

How your smartphone became poll-savvy

Ahead of Election 2019, apps are raising political awareness. Young voters are using them to rate and review candidates, enroll in voter lists, and even find the shortest route to the polling booth

Sonam Joshi & Himanshi Dhawan | TNN

Software engineer Deepak Pathania has never really been interested in politics, but a month ago, the first-time voter decided to download Neta after a friend shared an article about it. The leader rating app gamifies politics by inviting users to review politicians and parties. The 22-year-old has been checking the app once a week to see what other users are saying about political leaders from his constituency. The Bengaluru resident says the browsing is helping him make a more educated decision. "The concept of holding politicians accountable for their work is cool," says Pathania. "It's like a Zomato for politicians."

In the run-up to the general elections, a host of apps like Neta are using technology to bring politics and democracy closer to young voters like Pathania. They give information like the wealth and criminal background of their elected representatives, and offer them a platform to complain about electoral violations, find their names on the voter list and even rate their leaders' performance.

On the Neta app, which describes itself as "Leaders ka report card", users can also share their opinion in the form of video reviews and comments, tag their MLA and conduct polls, with the most active users being highlighted in a separate section called 'star citizens'. "People are spending half their day on the phone," says founder Pratham Mittal, 27. "If there is a political app available, their engagement will automatically increase and create better conversations."

Launched in 2018, the app has over 5 lakh downloads though Mittal claims that it has 2 crore users, with 70 lakh being from rural areas. Liking the platform to a US-style primary, Mittal hopes it will also encourage netas to do better work and improve their ratings. They have already started responding — an MP from Delhi imposed price controls on a private hospital that was charging exorbitant rates on the basis of a user's video review.

Another app, Missing Voters,



aims to bring voters missing from the electoral rolls back into the fray. Its Hyderabad-based founder, Khalid Saifullah, initially called it 'Missing Muslim' and used it in the run-up to the 2018 Karnataka elections, helping the state election commission add 12 lakh voters in a mere three weeks. Encouraged with the response, the 38-year-old scaled the app to the national level a month ago.

Research conducted by Delhi-based Centre for Research and Debates in Development Policy and RayLabs found 15% of all voters and 25% of Muslim voters missing from the rolls across the country. So, 12.7 crore voters including 3 crore Muslims may not be able to vote in the Lok Sabha elections.

Saifullah has combined technology with field work to address the problem. The app is used by 5,000 volunteers who visit homes with only one name on the voter list. The volunteer is expected to verify the number of voters in each house and add names that have been left out. This, along with proof of age and address is treated as an application for a voter ID. Subsequently, a team tracks each application with the Election Commission. "We found that people want to vote but are either unaware that their names are missing from the voter list or are too scared of the paperwork. We go to their homes to get the details and track the application till they get the card," he says. Already, there have been 10,000 applications from across India.

Another new platform, NextElection presents a more nuanced overview to users by enabling them not just to rate politicians but also learn which issues they are responsible for before making the decision. NextElection, which calls itself as a pro-democracy political accountability platform, has partnered with lawyer collectives, fact checkers, policy groups and non-profits such as Legal Desire, Madhyam, Factly and Janaagraha for awareness. It also offers insights about a MP's parliamentary performance, the areas under him and the work he has done over the last 5-10 years.

Those who sign up get to participate in ratings, surveys and get a personalised feed of Twitter-style updates of the leaders and issues

they're interested in. Its founder, privacy rights activist Amit Bansal, likens it to a social network that allows users to post, follow and feed, with channels for issues, personalities and parties. The app uses new-age tools like a mock election exercise that teaches young adults how to get their name added to a voter list and learn about key civic issues.

The app iEleg goes a step further: It allows voters to raise complaints about their constituency besides providing information on the constituencies and candidates. Started by 26-year-old Jayanth Reddy, an automotive engineer, the app was launched before the Karnataka polls. Reddy and his partners hope to scale up to national level in the next few weeks to provide information on all parliamentary constituencies. "Unlike other countries, money power which I call 'Vitamin M', is used very openly in India. We hope that active participation of educated people will help bring down the influence of money and corruption in politics," he says.

Among the oldest apps used to provide information on candidates' wealth and criminal backgrounds is MyNeta by Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). Founder Jagdeep Chhokar says that while there has been a significant increase in voters' awareness levels, but more needs to be done. "Information about

Information about a candidate's criminal background and his wealth has become a part of the national discourse

— JAGDEEP CHHOKAR
FOUNDER, ADR



a candidate's criminal background and his wealth has become a part of the national discourse. However, the awareness has not translated to anything tangible. Political parties continue to give tickets to tainted candidates," he says.

Former election commissioner S Y Quraishi says apps are helping young people become more politically conscious and aware of their responsibilities. "Till a few years ago, people knew celebrities like Shah Rukh Khan but not who their PM or President were," he points out. "This has improved over the years with the ground-level work done by the Election Commission."

While the EC has a number of apps, some states have been proactive too. The Maharashtra state election commission's COP (citizens on patrol) app allows citizens to complain about electoral violations but is also being used to highlight lack of civic amenities in the city. Telangana's Naa Vote app, launched before the 2018 state polls helped voters find their polling booth and the shortest route to get there. Also, differently abled voters could ask for a pick-up on polling day.

Bansal from NextElection says, "We're living in a time when ordinary citizens feel left out. Can we, as the electorate, hold politicians accountable, be the watchdogs and participate in governance?"

When I smelt a rat, and gave up chocolate

One of the great pleasures of life is the afternoon siesta. In Mexico and other Latin American countries, it has been perfected to a fine art. In warm countries like ours, it is almost a necessity, especially for the farmer toiling in his fields from daybreak to noon. An afternoon nap under a peepal tree or in the shade of a mighty banyan does wonders for body and soul.

I take my siesta on the same bed that I sleep upon at night, but if I am travelling, I have no difficulty in taking a nap on a plane or in a bus or in a railway waiting room, although I must admit that it's been many years since I travelled by train. Under a tree sounds romantic, but the last time I tried sleeping under a friendly horse-chestnut tree, I was woken by chestnuts falling on my head.

Bed is best, especially on a cold winter's day in the hills. And at night, a hot water bottle helps. Given a warm bed, I sleep like a baby. But like a baby, I am inclined to wake up at midnight or at one in the morning, feeling rather hungry. And for this purpose, I keep a bar of chocolate on my bedside table.

There's nothing like a chunk of chocolate in the middle of the night. It helps me feel that all's right with the world, and I fall asleep again to dream of cricket bats made of chocolate and rainbows made of sugar candy. You must try it sometime, those of you who have difficulty in sleeping.

But a few nights ago, I woke up prematurely to hear something nibbling away on my bedside table. Katr-katr, katr-katr, came the ominous sound. I switched on the bedside lamp, and there sat a fat rat, nibbling away at my chocolate!

Chad Crowe



Now I am generous with most things, and I am happy to share my chocolate with you, gentle reader; but I draw the line at rodents. So I flung a slipper at the rat, who dodged it and took off with some reluctance, and then I had to throw away the remains of the chocolate for fear of catching rat flu or something horrible.

Anyway, the next night I kept a fresh chocolate bar in a drawer of the dressing table, where I felt sure it would be safe. Once again, my dreams were interrupted by the nibble and crunch of small teeth embedding themselves in my chocolate bar. I sprang out of bed, rushed to the dressing table, pulled out the drawer, and out popped Master Rat, the champion chocolate-eater! Away he went, leaving behind only half a bar of chocolate for yours truly.

Apparently he'd found a hole in the back of the drawer, and spurred on by greed, had burrowed his way to the object of his desire.

A trap! A trap was what I needed. So I borrowed my neighbour's rat trap — not the kind that kills, but the kind that imprisons (which may be worse) — and set it up with my favorite chocolate as bait. They say rats prefer cheese, but I wasn't taking any chances.

Anyway the trap worked, and in the morning I found a disgruntled rat staring at me through the bars of his prison like the prisoner of Zenda. Picking up the trap, I walked with it half a mile up the road, and then released Master Rat in the bushes behind a popular bakery. Very irresponsible of me, but I thought the precincts of the bakery would at least keep him occupied.

Three peaceful nights passed. Once again, I enjoyed my midnight chocolate snack. Then — katr, katr, katr... He was back again!

"Once more into the breach, dear friends." Another trap was borrowed and Master Rat was jailed for a second time. And this time I was taking no chances. I engaged a taxi, drove to the Kemptly waterfall with the rat in its trap, and there flung the protesting rat into the waterfall, much as the villainous Moriarty had flung poor Sherlock Homes over a certain waterfall. The last I saw of the rat, he was swimming strongly downstream towards the Yamuna bridge.

Peace at last. Chocolate forever! Dreams of candy floss and golden syrups...

And then: katr, katr, katr... I switch on the bedside light. Two rats are on my desk, having a tug of war with my chocolate bar.

There's only one thing to do. I give up eating chocolates. I'll starve those rats out of existence even if, in the process, I must suffer from extreme malnutrition.

Dating offline in the age of Tinder

Millennials are choosing yacht parties and book readings over match-making apps to find love the old-fashioned way

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On her way to her new home in Sydney, Damini* came across an ad for a match-making service in an in-flight magazine. She had rather impulsively decided to move to Australia from the US after a divorce, and was looking for love again. "I wanted a modern Indian man — someone who was chivalrous and respected my space, but with whom I could eat butter chicken with my hands," says the 33-year-old. After a few unsuccessful Tinder dates, she found Sirf Coffee, which offers personalised dating experiences. Following detailed questionnaires and interviews, the service sets you up on a blind date. In Damini's case, she lucked out and is now married after a whirlwind romance.

It wasn't too long ago that eyebrows were raised when people said they'd met via a dating app but the script has flipped, and now it's like "What? You met offline?" Of course, apps have their uses — how else can you hook up with a total stranger on a jaunt abroad — but the mindless swiping and unsolicited dick pics can get tiresome after a while. Enter offline dating services which let you actually meet prospective partners in real life — some, like Sirf Coffee, through blind date set-ups and others through all kinds of singles events.

Footloose No More is one of the services that organise events where members can meet like-minded people. It was started by siblings Varsha Vadhyar and Abhishek Agnihotri at a time when the pair were, in Vadhyar's words, "spectacularly single", and was really a way for them to find someone (it worked — both found their spouses through Footloose No More). What began as a Facebook group ten years ago has turned into a network with over 10,000 members. Their user base isn't just full of young professionals. "Daughters drive their dads to our events, and vice versa," says Vadhyar.

After a tedious though necessary screening process to ensure people are who they say they are, they organise monthly events in Mumbai, Delhi, Pune and Bengaluru. These events are

catered to various hobbies and interests — from cricket matches, to live music brunches where members can show off their pipes, single parent events to pet-oriented events for the pooch-obsessed among us. They also sometimes do trips — a relaxing holiday to Thailand, or Turkey, for instance. The events cost about Rs 1,000-1,500 per head, and the trips are obviously more expensive depending on the location.

Focusing on people in their late-twenties, Footloose is for people looking for something serious. Vadhyar says, "So much of online dating is attention without intention. That's why we ask a lot of personal questions that make people understand what it is they are looking for."

Naina Hiranandani, COO of Sirf Coffee,



doesn't rubbish dating apps. "Dating apps are great in a sexually and socially repressed country, but if you're a busy person, it's hard to scroll through so many profiles." So what Sirf does is get to know you, understand what you're looking for (and what your deal-breakers are), and find potential matches. Seventy percent of their first dates turn into second dates, they claim. All you do is go on the date. This, unsurprisingly, comes at a price — a six-month membership costs Rs 25,000.

Floh probably set the trend for offline dating in India. Its co-founder Siddharth Mangharam says, "The dating landscape in India was either Tinder or Shaadi.com, neither of which lend themselves to people connecting on a human level. There's no better way to figure out if you have chemistry than in real life."



Photos courtesy: Floh

LOOKING FOR LOVE: Though online dating is convenient, some busy young people prefer face-to-face meetings centred around hobbies and interests

Their events — they've arranged over a thousand — range from wine tastings and book readings to vintage car expos, and the idea is to get a curated bunch of people together in a situation where they're doing something with like-minded people. "We wanted to put people at ease and break the ice, rather than it being a contrived coffee date set up," he says.

Bhavana Singh, a Mumbai-based corporate insurance broker, met her husband Gaurav Shekdar through Footloose No More. Singh says, "People often come off one way online, and are very different in person. If Gaurav had messaged me on any other platform and I hadn't met him before, I probably wouldn't have given him my information as quickly." Knowing he had been screened, Singh felt more safe and comfortable giving him her BBM pin (This happened in 2012 after all).

Clinical psychologist Dr Varkha Chulani, who deals with relationship issues, agrees that there's

a flipside to online dating. "You don't know if the person out there is authentic or not. They could be projecting qualities they wish they had. Also, people wait too long to meet one another because they are sceptical or want to be doubly sure. But, by not meeting, you're either wasting time or giving the person time to perpetuate a pretentious facade."

Mira, who met her boyfriend through Sirf Coffee, says online dating was simply not suited to her personality. "A person I was in a relationship with was on Tinder while we were together, so I decided to try it since it had played such an important part in my life," she says jokingly. "It's just so exhausting — it's quantity, not quality. The effort to chat and the meaningless banter was not for me. This was easy — all I knew about him before we met was a four-line bio, and then you meet and make up your mind."

And while dating — whether online or offline — has its challenges, some people seem to be looking beyond the screens.

*Name changed on request

ARE STREET NAMES SEXIST?

Yes, discovered a geography teacher in Rome, Italy in 2012

Maria Pia Ercolini and a team of 26 women went through every one of Rome's 16,550 streets to find that 7,575 (45.7%) of the city's streets were named after men and just 580 (3.5%) were named after women



WOMEN TAKE TO THE STREETS

Ercolini set up the Toponomastica femminile Facebook group and got 2,600 people to sign up to rally for new streets in the city to be named after women

Inspired by Italy, a group of women in Spain surveyed Madrid's streets. It fared a bit better than Rome, with nearly 7% of streets named after women, and 27% after men

In 2015, a Parisian group Osez Le Feminisme found only 2.6% of the streets had women names. So they created their own version of the signboards and stuck them over the "official" names

THE INDIA STORY

In 2015, Bengaluru-based Aruna Sankaranarayanan from Mapbox developed an interactive map of 7 cities: London, Paris, San Francisco, Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai and Bengaluru

The difference within each city, when mapped, was visually striking — with blue lines (indicating male street names) far outnumbering pink ones (representing streets named for women)

On an average only 27.5% of the streets had female names

39% Bengaluru had the highest number of female street names in India

Some streets named after famous Indian women: Amrita Shergill Marg in Delhi and Attimabbe Road in Bengaluru



Recently, there have been renewed campaigns in London (where Doughty street was renamed after early suffragette supporter Jane Lyons), and The Netherlands which now has streets named after British mathematician Ada Lovelace, and even a Beyoncé Boulevard, Brussels and New York have also followed suit.