of internet and social media access among Indian youth between 2019 and 2024 was accompanied by a matching growth in political participation, and if not, where the gap lies. It pursues four objectives: to map the growth of internet and social media access among Indian youth across this period; to compare that growth against Lok Sabha turnout and first-time-voter registration trends across the 2014, 2019 and 2024 general elections; to examine the gender and rural-urban gaps that condition who obtains access in the first place; and to identify which specific social-media-mediated activities, expressive, informational or corrective, Indian youth are actually observed to undertake. The paper draws entirely on secondary data: the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2019 survey on social media and political behaviour; three vintages of the Internet and Mobile Association of India's internet-adoption tracking (2019, 2020 and 2024); the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21); Election Commission of India turnout figures for 2014, 2019 and 2024; an Association for Democratic Reforms analysis of first-time-voter registration; and the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024 India chapter. The findings show a clear disjuncture: India's internet user base grew from about 504 million in late 2019 to 886 million in 2024, yet Lok Sabha turnout barely moved, standing at 66.4 percent in 2014, 67.11 percent in 2019 and 65.79 percent in 2024, and only 38 percent of eligible 18-19-year-olds had registered to vote ahead of the 2024 election, ranging from 17 percent in Bihar to 67 percent in Telangana. Access itself remains unevenly distributed: nationally, 57.1 percent of men but only 33.3 percent of women had ever used the internet as of 2019-21, and the gap widens further in rural areas. Where young Indians do engage politically online, the engagement is modest and platform-specific: only about a quarter of social media users report expressing political views even occasionally, and WhatsApp and YouTube, not Facebook or X, dominate as sources of political news. The paper concludes that rising connectivity is a necessary but clearly insufficient condition for rising political participation among Indian youth, and that policy attention should shift from expanding access in the abstract toward closing the specific gender and first-registration gaps that access growth has so far left untouched.

Keywords: voter turnout; digital divide; internet access; misinformation; gender gap; lok sabha elections; civic engagement

Introduction

By 2024, India's internet user base had reached about 886 million people, of whom a majority now live outside the country's cities (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2024, p. 5). That expansion happened almost entirely within a single political generation: as recently as November 2019 the user base stood at roughly 504 million, and by 2020 it had grown only to 622 million, so more than 260 million people came online for the first time in the years bracketing the 2019 and 2024 general elections (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2019; Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2021, p. 4-6). Political actors treated this expansion as an opportunity for direct outreach well before it was complete. Narendra Modi's Twitter presence, cultivated since 2013 through feel-good messaging and selective engagement with followers, had already made him the platform's second most-followed user worldwide by 2015 (Pal, 2015). The assumption embedded in that kind of outreach, that a larger connected audience is also a more politically active one, is precisely the assumption this paper sets out to test rather than to take for granted. Survey evidence from the same period complicates that assumption. Among social media users surveyed nationally by Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in 2019, only 3 percent of all respondents, and just 6 percent of active social media users, named social media as their primary source of political news; roughly one in four reported expressing political views online even occasionally, and more than half never did so (Lokniti - Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019, Section 4, p. 7). The youngest age band, 18-22-year-olds, showed the highest social media exposure of any group, at 26 percent, against 23 percent for 23-25-year-olds and near-zero exposure over 55 (Lokniti - Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019, Figure 2.3, p. 29). Cross-national research on social media use and political participation generally finds a positive but modest association, one that strengthens as platforms mature but varies by country and by what is measured as participation (Persily & Tucker, 2020). Whether digitally networked activity is a distinct mode of participation, rather than a low-effort substitute for it, remains an active point of disagreement in that literature (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). For India specifically, and for Indian youth in particular, this question has rarely been asked in a way that sets the growth of access directly against the growth, or stagnation, of participation across successive general elections, which is the gap this paper tries to fill.

This paper pursues four objectives:

1. To map the growth of internet and social media access among Indian youth between 2019 and 2024;
2. To compare that growth against Lok Sabha turnout and first-time-voter registration trends across the 2014, 2019 and 2024 general elections;
3. To examine the gender and rural-urban gaps that condition who obtains access in the first place; and
4. To identify which specific social-media-mediated activities, expressive, informational or corrective, Indian youth are actually observed to undertake.

Correspondingly, it asks four descriptive questions. How much did internet and social media access among Indian youth grow between 2019 and 2024? Did Lok Sabha turnout and youth voter registration grow at a comparable rate over the same period? How evenly is access itself distributed by gender and by residence? And what forms, if any, does youth political activity on social media actually take, once that activity is disaggregated by type, expressive, informational or corrective, rather than treated as a single undifferentiated category? Because the design is descriptive rather than experimental, these are framed as questions about co-movement over time, not as hypotheses about the direction of causation.

Answering these questions matters for two audiences. For the Election Commission of India and state Chief Electoral Officers, who spent much of 2024 publicly concerned about low first-time-voter

registration, evidence on where connectivity has and has not converted into participation should inform where outreach is actually directed, rather than resting on the assumption that any digital platform does the same job as any other (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2024). For scholars of Indian political behaviour, the electoral record itself, spanning three elections held under progressively higher connectivity, offers a point of comparison existing India-focused work has not fully exploited, most of which examines either elite-driven digital campaigning (Neyazi, 2019) or access gaps in isolation (Vaidehi et al., 2021), rather than setting connectivity and the electoral record against each other over time. That comparison is straightforward in principle, since both series are already published annually by credible institutions, and the value added here lies mainly in placing the two side by side, across the same years and age group, rather than in collecting any new figure of its own. The remainder of the paper reviews that literature thematically, sets out the secondary-data design used to bring access and participation trends into the same frame, presents five points of comparison drawn from that design, and closes with what the comparison implies for both policy and further research.

Literature Review

Whether social media use raises or dampens political participation

A first cluster of studies asks, across many countries and measures, whether social media use makes people more likely to participate politically. The balance of evidence is positive but modest. A meta-analysis of 36 studies found a small but consistent positive association between social media use and civic and political participation, with larger effects for expressive uses than for purely social ones (Boulianne, 2015). A later synthesis of 106 studies on young people found no evidence that digital media use dampens youth engagement, and showed that politically focused digital activities, discussing politics online, following political news, predicted offline participation such as contacting officials and protesting (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Tracking the same relationship across two decades and fifty countries, a further synthesis found the underlying coefficient has grown stronger over time (Boulianne, 2020), consistent with panel evidence that social media use for news predicts subsequent political expression, which in turn predicts online and offline participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Political efficacy appears to be one mechanism behind this chain: a multilevel meta-analysis found internal efficacy, the sense that one's participation matters, to be a robust predictor of online and offline participation, while external efficacy, trust that the system will respond, was weaker and less consistent (Oser et al., 2022).

Where this literature disagrees is over what counts as meaningful participation once it moves online. The slacktivism critique holds that low-effort, publicly visible acts of token support crowd out substantial commitment; an experimental study found publicly performed acts of support reduced subsequent contribution, while privately performed ones increased it, tying the effect to social observability rather than the act itself (Kristofferson et al., 2014). Other work rejects the premise that online activity substitutes for offline activism, finding instead that internet-based campaigning complements, and can help mobilise, conventional participation (Christensen, 2011). A third position locates the value of social media in incidental exposure: citizens who stumble across political content become more likely to participate online, an effect strongest among those with the least prior interest, which narrows rather than widens participation gaps (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Taken together, these findings support treating digitally networked participation as a genuinely distinct mode of civic action rather than a debased version of an older one (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018), but leave open how much of it, and under what conditions, adds

up to something politically consequential, a question the India-specific literature reviewed next answers only partially.

Social media and political mobilisation in India

A second cluster turns from the general relationship to the Indian case, and here the emphasis has fallen on elite-driven mobilisation more than grassroots participation. Modi's early and disproportionate cultivation of Twitter, discussed above, set a pattern later scholarship has traced into more coordinated territory (Pal, 2015): an analysis of digital propaganda in Indian politics documented coordinated bot networks amplifying partisan content, arguing that these practices deepen polarisation rather than simply informing the electorate (Neyazi, 2019). That finding sits within a longer-running argument that vernacular media expansion, particularly of Hindi-language outlets, did much of the work of political mobilisation in north India before social media layered additional reach on top of it (Neyazi, 2017). Whether social media specifically moves young voters is answered more sceptically by survey research than by studies of campaign strategy: using Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study data for 2019, one analysis found turnout among 18-25-year-olds at 67 percent, a marginal decline from 2014, with more young voters crediting news media than social media for motivating them to vote, even though 31 percent described themselves as last-minute deciders (Attri & Mishra, 2020). This is consistent with the Lokniti-CSDS finding, noted above, that only a minority of social media users engage in political expression on the platform at all (Lokniti - Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019, p. 20).

The Indian literature finds social media doing something distinctive not in mobilising turnout but in shaping what people believe. A large field study on WhatsApp, the platform most Indians actually use for political content, found that peer-to-peer corrections substantially reduced belief in misinformation, without the partisan backfire effects similar corrections often produce in Western contexts (Badrinathan & Chauchard, 2024). That capacity for peer correction, however, coexists with the same platforms' capacity to spread hateful and hyper-partisan content alongside legitimate mobilisation, complicating any simple story in which social media access is unambiguously good for democratic participation (Banaji & Bhat, 2021). The Indian evidence, in short, points toward social media as a site of belief formation and elite outreach more than a driver of the specific, measurable acts, registering, turning out, this paper treats as participation.

Unequal access as a prior constraint

A third body of work steps back from what people do on social media to ask who gets to be there at all, and finds access itself unevenly and structurally distributed. A decomposition analysis of the caste-based digital divide in India found more than half of the gap between disadvantaged caste groups and others is explained by education and income, with a residual first-level divide in access and second-level divide in skills persisting even after those factors are accounted for (Vaidehi et al., 2021). Gender produces a comparably large gap: national data from 2019-21 show 57.1 percent of men but only 33.3 percent of women had ever used the internet, widening to a rural gap of 48.7 percent versus 24.6 percent, against a narrower urban gap of 72.5 percent to 51.8 percent (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021). That gender gap has a rural-urban gap layered on top of it: even by 2024, with the user base at 886 million, rural internet penetration stood at 52 percent against 78 percent in urban areas (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2024).

These access gaps carry through into political voice rather than stopping at the point of connection. Research on digital media and women's political participation in India argues that platforms have opened real space for feminist mobilisation, from the 2009 Pink Chaddi campaign to the 2018 #MeToo movement,

but that the same space exposes women to trolling and harassment that can just as easily suppress participation as enable it (Raj, 2023). The same double-edged pattern appears beyond electoral-mobilisation campaigns: a broader review of social media and women's rights movements finds platforms that enabled global solidarity campaigns, such as the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, also exposed activists to harassment, and cites India's #GirlsCountCampaign against sex-selective abortion as a case where mobilisation still helped strengthen legal protections for women (Alam, 2024). A recent survey of Indian youth found a substantial gender gap not only in access but in political interest, engagement and aspiration to a political career, with young women reporting narrower perceived opportunities than young men (Wilf & Mishra, 2025). Consistent with this pattern, first-time-voter registration ahead of the 2024 election ranged from 17 percent in Bihar to 67 percent in Telangana, a spread too wide to be explained by internet access alone but one access-focused research partly accounts for (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2024).

What counts as participation once it moves online

A fourth, more theoretical, strand supplies vocabulary the other three borrow without always making explicit. The concept of affective publics describes the emotionally expressive, hashtag-organised activity that dominates political conversation on social media, activity that is genuinely public and political without resembling the instrumental acts, voting, donating, canvassing, that participation research has traditionally counted (Papacharissi, 2014). A parallel argument about networked protest movements cautions that such activity can mobilise very large numbers of people quickly because it dispenses with the organisational work earlier movements had to do, but the same shortcut leaves those movements fragile and often unable to convert mobilisation into durable change (Tufekci, 2017). Cross-national synthesis of social media's democratic effects echoes this caution at a larger scale, stressing that effects are heterogeneous across countries and platforms and resist any single, portable conclusion about whether social media helps or harms democratic participation (Persily & Tucker, 2020).

The Research Gap

These four clusters leave a specific gap. The cross-national literature establishes that social media use is associated with modestly higher participation on average, but with effects that vary by country and platform (Persily & Tucker, 2020). The India-specific literature documents vigorous elite-driven digital campaigning and belief-correction dynamics on WhatsApp, but treats turnout and registration as background rather than the outcome to be explained (Neyazi, 2019). The access literature documents severe caste, gender and rural-urban gaps in who can be online at all (Vaidehi et al., 2021), but does not connect those gaps back to the electoral record. No study located for this review sets India's longitudinal access curve, from roughly 504 million users in 2019 (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2019) to 886 million in 2024 (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2024), directly against the turnout and registration curve for the same period, disaggregated for youth. This paper addresses that gap descriptively, using exactly the secondary data sources reviewed above.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper uses a descriptive-analytical, secondary-data design, combining a longitudinal comparison across three general elections with a cross-sectional comparison across demographic groups in the most recent data. The design suits the paper's objectives because none require primary data collection: each objective asks how existing, already-measured quantities, access, turnout, registration, expressed political

activity, have moved or vary, not why any individual behaves as they do. A descriptive design cannot establish that access growth causes participation to change, and this paper does not claim that it does; it can establish whether the two move together, a more basic question the existing literature has not directly answered for India (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018).

Data sources

Table 1 summarises the sources anchoring the analysis: the Lokniti-CSDS and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2019 survey on social media and political behaviour (Lokniti - Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019); three vintages of IMAI's internet-adoption tracking, covering 2019, 2020 and 2024 (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2019; Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2021; Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2024); the National Family Health Survey-5 (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021); Election Commission of India turnout figures for 2014, 2019 and 2024, released through the Press Information Bureau or reported contemporaneously from the Commission's announcement (Election Commission of India, 2014; Election Commission of India, 2019; Election Commission of India, 2024); the Association for Democratic Reforms' analysis of first-time-voter registration ahead of the 2024 election (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2024); and the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2024 India chapter (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024). The Lokniti-CSDS survey and Attri and Mishra's analysis of National Election Study data (Attri & Mishra, 2020) supply the only individual-level evidence used here; the remainder are population-level administrative or industry figures.

Table 1
Data sources used in this paper, by coverage and contribution

Source	Years covered	Geographic scope	Contributes
Lokniti-CSDS & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Social Media & Political Behaviour	2019 (cross-sectional survey)	National	Social media exposure and political expression, by age
IAMAI-Nielsen / IMAI-Kantar ICUBE (three vintages)	2019, 2020, 2024	National, urban/rural	Internet user counts and penetration rates over time
National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5)	2019-21	National, urban/rural, by sex	Internet use by gender and residence
Election Commission of India / Press Information Bureau turnout releases	2014, 2019, 2024	National	Lok Sabha general election turnout, and 2024 turnout by gender
Attri & Mishra, analysis of Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study 2019	2019 (cross-sectional survey)	National	Youth (18-25) turnout, vote choice and decision timing
Association for Democratic Reforms, analysis of ECI registration data	2024	National and state-wise	First-time-voter (18-19) registration rate

Source	Years covered	Geographic scope	Contributes
Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024, India chapter	2024 (cross-sectional survey)	National (non-representative online sample)	Platform used weekly for news

Source: Compiled by the author from the sources listed. See Table 1 in the accompanying source ledger for full citations and verification dates.

Sampling and case selection

The three general elections chosen, 2014, 2019 and 2024, are not a statistical sample; they are the full population of general elections held since social media use became widespread in India, so selection is driven by data availability and relevance to the paper's question rather than by any procedure that could introduce bias. Youth is defined as ages 18-25 wherever the source allows it, following the Lokniti-CSDS survey series and Attri and Mishra's analysis (Attri & Mishra, 2020); where a source reports a different band, for instance the National Family Health Survey's 15-49 range or the internet-adoption reports' users aged five and above, that band is stated explicitly rather than treated as equivalent.

Variables and operationalisation

Political participation is operationalised three ways: turnout, the official percentage of registered electors who voted; registration, the audited percentage of an eligible age cohort who enrolled; and expressed political activity on social media, the self-reported frequency of expressing opinions or sharing political material online. Access is operationalised as internet penetration and, separately, as the raw user count, since the two move together but tell slightly different stories about the pace of growth. Where a source defines a variable differently from another used alongside it, for example the age floors just noted, that difference is treated as a limitation rather than smoothed over.

Analytical tools and methods

The analysis is limited to percentage-point comparison across time and demographic categories; no inferential statistics are computed, since the data are aggregate figures from published reports rather than an individual-level dataset. Charts and tables were produced in Python, using pandas and matplotlib, from figures already in the data ledger; no new statistic was calculated beyond what a cited source reports.

Ethical considerations

All data used are publicly available, aggregate figures published by government bodies, a survey research institute, an industry association and a non-governmental watchdog. No primary human-subjects data were collected, and no individual is identifiable in any reported figure.

Limitations

Four limitations bear on how the findings should be read. First, the internet-adoption figures for 2019 and 2020 cover users aged five and above, while the 2024 figure does not restate an age floor, so the access trend may not be perfectly continuous across a single definition. Second, the Reuters Institute's India sample is not nationally representative, skewing toward English-speaking online news users, as the report flags. Third, verifying the National Family Health Survey's internet-use figures directly against the primary report was blocked while preparing this paper; the figures used here are cross-checked against two independent secondary compilations reporting identical numbers, but should be re-verified against the printed volume. Fourth, aggregate secondary data can show that access and participation moved together or apart across a population; it cannot show, for any individual young voter, what role social media played

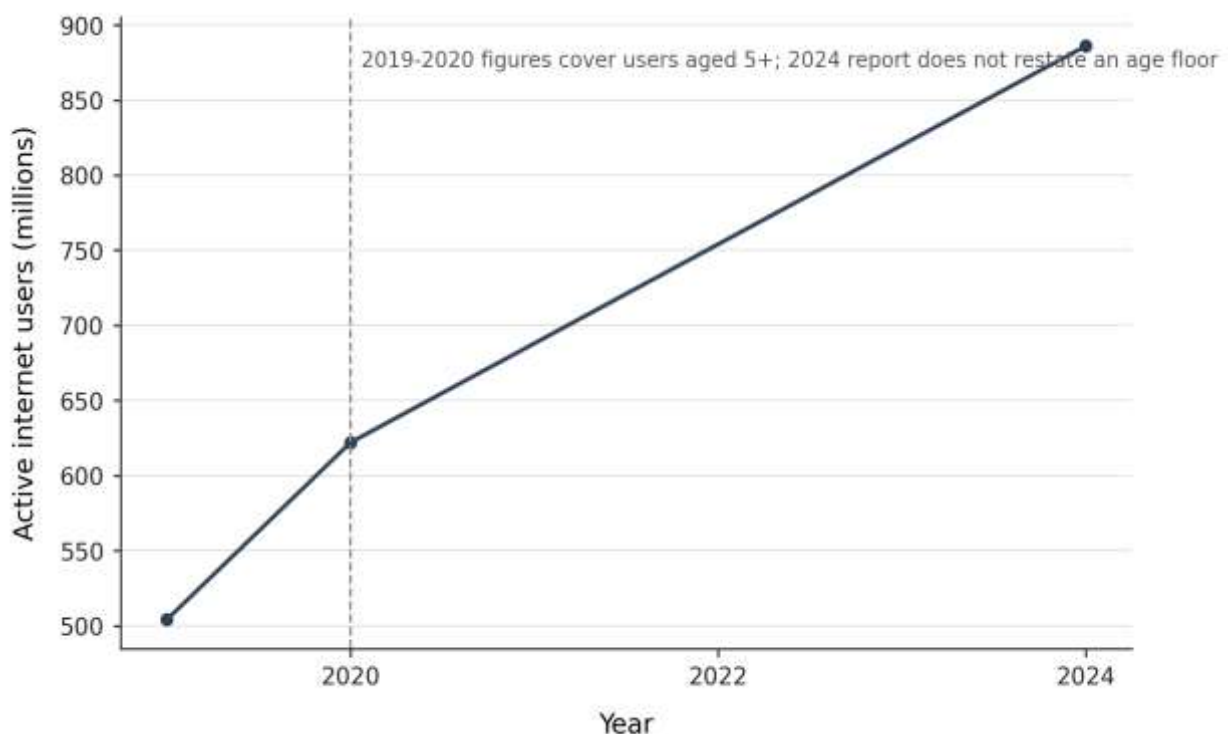
in that decision to register, vote, or speak up online, a limitation the panel-survey literature reviewed above has handled better than the descriptive comparison attempted here (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014).

Results and Discussion

Access grew far faster than any measure of participation

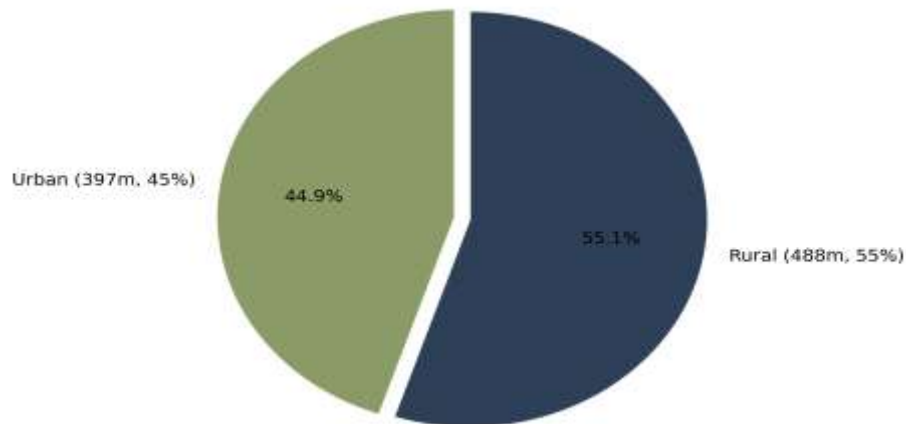
Internet access in India grew rapidly across exactly the period this paper examines. Figure 1 plots active internet users at three points: roughly 504 million in November 2019, 622 million in 2020, and 886 million in 2024 (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2019; Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2021; Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2024). That is growth of about 76 percent in under five years, driven disproportionately by rural adoption, which grew at roughly twice the urban rate in the most recent period measured (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2024, p. 18). Figure 2 shows that by 2024 the user base had also become predominantly rural, with 488 million rural users (55 percent of the total) against 397 million urban users (45 percent) (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2024, p. 5). Whatever else changed in Indian political life over these years, access to the medium through which that life is now partly conducted did not stand still.

Figure 1
Active internet users in India, 2019-2024



Source: Compiled by the author from IMAI-Nielsen (2019) and IMAI-Kantar ICUBE (2020, 2024). The 2019 and 2020 figures cover users aged five and above; the 2024 report does not restate an age floor, so the series may include a small definitional break.

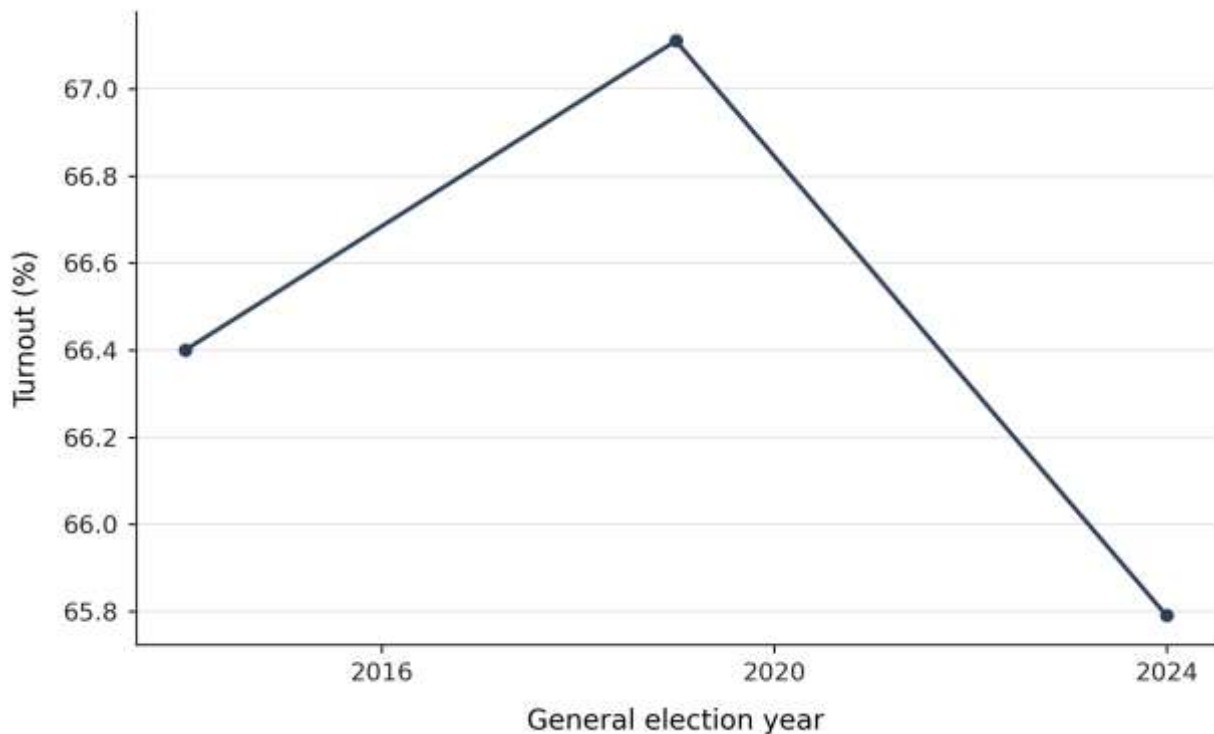
Figure 2
Rural and urban share of India's internet user base, 2024



Source: Compiled by the author from IMAI-Kantar ICUBE (2024), p. 5. Figures are in millions of active internet users.

Turnout, meanwhile, did not follow the same trajectory. Figure 3 sets the same period against Lok Sabha turnout: 66.4 percent in 2014, 67.11 percent in 2019, and 65.79 percent in 2024 (Election Commission of India, 2014; Election Commission of India, 2019; Election Commission of India, 2024). Across three elections spanning the fastest decade of internet growth in India's history, turnout moved by less than a percentage and a half in either direction, and its 2024 level was in fact lower than in 2019. If rising access were, by itself, sufficient to raise political participation as conventionally measured, this is not the pattern one would expect to see. The finding sits more comfortably with the meta-analytic literature's own hedging than with any simple diffusion story: social media use is associated with modestly higher participation on average (Boulianne, 2015), and the association has strengthened over the two decades that literature covers (Boulianne, 2020), but modest and strengthening is not the same as sufficient to move a national turnout figure that is itself shaped by turnout's own long-run ceiling effects, evident across the full run of Indian general elections since 1952 (Kumar, 2022), and by the many offline factors, candidate quality, local mobilisation, election-day logistics, that determine whether a registered elector actually reaches a booth. Christensen's finding that online activity complements rather than substitutes for offline mobilisation is one plausible reading of this gap: connectivity may be raising the volume of political talk without proportionally raising the number of first-time actors that talk brings to the polling booth (Christensen, 2011).

Figure 3
Lok Sabha general election turnout, 2014-2024



Source: Compiled by the author from Press Information Bureau / Election Commission of India releases for 2014 and 2024, and from contemporaneous ECI-attributed reporting for 2019 (see Methodology and source ledger).

The youth-specific gap is sharper still

The gap is sharper again once the analysis is narrowed to the youngest cohort. Table 2 brings together three youth-specific figures that are easy to state separately but striking when read together: 18-22-year-olds showed the highest rate of social media exposure of any age band surveyed in 2019, at 26 percent (Lokniti - Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019, Figure 2.3, p. 29); turnout among 18-25-year-olds in the 2019 general election was 67 percent, close to the national average but marginally down from 2014 (Attri & Mishra, 2020); and only 38 percent of eligible 18-19-year-olds, just 18 million of 49 million, had registered to vote ahead of the 2024 election, a figure that ranged from 17 percent in Bihar to 67 percent in Telangana (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2024). The group with the highest social media exposure is thus also the group with by far the lowest registration rate of any age band with usable data. Registration, unlike turnout, requires no polling-day logistics at all, only a form; if high social media exposure were translating into political mobilisation among the youngest voters, registration is exactly where that mobilisation should show up most clearly, and in the aggregate national figure it does not. The fifty-percentage-point range between Bihar and Telangana further suggests that whatever explains the registration gap operates unevenly across states in a way that a single national access figure cannot capture. It is also worth noting that the one youth-specific figure that does look encouraging, 67 percent turnout among those already on the rolls, describes only the minority of young Indians who had cleared the registration hurdle in the first place; read against the 38 percent national registration rate, it says more about the committed minority than about the cohort as a whole, and should not be mistaken for evidence that youth political participation in general is healthy.

Table 2
Youth social media exposure, turnout and registration, 2019-2024

Metric	Cohort	Year	Value
High social media exposure	Age 18-22	2019	26%
High social media exposure	Age 23-25	2019	23%
Lok Sabha turnout	Age 18-25	2019	67%
Vote share for BJP	Age 18-25 (of young voters)	2019	41%
Last-minute vote decision	Age 18-25 (of young voters)	2019	31%
Voter registration (national)	Age 18-19	2024	38%
Voter registration (lowest state, Bihar)	Age 18-19	2024	17%
Voter registration (highest state, Telangana)	Age 18-19	2024	67%

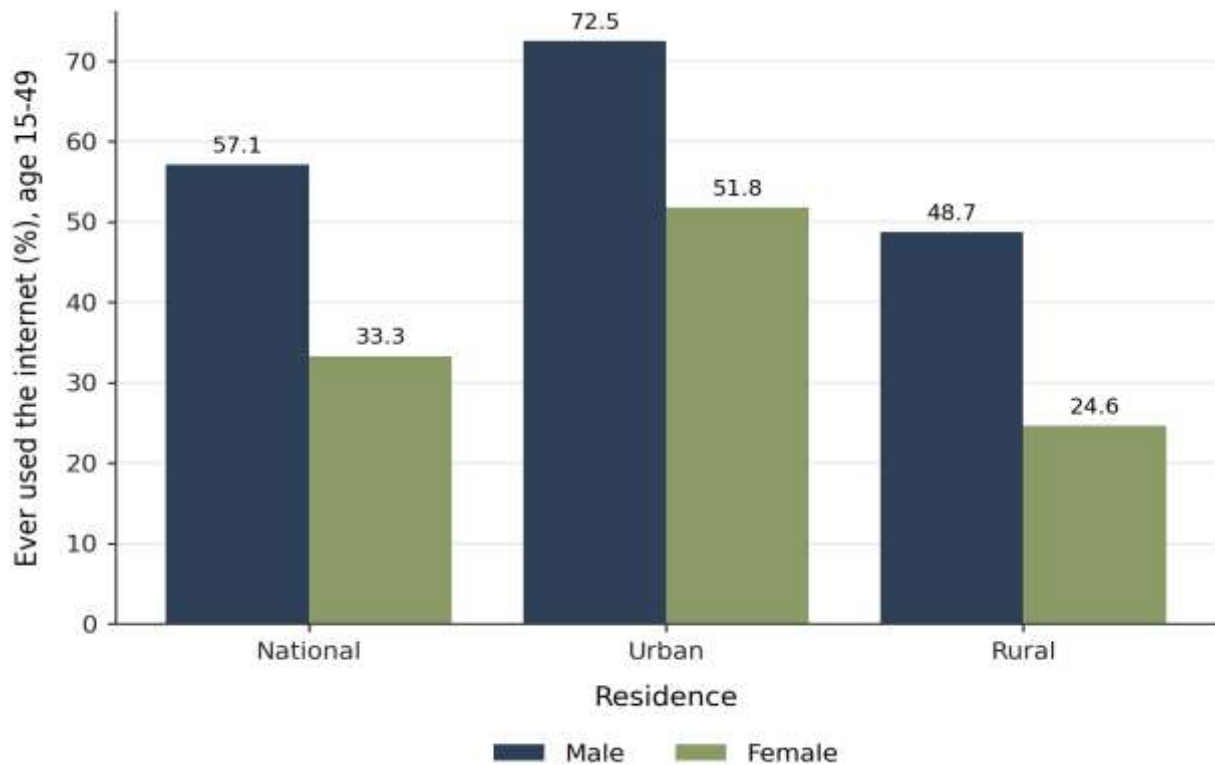
Source: Compiled by the author from Lokniti-CSDS & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2019), Attri & Mishra (2020), and Association for Democratic Reforms (2024). Cohort age bands differ by source, as noted in Methodology, and should not be treated as a single continuous age group.

Gender divides access before it can divide participation

Figure 4 shows the National Family Health Survey's internet-use figures by sex and residence: 57.1 percent of men against 33.3 percent of women nationally, widening to a 24-point gap in rural areas (48.7 percent versus 24.6 percent) and narrowing, but not closing, to a 21-point gap in urban areas (72.5 percent versus 51.8 percent) (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021). A gap of this size in the precondition for any social-media-mediated participation places a hard ceiling on how much such participation women can show in the aggregate, regardless of how politically engaged individual women are once online. Consistent with that ceiling, recent survey work on Indian youth finds a parallel gender gap in political interest, engagement and aspiration to a political career, with young women reporting narrower perceived opportunities to participate than young men report for themselves (Wilf & Mishra, 2025). Where women are online and politically active, the evidence is genuinely double-edged rather than simply negative: digital platforms have carried real feminist mobilisation, from the 2009 Pink Chaddi campaign to the 2018 #MeToo movement, but the same platforms expose women engaging in that mobilisation to trolling and harassment that can just as easily suppress further participation (Raj, 2023). That double-edged character extends beyond India's own campaigns: broader work on social media and women's rights activism documents the same trade-off internationally, including in India's #GirlsCountCampaign against sex-selective abortion, where platform-enabled mobilisation nonetheless coexisted with the harassment risks such visibility invites (Alam, 2024). The caste-based access literature offers a partial account of part of

this pattern without addressing the gender-specific part of it directly: more than half of the caste-based digital divide is attributable to differences in education and income between disadvantaged caste groups and others (Vaidehi et al., 2021), factors that plausibly interact with, rather than substitute for, the gender gap documented here.

Figure 4
Internet use by sex and residence, India, 2019-21



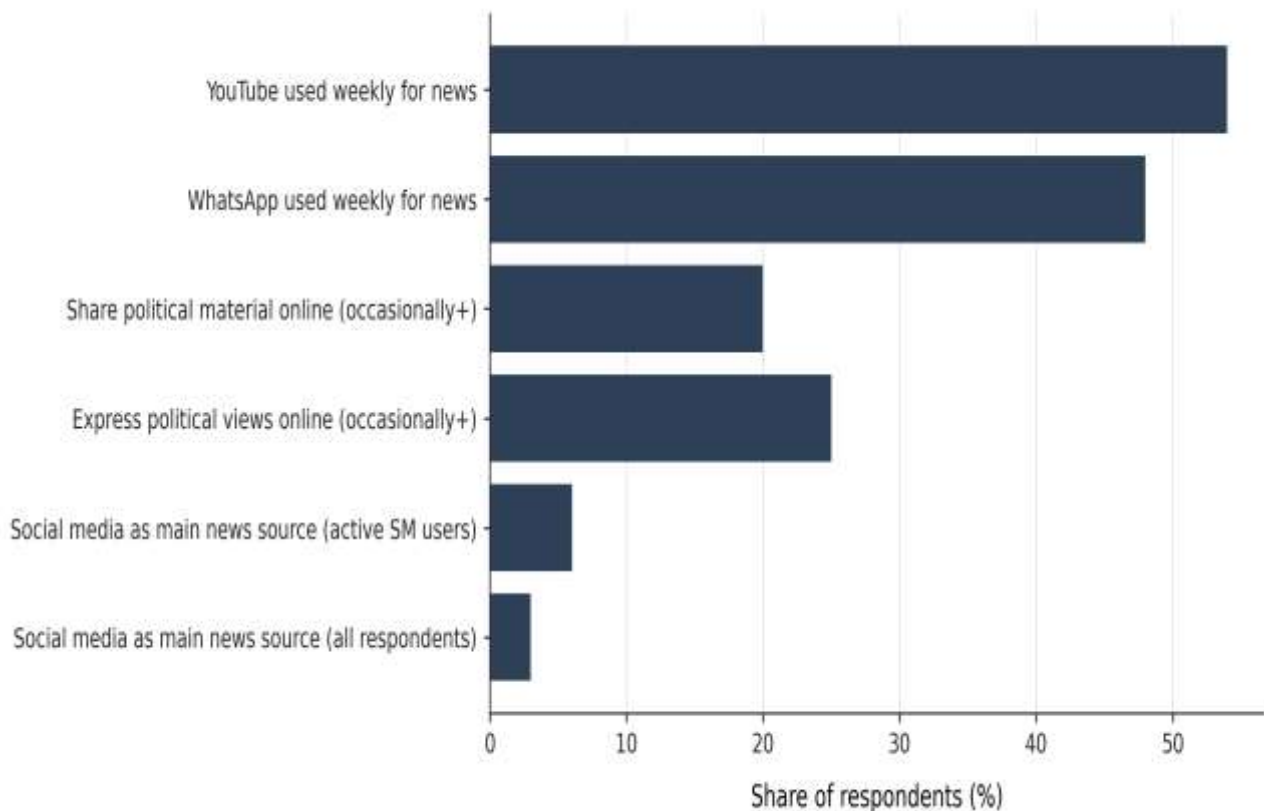
Source: Compiled by the author from the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), cross-checked against two independent secondary compilations of the same indicator (see Methodology, Limitations).

What little political activity there is looks corrective and platform-specific, not expressive and general

Figure 5 collects the clearest available measures of what Indian social media users actually do that could be called political: 3 percent name social media as their main source of political news, rising to 6 percent among active users (Lokniti - Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019); about a quarter express political views online at all, even occasionally, and a fifth share political material with that frequency (Lokniti - Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019); and, among a differently sampled but more recent group of online news users, 54 percent use YouTube and 48 percent use WhatsApp weekly for news, well ahead of Facebook or X (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024). Read together, these figures describe activity that is modest in overall scale and concentrated on a narrow set of platforms rather than spread evenly across social media as a single undifferentiated category, a distinction the taxonomic literature has argued participation research should take seriously rather than collapse (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). The one place the Indian evidence shows social media doing something at real scale is correction rather than expression: a large WhatsApp field study found that peer-to-peer corrections substantially reduced belief in political misinformation, without the partisan backfire that

similar corrections often produce elsewhere (Badrinathan & Chauchard, 2024). That a platform built for private messaging, not public expression, is where the clearest positive finding in the Indian literature shows up is itself informative: it suggests that where Indian social media use has demonstrable political consequences, those consequences run through interpersonal correction on largely closed platforms more than through the open, expressive participation the international literature has mostly studied (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Taken across the comparisons presented in this section, the pattern is consistent rather than coincidental: wherever this paper can measure both access and a specific form of participation side by side, access has moved further and faster, leaving participation, however defined, to trail behind it by a wide and fairly stable margin.

Figure 5
Reported political and news-related social media activity in India



Source: Compiled by the author from Lokniti-CSDS & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2019, national survey) and the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024, India chapter (non-nationally-representative online sample). The two surveys use different samples and question wording and are shown together only to illustrate relative scale, not to imply a single trend.

Conclusion

Across three general elections and roughly five years of the fastest internet growth in India's history, this paper finds a consistent disjuncture rather than a converging trend. Internet access nearly doubled, from about 504 million users in 2019 to 886 million in 2024, but Lok Sabha turnout barely moved and first-time-voter registration ahead of the 2024 election reached only 38 percent of eligible 18-19-year-olds nationally, with a fifty-point range between the best- and worst-performing states. The cohort with the

highest social media exposure, 18-22-year-olds, is also furthest from converting that exposure into the two acts, registering and turning out, that participation research has traditionally counted. Underneath this aggregate picture sits a gender gap in access itself, 57.1 percent of men against 33.3 percent of women nationally as of 2019-21, that places a ceiling on how much social-media-mediated participation women can show regardless of individual engagement, and a platform-specific pattern in which the clearest positive finding in the Indian evidence, WhatsApp-based peer correction of misinformation, involves correction rather than the expressive participation the international literature has mostly studied.

Four policy suggestions follow directly from these findings rather than the topic in general. First, the Election Commission of India and state Chief Electoral Officers should target first-time-voter registration campaigns at the states and age bands where the shortfall is largest, using the platforms this paper's evidence shows young Indians actually use for information, YouTube and WhatsApp, rather than a generic social media presence. Second, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and NITI Aayog should treat closing the rural and female internet-access gap as a precondition for, not a byproduct of, any digital-participation initiative, since the access gap documented here is large enough alone to mechanically suppress participation measures regardless of what happens once people are online. Third, university grants commissions and state education departments should scale the kind of peer-to-peer media-literacy intervention shown to work against misinformation on WhatsApp, rather than generic digital-literacy campaigns whose effectiveness this evidence does not speak to. Fourth, since much of this paper's difficulty in linking access to participation stems from the absence of individual-level data connecting the two, Lokniti-CSDS and the Election Commission of India would each gain from a joint survey module linking validated turnout records to individual social media use, closing a gap this paper could only describe from the outside.

Two directions for future research follow from the same limitation. One is the panel or validated-turnout data just described, which would allow India-specific tests of the causal chain cross-national panel studies have already traced elsewhere. The other is a caste-disaggregated extension of the participation analysis attempted here, since existing work has decomposed the caste-based digital divide in access but not yet followed that divide through to registration or turnout outcomes. Internet access has grown faster in India over the past five years than at almost any point in the country's history; whether that access has yet become political voice, this paper's own comparison suggests, is a question the numbers gathered here leave genuinely open rather than answered.

References

1. Alam, N. (2024). The impact of social media on women's rights movements: Empowerment, challenges and future directions. *International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies*, 3(8), 463-469. <https://doi.org/10.70333/ijeks-03-08-001>
2. Association for Democratic Reforms (2024). *Few Indian youngsters have registered to vote - and what that means*. Association for Democratic Reforms, analysis of Election Commission of India registration data. <https://adrindia.org/content/few-indian-youngsters-have-registered-vote-%E2%80%93-and-what-means>
3. Attri, V., & Mishra, J. (2020). The youth vote in Lok Sabha elections 2019. *Indian Politics & Policy*, 3(1), 87-107

4. Badrinathan, S., & Chauchard, S. (2024). "I don't think that's true, bro!" Social corrections of misinformation in India. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 29(2), 394-416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612231158770>
5. Banaji, S., & Bhat, R. (2021). *Social media and hate*. Routledge.
6. Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 524-538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542>
7. Boulianne, S. (2020). Twenty years of digital media effects on civic and political participation. *Communication Research*, 47(7), 947-966. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218808186>
8. Boulianne, S., & Theocharis, Y. (2020). Young people, digital media, and engagement: A meta-analysis of research. *Social Science Computer Review*, 38(2), 111-127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439318814190>
9. Christensen, H. S. (2011). Political activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or political participation by other means?. *First Monday*, 16(2)
10. Election Commission of India (2014). *General Election 2014: Highest ever voter turn-out*. Election Commission of India, data released via the Press Information Bureau, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?reid=105118>
11. Election Commission of India (2019). *At 67.11%, 2019 turnout highest for LS polls*. Election Commission of India's official turnout figure, as reported by Deccan Chronicle. <https://www.pressreader.com/india/deccan-chronicle/20190521/281917364541074>
12. Election Commission of India (2024). *Overall 65.79% voter turnout recorded in General Elections 2024*. Election Commission of India, data released via the Press Information Bureau, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2023231>
13. Gil de Zúñiga, H., Molyneux, L., & Zheng, P. (2014). Social media, political expression, and political participation: Panel analysis of lagged and concurrent relationships. *Journal of Communication*, 64(4), 612-634. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12103>
14. International Institute for Population Sciences (2021). *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-21: India report*. International Institute for Population Sciences, for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. <https://iipsindia.ac.in/content/national-family-health-survey-nfhs-5-india-report>
15. Internet and Mobile Association of India (2019). *India Internet 2019*. Internet and Mobile Association of India, in collaboration with Nielsen. <https://www.techradar.com/news/indian-internet-users-now-account-for-over-500-million>
16. Internet and Mobile Association of India (2021). *Internet adoption in India: ICUBE 2020*. Internet and Mobile Association of India, in collaboration with Kantar (ICUBE 2020). <https://www.iamai.in/sites/default/files/research/IAMAI-KANTAR-ICUBE-2020-Report.pdf>
17. Internet and Mobile Association of India (2024). *Internet in India 2024*. Internet and Mobile Association of India, in collaboration with Kantar (ICUBE 2024). https://www.iamai.in/sites/default/files/research/Kantar_%20IAMAI%20report_2024_.pdf
18. Kristofferson, K., White, K., & Peloza, J. (2014). The nature of slacktivism: How the social observability of an initial act of token support affects subsequent prosocial action. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(6), 1149-1166. <https://doi.org/10.1086/674137>
19. Kumar, S. (2022). *Elections in India: An overview*. Routledge India.

20. Lokniti - Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (2019). *Social media & political behaviour*. Lokniti-CSDS, in collaboration with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. https://www.csdS.in/uploads/custom_files_new/Report-SMPB.pdf
21. Neyazi, T. A. (2017). *Political communication and mobilisation: The Hindi media in India*. Cambridge University Press.
22. Neyazi, T. A. (2019). Digital propaganda, political bots and polarized politics in India. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 30(1), 39-57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2019.1699938>
23. Oser, J., Grinson, A., Boulianne, S., & Halperin, E. (2022). How political efficacy relates to online and offline political participation: A multilevel meta-analysis. *Political Communication*, 39(5), 607-633. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2022.2086329>
24. Pal, J. (2015). Banalities turned viral: Narendra Modi and the political tweet. *Television & New Media*, 16(4), 378-387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415573956>
25. Papacharissi, Z. (2014). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
26. Persily, N., & Tucker, J. A. (Eds.) (2020). *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform*. Cambridge University Press.
27. Raj, S. (2023). Digital media and women's political participation in India. *Media Watch*, 14(3), 366-385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09760911231185975>
28. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2024). *Digital News Report 2024: India*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/india>
29. Theocharis, Y., & van Deth, J. W. (2018). The continuous expansion of citizen participation: A new taxonomy. *European Political Science Review*, 10(1), 139-163. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000230>
30. Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.
31. Vaidehi, R., Reddy, A. B., & Banerjee, S. (2021). Explaining caste-based digital divide in India. *Telematics and Informatics*, 65, 101719. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101719>
32. Valeriani, A., & Vaccari, C. (2016). Accidental exposure to politics on social media as online participation equalizer in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. *New Media & Society*, 18(9), 1857-1874. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815616223>
33. Wilf, S., & Mishra, S. (2025). "We aren't even allowed to dream of a future in politics": Gender disparities in Indian youth political interest, engagement, and aspirations. *Gender & Development*, advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2025.2539623>