

Mobile phones stir Indian voters

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Voting begins on Thursday in more than 100 parliamentary constituencies in India, as the world's largest democracy goes to the polls in a General election staggered over a month.

Nearly 50% of Indians are less than 25 years old - making the country one of the youngest in the world.

But the prime ministerial candidates of the two leading parties are over 70 years old.

To bridge the gap, political parties have been going all out to take their election campaign into the digital media using text messages, social networking sites, online campaign tunes and videos.

In the last four years, a booming economy has vastly increased the penetration of internet and mobile phone ownership, giving politicians tools to connect with voters faster.

Knocking on doors

Door to door campaigning is what political parties traditionally did during elections. But this time, they are substituting some of the usual knocking on doors by getting online.

And taking their messages to the young urban voter are internet companies like Yahoo.

With a new India website, they hope to ride the election bandwagon to build their own brand among young people.

Yahoo! estimates that a majority of the 45 million internet users in the country are of voting age and are actively looking online for political information.

So users can login to their site and create their own manifestoes. Looking at the youth manifestoes provides some interesting insights says Gopal Krishna, head of Yahoo! India.

Youth concerns

The top concern for youth is terrorism, followed by poor infrastructure, while inflation is at the bottom of the list, Mr Krishna says.

"This feature can help politicians understand what issues are of concern to urban youth.

"They can respond to these queries and issues and explain party manifestoes and ideologies directly to the users.

"The internet has emerged as an important medium for people to interact and debate with other voters, political parties and candidates."

Since India doesn't have the culture of television debating as in the American elections, this is the closest you get to real thing, he adds.

Google too has launched a similar election site in partnership with a national newspaper, the Hindustan Times.

Catchy tunes

The Congress Party paid nearly \$200,000 (£140,000) to buy the rights to Jai Ho, the Oscar-winning song from Slumdog Millionaire and is using it primarily for its online campaign.

Ignitee Digital Solutions has been hired by the party to push their messages on sites like Facebook, Orkut and Myspace - where the main users are young urban voters.

Atul Hegde , the chief executive of Ignitee, says unlike traditional advertising, messages on the internet can be customised to target the relevant user.

Users of a social networking site, or any site where users are likely to be students, will get Congress Party advertisements which are targeting them with messages about education loans and university places. While other measures will go to sites viewed mainly by young women.

But while the Congress Party is targeting select sites on the internet, the opposition Hindu Nationalist rival Bharatiya Janata Party has gone completely tech-savvy. The party has set up a campaign war-room with young volunteers with varied backgrounds in software, banking and even farming.

They are 24/7 online and on the ground to promote their prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani and the party's ideology. They are on blogs, websites and Twitter to keep people posted of the party's events.

Mobile strategy

But no one can reach the Indian audiences without a mobile strategy.

There are just around 45 million internet users as compared to over 370 million mobile subscribers.

So political parties are targeting them with ring tones, text messages and even wallpapers of the contesting leaders.

Sunil Rajshekhar, the chief operating officer of Times Internet Ltd ,says they have developed special election packages which can be subscribed for as little as 30 rupees (\$0.60, 40p) a month.

Subscribers will receive details of candidates, poll trivia, party meetings, election rallies and dates of voting.

The company hopes that it will serve as a mobile real time newspaper during the election.

Political parties too have started sending text messages to mobile users across the country.

The BJP has hired private companies to place Bluetooth kiosks in areas such as malls, so people can download messages, pictures and caller tunes from the BJP on their mobile phones.

In Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Goa, mobile users receive auto-dialler calls that play recorded voice messages from candidates.

Political games

In a crowded gaming centre in Paharganj in old Delhi, young men are glued to their flat screen monitors.

Instead of the usual combat or racing games- they are pitting politicians against each other in political games.

Here you can see Indian politicians pumping iron, running a marathon and punching in a boxing arena.

Gaming company 7Seas Technologies has developed five free online political games at a cost of \$10,000 (£6000) each.

Their gaming portal onlinerealgames.com is witnessing about 100,000 visitors a day.

They hope that this encourage young people to vote.

But only about 10% percent of urban youth voted in the last general election. Will these games change their mind this time?

18 year-old Neeraj Kumar is skeptical.

"This is the first I'm going to vote...this is just a game - I don't think this will help me in deciding who to vote for."

But 22 year-old Rajender is addicted to the games.

"This is a fun way of learning about the elections. It's my first time as a voter and I learnt about all the leaders and parties through these games."

In previous elections, political parties didn't feel the need to campaign for young people's votes, as they are not traditionally seen as politically active.

But this time, young Indians have been active on websites, blogs and social networking sites expressing their political opinions. Now it remains to be seen if this interest will translate into votes.

An estimated 100 million young voters will qualify to participate in this election. And in order to woo this wired generation, politicians too are being forced to get tech-savvy.

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Published: 2009/04/14 23:39:09 GMT

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