

# “Millennial India”: Global Digital Politics in Context

Television & New Media

1–17

© The Author(s) 2019



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/1527476419870516

[journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn)



Sahana Udupa<sup>1</sup> , Shriram Venkatraman<sup>2</sup>,  
and Aasim Khan<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

In this special issue, we examine the two decades of digital media expansion in India, the world’s second largest Internet user domain, to propose the idea of “millennial India.” Millennial India highlights the processes of digitalization as a distinct sociopolitical moment entailing new conditions of communication, and the stakes of “millennials” who are drawn to digital media to articulate political matters. These processes, we suggest, have led to a democratization of public participation through the self-activity of online users. Qualifying the assumption that participation leads to empowerment, we show that a politics of civic action has grown simultaneously with violent exclusions via digital circulation. Millennial India emphasizes the need to take a contextual approach to global digital politics, and recognizes the continuities in the structures of political action in as much as the disruptions engendered by digital infrastructures.

## Keywords

millennial India, digital politics, social media, civic activism, digital vigilantism, global digital media

Scholarship on global digital politics has rightly recognized the growing significance of digital infrastructures for political expressions in the last two decades, highlighting Internet based organizing as a key aspect of contemporary political agitations. The focus however is still hindered by an overemphasis on contemporaneous technological affordances as sufficient conditions for networked participation in the digital age. The

---

<sup>1</sup>Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi, India

## Corresponding Author:

Sahana Udupa, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 67 Oettingenstrasse, 80538 Munich, Germany.

Email: [Sahana.udupa@lmu.de](mailto:Sahana.udupa@lmu.de)

new wave of social media activism and protest movements that shook the world in the last decade has triggered a large volume of insightful scholarship. These studies have placed the emphasis on organizational and tactical resources offered by social media platforms or on symbolic resources for collective identity construction that are assumed to propel the publics to storm the streets. The tussle between the perspectives of instrumental and expressive forms of communication seen in this scholarship (Gerbaudo and Trere 2015) is framed in ways to exempt the enduring historical-political structures of power that underpin contemporary digital politics. The articles collected in this special issue take a grounded approach to global digital politics, by highlighting the historical structures of sociality and political action that are revived and disrupted by Internet-enabled media. Focusing on India, seen as the “next frontier of the Internet” (Iyengar 2018), the special issue brings empirically grounded studies on the two decades of digital media expansion, to qualify prevalent assumptions about digital media as spatially unbounded political articulations that give rise to affinities prior to identities or solidarities based solely on digital enactments (Margetts et al. 2016).

We examine digital politics in India by developing the analytical lens of “millennial India,” venturing beyond its use as a descriptive term. This comes with two interrelated analytical angles. First, “millennial India” as a sociotechnological formation and a historically specific moment that cannot be comprehended without considering the pervasive processes of digitalization affecting the domains of politics, market, and culture. Here, we understand digitalization as a wide ranging process of informationization (Sen 2016; Thomas 2012) but focus in particular on the Internet media and new conditions of communication enabled by them. Second, millennial India as a “millennials’ India,” to signal the stakes and struggles of a digitally savvy generation whose political imagination is inextricably linked to digital cultures as tools, habits, and sensibilities.

India’s millennials—particularly those who came of age in the new millennium overlapping with the “generation Z” born in the new millennium—are drawn to digital media to mobilize, satirize, and express their interest in political matters. They come from diverse class backgrounds and are not confined to the commonly assumed urban middle-class users. The category of “millennial” both as a sociopolitical moment and a digitally mediated demographic, we suggest, is important in grasping the emerging spaces of political action in contemporary India. Millennial India, we argue, has grown in ways distinct from the elite discourse of “digital India” that pivots around the promise of technology-led transparent governance.

Without doubt, digital political campaigning and propaganda enabled by data analytics and targeted to appeal to voter base remain important aspects of digital politics. Studies have shown that Indian politicians and political parties are using the Internet to great effect (Chakravarty and Roy 2015; Neyazi et al. 2016; J. Pal et al. 2016), although recent surveys have contended that the direct impact of social media on voting preferences is not high (Lokniti 2019, 52). Practices of state surveillance and biopolitics are other important dimensions of digital politics (Rao 2013). However, in this special issue, we limit our focus to forms of public participation that are spurred by

formal party politics as well as fields of “subpolitics” inhabiting spaces that do not fully map onto governmental and institutionalized politics, at least not in the current form (Beck 1997). In tracing Internet media’s influence in everyday politics of participation, we move beyond existing perspectives on digital politics which focus largely on political authoritarianism framed as India’s variation of a global populist rise (Govil and Baishya 2018). Mindful of the vast, fractious, and deeply diverse polity such as India, we build on a growing body of scholarship that has tracked digitally mediated participations across a variety of formats including memes (Kumar 2015), sounds (Punathambekar 2010), mobile phone multifunctionality (Tenhunen 2018), and profile visuals (Gajjala 2004), and the ways they have energized new urban civic movements (Doron 2016), contentious politics (Kumar 2015), networked subjectivities (Hegde and Sahoo 2018), activist networks (Gajjala 2004),<sup>1</sup> and discursive strategies to find a voice in the public sphere (Mitra 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Our key departure from the existing body of scholarship on digital politics comes from the emphasis we place on prevailing structures of power that circumscribe, and are reenergized by, new forms of Internet organizing. Far from positing technology as an autonomous source of change or millennials as a homogenous group who are sequentially set apart from earlier generations, “millennial India” emphasizes that networks and expressions of class, regional identity, religion, and caste are central to digital political processes. They structure citizenship claims, labor actions, and digital performances. Contributions in this special issue demonstrate this point by highlighting emerging areas of digital participation: digital activism among Dalit caste groups who have embraced digital technologies to challenge their historical marginalization, political campaigning among the middle-class Indian diaspora, neighborhood vigilantism based on instantaneous mobile phone video, digitally mediated labor protests, and regional identity politics organized via social media.

The variety of participations and contestations documented in the contributions have relied on an equally diverse panoply of social media practices: hashtag activism and slogan exchange, video capture and circulation on YouTube, political tweeting, content management of Facebook pages, “missed call” campaigns organized through digital technologies, and the use of audiovisual clips and cryptic messages on WhatsApp. Spread across the metropolises and smaller cities of India as well as its diaspora, these digital practices and their connections with politics of caste, religion, region, and class allow a glimpse of the networked forms of political action that have emerged with digital media.

One key feature of networked political actions in contemporary India is that they are increasingly shaped by the self-work of ordinary publics. With the growth of Internet media and affordable Wi-Fi, avenues for amplifying political voices have certainly expanded for ordinary citizens. The spectacular #MeToo movement against gender-based harassment and Dalit activism online in India hold testimony to social media’s disruptive effects (Ayyub 2018; Mitra 2001). Yet, it would be naïve to assume that social media expansion has translated into inclusive empowerment that can address multifarious and entrenched forms of oppression. Cautioning against the celebration of participation as empowerment, “millennial India” gestures toward two

conflicting faces of digital politics—of new forms of civic engagement imagined to be above “divisive traditional politics” and of the unabashed violence of digital circulation evidenced starkly by incidents of mob vigilantism. In a few important ways, therefore, assumptions that the Internet is empowering ordinary publics and making politics less exclusive are simply incorrect.

## Millennial India and Multiple Publics

India’s 450 million Internet users comprise the world’s second largest online user base, next only to China.<sup>3</sup> Digital media cultures have expanded across major social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, and a veritable outpouring of new media expressions through homegrown mid-range social media tools such as ShareChat. Facebook has the largest number of subscribers in India (270 million), followed by the United States (Livemint 2017; Statista 2018), whereas the company’s recently acquired messenger service WhatsApp has close to 200 million users (Statista 2017). India constitutes one of the rapidly growing markets for Twitter in terms of active users (estimated at 7.8 million; Mandavia 2018; Statista 2019). There are still wide gaps in access and usage. The Internet usage rate in India is one of the lowest in the world: only 26 percent of the total population are connected to the Internet. Internet penetration rates in rural and urban India stand at 173.42 million and 338.84 million, respectively (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India [TRAI] 2018). Almost a third of the world’s population that is not connected to the Internet are in India (Iyengar 2018). Despite these sobering indicators, continued growth of digital media markets and the state-led digitization agenda (Department of Telecommunication 2018; Poushter et al. 2018) have shaped a climate of tremendous uptake for digital tools as a means for political communication. Deeply impacting the political present, Internet media are expanding at once as sources of information, affective spaces of affinity, and objects of state policy. Whether we see public contestations on and around new media communication as “conflicts of modern politics” (Khilnani 2004, 59) or as a subset of “elites” seeking to dominate the subaltern masses (Chatterjee 1999; Schroeder 2018), it is hard to ignore that digitalization is now at the heart of India’s political landscape.

Postcolonial scholarship has shed light on the boundaries that get drawn around civic and citizens’ activism in India, with much of everyday claim-making falling beyond the purview of “civil society.” In his influential formulation, Chatterjee (1999) has argued that subaltern publics in India, similar to other postcolonial societies, tend to rely on extralegal means to realize their demands rather than on a rights-based discourse. However, the question on digital avenues of participation and their implication for politics from below, often described as “political society,” is yet to receive full attention. The analysis forwarded in the contributions not only foreground the need to reframe the problem of media in contemporary Indian politics and activism beyond the liberal thesis that posits a single “idea of India” (Khilnani 2004) but also shifts the focus to the extrainstitutional and subaltern dimensions of political action. Rather than considering these dimensions of digitally enabled political action as illustrations of a global “network society” (Castells 2000) or the idealized “public sphere” (Habermas

1989), we place the implications of digitalization within specific political contexts, including revived transnational diaspora networks and enduring regional variations in a diverse polity such as India.

Along these lines of focus, the framework of “Millennial India” foregrounds multiple publics and actually existing conditions of democratic publicity, to argue that political action in the digital era has induced active networking among citizens. Digital networking channels have reenergized different scales of agentic action—among groups and individuals. Such strategizing and deliberate public actions cohering around digital networking stand in contrast to the ideal-typical passive consumer of mass media. Yet, these digitally mediated actions operate within the constraints of broader social-political structures as well as political manipulation of, and limitations inherent in digital circulation.

The second analytical turn of “Millennial India”—a focus on the younger generation of India’s citizens—provides an important lens to assess the stakes of such digital actions. Similar to many other parts of the contemporary world, young Indians are among the most prolific users of the Internet. Recent industry reports suggest that about 60 percent of Internet users in India are young adults and students (Internet and Mobile Association of India [IAMAI] 2017). It is estimated that 46 percent of urban mobile phone Internet users and 57 percent of rural mobile phone Internet users are under the age of twenty-five years. According to a recent nation-wide survey, “26% and 23% of the 18–22 and 23–25 year-olds were found to be highly exposed to social media respectively,” whereas only 7 percent in the age group of thirty six to forty-five years and 5 percent in the age group of forty-six to fifty-five years were likely to have high exposure (Lokniti 2019, 29).

With a growing digitally savvy young population and the spread of digital media via and beyond this demographic, what then are the possibilities and limitations of Internet enabled political participations in contemporary India? To explore them, we foreground two interlinked axes—digital visibilities and digital temporalities.

First, we examine digital visibilities. There are “new ways of seeing from below,” argues Arvind Kumar Thakur (2019, xxx), as he documents the spurt of online expressions among historically disadvantaged Dalits, who belong to India’s most oppressed caste groups. Seeking to overcome their historical marginalization and to challenge caste-based discrimination, Dalit groups have been active in creating online networks, discourses, and archives (see also Paul and Dowling 2018). Against the severe underrepresentation of Dalits in mainstream media which are still largely under the control of upper caste and dominant caste groups, digital media have revived alternative avenues of political publicity that rely on the potential of social media virality. Thakur illustrates that in specific cases, violent attacks on Dalit youth would have gone unnoticed without the “viral diffusion” of videos and hashtags, and offline mobilizations they triggered. Social media virality seen widely as inimical to calm democratic deliberation and blamed for rumor mongering has gained a different political meaning in these movements. With easy sharing and diffusion of messages online, Dalit online groups, similar to their pre-digital predecessors, are challenging the violent erasure of Dalit voices

from history, and the mainstream upper caste political consciousness which maintains its dominance through “structured invisibility” (Frankenberg 1993, 6).

Digital resources have been equally important for civic campaigns organized by activist citizen groups in Indian cities. Civil society campaigns demanding corruption free governance, public hygiene, environmental protection, alleviation of urban poverty, and allocation of public resources for neighborhood development have increasingly used social media platforms as a key means to mobilize ideas around a desired future. Craig Jeffrey and Jane Dyson have found that new communications are important because they have offered “young people new opportunities to experiment with identities and broadcast messages” (Jeffrey and Dyson 2016, 79). In his study of youth campaigns to clean up public spaces in India, Assa Doron (2016) has found that India’s youth use social media networks to organize campaigns to cleanse public streets and to voice their impatience against “the state’s apparent inability to manage waste and disorder.” Doron considers these civil society campaigns as instances of prefigurative politics: “. . . civic-minded everyday forms of politics where energies are self-consciously channeled into the performance in the present of some future ‘change’” (Jeffrey and Dyson 2016, 78). In these civic minded initiatives, digitally enabled actions have become a way to signal the desired future. Digital media thus have not only provided coordination tools for civil society campaigns, but they have also cocreated a public culture of aspirational, change-oriented citizens. Although change-oriented citizens are not an invention of the digital era as they relate to longer mediated forms of rights-based agenda building (Relly and Pakanati 2018) and urban revival (Udupa 2015), the networked dimension of online communication has enabled new channels of mobilization, simultaneously feeding the culture of change and action.

Digital visibility linked to civic engagement and change-oriented political action has enabled new connections with the Indian diaspora. Reflecting the global phenomenon of diaspora online activism, Indian diaspora members are using Internet-enabled networks to engage in civic and political campaigns in the homeland. In his ethnographic study of the *Aam Aadmi Party* [common man’s party] (AAP) volunteers in the United Kingdom, Martin Webb (2019, xxx) reveals that digital platforms have enabled diaspora Indians to participate in electoral campaigns and articulate the ideals of “pan-Indian civil mindedness.” Using their technical skills and experience of working in the high-tech industry, these volunteers have tried to bring “the team based but self-directed, flexible working practices of the global IT industry” for political campaigning. For instance, it is a regular practice for non-resident Indian (NRI) cyber volunteers to coordinate with other NRI teams to enlist supporters for the party back in India using “missed call” campaigns.

A common thread that runs through these campaigns is a moral critique of establishment parties and the state. This moral critique is distinctly middle class in its orientation and is largely driven by digitally savvy middle-class youth. Doron (2016, 3) argues that the prefigurative projects circulating across social media networks are instrumentalized by the middle class to favor the interests of the propertied class in Indian cities. Webb (2019) finds that

in many ways the AAP-UK supporters are similar to their diasporic Hindutva supporting counterparts in terms of the reproduction of values and hierarchies based in discourses of pan-Indian class morality, moral and ethical reform of the state and society, and the imposition of streamlined and disciplined forms of governance.

These findings reveal that class-based hierarchy continues to underpin civic and political campaigns, posing real limits to digital visibility.

Further complicating the easy celebration of digital visibility, Gabriel Dattatreyan (2019, xxx) ruminates on his encounter with a spontaneous mob in an urban village in Delhi to show how

social media circulation . . . can at once generate anxiety for some . . . and the feeling of some control over their own appearance for those who throw their might on the street to regulate capture and circulation on digital media.

This “interweave of affect and imminent circulation,” Dattatreyan argues, pushes us to reconsider simplistic ideas that valorize the democratization of representation necessarily as a break or interruption of the social order. Social media circulation could itself be policed for its potential rapturous visibility and “its capacity to reveal the messy, turbulent politics of the everyday.” Similarly, in a gripping analysis of “remixes and unofficial uploads” on digital social media as evidence bearing objects of intense intimacy, Shuddhabrata Sengupta (2012, 318) has drawn attention to smart phone users in India who “relentlessly circulate and annotate the material at hand,” often questioning the supremacy of official narratives about events and controversies. By injecting new circuits of witnessing and capture, digital platforms have thus created visibilities and connections that defy a naïve celebration.

Together with digital visibilities, the second interrelated axis concerns the temporality of digital media which we discuss further in the following sections. Digital temporalities refer to emergent forms of instantaneous coordination for political action especially by means of instant messaging services such as WhatsApp. Relatedly, it also gestures toward the limitations of digital protest temporalities.<sup>4</sup>

In his study of industrial workers in North India, Faiz Ullah (2019, xxx) demonstrates the logic of “*taal me!*”—the self-activity of industrial workers that responds to the fluctuating temporalities of handheld media. In a vibrant climate of digital media use, Ullah shows, “workers no longer wait for politics but actively initiate and shape it according to their specific circumstances.” Focusing on labor action episodes at two industrial production centers in the Delhi region, he draws attention to the tremendous spontaneity that agitating workers displayed in occupying the workplace. This spontaneity, he argues, developed directly from mobile Internet media. He suggests that such acts have heralded a new phase of resistance to the excesses of factory management and the apathy of state institutions in addressing the problems of organized and unorganized labor.

Francis Cody (2019, xxx) notices a similar modality of spontaneous assembly and publicity in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. In this region, long standing forms

of “cinematic populism” characterized by cinematic stardom as the primary means of political dominance are overlaid by new mediations of political community under current conditions of digitalization. Referring to recent episodes of public agitations that followed intense online coordination, Cody shows how social memory and regional pride were brought together through WhatsApp and Facebook circulation. These digitally coordinated mobilizations led to affective publicity of spectacular proportions.

## Self-work and Colloquialism

Whether for regional pride politics, labor struggles, neighborhood vigilantism, or pan-Indian nationalism, dynamic assemblies and coordination are shaped increasingly by the self-work of ordinary publics and nonlegacy actors within diverse conditions of political support and control. Political control includes paid trolls and organized forms of digital propaganda, as governments and political parties have made heavy investments in digital infrastructures in recent years (Udupa 2019). Self-work is inseparable from these structures of political support and amplification. Yet, self-work in terms of a politics of scale (scale-shifting), coordination (horizontal and affective networks), and public culture of change-oriented action is undeniably a key feature of digital politics in contemporary India.

Affordable data plans on mobile Internet media, availability of cheaper and even “free Wi-Fi” (Khan and Ullah Forthcoming), and introduction of regional language services by major social media companies in the last decade<sup>5</sup> have facilitated what could only tentatively be defined as a democratization of participation through colloquialism. By colloquialism, we mean a form of easy, almost playful language and visual practices which are distinct from the official centrality of political discourse (Udupa 2019).<sup>6</sup> Internet meme cultures best illustrate the playfulness of political discussions. Colloquialism also refers to forms of circulation through online self-work that have reconfigured the barriers of entry into the public domain and political contestation. These practices have posed new challenges to, if not eroded, prevailing forms of party-dominated publicity and organized leader-driven social movements.

New forms of labor resistance documented by Ullah in this special issue demonstrate this changing scenario. Disillusioned by the failures of trade unions to negotiate better labor conditions, industrial workers in the last decade have increasingly used spontaneous agitations marked by shifting and dynamic leadership patterns. Ullah finds that workers view trade unions as mere extensions of the state. They also cynically dismiss unions as weak organizations that are swayed by the agendas of political parties. Workers believe unions are not alert and flexible enough to respond to dynamic situations that arise with contemporary production systems. Ullah notes that the “exclusionary, hierarchical, reductive and state prescribed forms of claims-making” characteristic of trade unions have “severely limited the workers’ ability to mobilize wider solidarities.” Under such harsh conditions of enfeebled trade unions and emboldened managements now sending “bouncers”—private security muscle men to physically attack protesting workers—digital media have become a critical means to organize spontaneous agitations that circumvent negotiation protocols.



Documenting new protests around linguistic nationalism in Tamil Nadu, Cody (2019, xxx) notes “the rise of digitally enabled millennials as a political generation” that asserts its independent voice. For instance, in the Marina Beach occupation, a major agitation that drew nationwide attention, educated youth organized public demonstrations largely through social media to demand the right to continue the annual bull wrestling sport event famously associated with the region. In these spectacular events of public demonstration, agitators actively resisted attempts by establishment parties to join the rally and “claim a representative function.” Thakur (2019, xxx) notices a similar trend in Dalit mobilizations online. He notes that networked mobilization has led to a scenario where sections of young online Dalit activists feel they are no longer dependent on non-Dalit leaders and the intelligentsia to express their political views. Although Dalit leadership continues to be a prominent feature of resistance and political organizing, as illustrated in North India by the prominence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), digital media have opened new avenues for collective voicing among a new generation of activists and social justice campaigners. Thakur illustrates this by documenting the protests that erupted against the tragic suicide of Rohit Vemula, a Dalit student leader, on the campus of the University of Hyderabad in southern India.

Spectacular as they may be, these movements are however challenged by the temporality of shorter-term effects. Comparing online mobilizations with older forms of political movement, Cody (2019) suggests that “Many of the political challenges to existing structures fueled by newer media forms appear as shorter term events . . . with limited lasting impact compared to the non-Brahman social movements and linguistic nationalism within which cine-politics itself became intertwined.” In his study of Dalit activism, Thakur (2019, xxx) opts for a similar stance of skepticism. The promise of empowering digital virality is weakened by its momentariness. He shows that hashtag activism by the Dalit groups around specific events lost its momentum after some months of intense online activities. He goes further to suggest that multiple narratives among Dalit activists online and the strong hold of caste Hindu narratives have made networked resistance even more difficult.

Constrained by fluctuating temporalities, networked digital actions nonetheless share the potential of “oblitera[ting] the customary limitations of here and now” (Dent 2017). Although predigital media have also had the capacity to circulate beyond national and local boundaries (Ginsburg et al. 2002), the speed and user driven nature of digital circuits mark a significant shift. In some of the cases examined in this special issue, online mobilizations have led to scale shifting, allowing actors to connect local issues with global politics. Hashtag #DalitLivesMatter, for instance, connected up with #BlackLivesMatter, in an attempt to articulate a “global subaltern project” (Thakur 2019). This echoes similar efforts to forge “networks of hope” on a global scale (Castells 2012) by environment protection activists in India. For instance, transnational activism by NGO networks in India have used social media networks to mobilize demands for justice for the victims of the 1984 Union Carbide disaster in India, a predigital campaign sustained over decades (M. Pal and Dutta 2012).

Ullah, in this special issue ruminates on similar effects of shifting scales for labor action across local spaces of agitation. These labor agitations signaled shared

aspirations to develop global solidarities. Even though forging a global network of supporters was still a remote possibility, protesting workers were nonetheless able to draw support from workers in the neighboring factories and other progressive groups across the country using mobile phone messaging and Internet based organizing. AAP volunteers in Webb's (this special issue) study operate with a similar affordance of scaling up call campaigns and agenda setting, albeit in this case such efforts are strictly in relation to national (homeland) politics. In a different sense, scale shifting has also injected a new dynamic of visibility through instantaneous video capture on mobile phones, thereby stirring up anxieties and excitement in the lived worlds of local communities due to potential global circulation (Dattatreyan, xxx). The new media dynamic of instantaneous video capture and related affects have played a significant role in enabling communal vigilantism in other instances.

Taken together, these studies illustrate that the consequences of scale shifting are deeply ambiguous as they can at once hold the promise of activist networking on a global scale, as well as bring about tensions of unexpected circulations in the local neighborhoods and even trigger targeted physical violence—a point we highlight below.

## Violence in “Multi-hybrid” Millennial India

In creating new spaces of agitation and practices of representation, digital circulation does not work in isolation. Following John Postill's (2018, 754) term “twice hybrid,” we suggest that millennial India is “multi hybrid”. It “entails the ceaseless interaction between old and new media . . . between online and offline sites of communication” (Postill 2018, 754), and forms of power that are reconfigured, and not dismantled, by digital mediations. Television news channels, for instance, continue to be a powerful medium of communication across India as they become even more amplified with high definition digital production technologies and distribution channels. During the 2019 elections, political parties built WhatsApp networks based on older face-to-face community networks for campaign content distribution. In this issue, Cody approaches this as “heterogenous time” of postcolonial democracy, in which the old is rendered anew—and not obsolete—by emerging media practices and forms of power.

In other words, this special issue emphasizes that digital circulation alone does not guarantee anything, not least an emancipatory possibility. Ullah's (2019, xxx) study reveals that spontaneous agitations by industrial workers are not only a function of digital temporalities but also a reflection of neoliberal precarity that has taken away the spaces for stable and organized forms of negotiation based on trade union protocols. Webb (2019) shows that the AAP-UK supporters present their educated, techno-professional background as a valuable factor for the party politics, discursively constructing “NRI activists as aspirational avatars of India's techno-modernity and global influence.” They do not “easily prefigure a future India free from hierarchy in the way that the use of term *aam aadmi* [common person] suggests.” This is also evidenced by the limitations placed by hybrid media upon Dalit mobilization (Thakur 2019, xxx). That organized media continue to be influenced by upper caste and dominant caste consciousness places real limits to what online movements can achieve in terms of political publicity.

As Cody (2019, xxx) illustrates further, the digital public sphere in the southern state of Tamil Nadu is marked by the rise of caste-based politics “where such forms of collective political identity were largely subsumed under the broader non-Brahman politics of Tamil nationalism and its cinematic populism.” He draws attention to a “new form of public hate” arising with anti-Dalit violence and vigilantism, focused especially on relationships between Dalit men and caste-Hindu women. This is similar to forms of political and communal vigilantism in Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh that work with instant alerts and subterranean flows of WhatsApp messaging to surveil and police romantic relationships between Hindu women and Muslim men. Vigilante action is targeted against what right-wing attackers describe as “love jihad,” finding cause in the conspiracy theory of conniving Muslim men seducing gullible Hindu women into marriage and submission. “Love jihad” is a violent expression of the broader politics of regulating female sexuality—a core element of online Hindu nationalism manifest variously as shaming and abuse (Udupa 2017).

Journalistic accounts and recent studies show that incidents of mob vigilantism aimed at Dalits and Muslims had used digital tools of visual morphing and targeted messaging (Siddiqui 2018). Cody (2019) notes that these new forms of organized communal hatred have all relied heavily on the infrastructural capabilities afforded by WhatsApp. Furthermore, caste-based policing of relationships has energized dominant caste-based political groups that are growing more assertive and independent of established Tamil parties. In his ethnographic study of social media in Tamil Nadu, Venkatraman (2017, 199) has drawn a similar conclusion that “Rather than a progressive emancipation from such social categories [as caste, class and religion], we more commonly observe their reassertion online.” Udupa (2017) has revealed that the exclusionary nature of these reassertions is starkly evident in the online voluntary work for Hindu nationalism, which confronts critical voices using digital resources of archiving, fact checking, and extreme speech. The electoral victory of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2019 national elections has once again signaled the prominent presence of this ideological group within India’s online sphere.

Millennial India thus gestures toward the two conflicting faces of digital publicity. On one hand, there are new forms of change-oriented civic engagement that perform a politics of development presented as superior to the divisive nature of “traditional politics” and articulates a “politics of hope” through transnational activism. On the other hand, there is unabashed violence of digital circulation that relies on the new affordances of instantaneous mobilization, visual capture, and coordinated rumors for targeted attacks by dominant caste and religious groups.

## **Enduring Hierarchies and the Newness of Digital Media**

The two conflicting faces of digital politics in contemporary India discussed in the foregoing sections emphasize that networked political action is neither distinctly inclusive nor a straightforward process of direct participation that diminishes the role of traditional intermediaries. Although networked politics enabled by Internet media have created greater access to public discourse for ordinary publics, the dynamics of

“millennial India” highlight the nature of enduring hierarchies in the age of digitalization. In the early years of digital media expansion, critical studies drew attention to the problem of digital divide as a major barrier for digital empowerment and participation. Hierarchy was largely understood as a divide between “digital haves and have-nots.” With the spread of affordable smartphones and Internet data packages, digital access in the narrow sense of “going online” has become more common. However, digital divide is multifaceted and “is most often visible in at least five forms: region, language, education, gender and disability” (Khan and Kumar 2013). According to government sources, vast variations across regions and states persist in terms of Internet usage: only nineteen out of hundred use the Internet in rural India compared with eighty-two in urban India (TRAI 2018). Industry surveys show that the estimated number of Internet users in India might reach 500 million in 2018, but only 30 percent of them are women, and they are largely urban (IAMAI 2017). The Lokniti (2019, 6) survey highlighted caste and gender-based differences in Internet use and access. It found that “upper castes are twice as likely to have high or moderate exposure to social media as Dalits and tribals.” Similarly, only 24 percent women are likely to own a smartphone, compared with 41 percent men (19). Moreover, 74 percent of women polled in the survey reported no exposure to social media (37). As mentioned earlier, younger generations (aged 25 years and below) are predominant users of the Internet, although this is set to slightly change with more regional language content. Furthermore, rapidly changing digital media platforms have placed a premium on acquiring the know-how of using different networking platforms, apps, and data packages. There is thus an emerging hierarchy among Internet users in India in terms of the quality of the Internet, knowledge of search strategies, quality of broadband and mobile connections and social support, ability to engage with the quality of information and diversity of use (Khan and Kumar 2013).

Aside from access and knowledge-related inequalities, the framework of millennial India developed in this issue has highlighted that a dynamic field of political publicity enabled by digital networks has grown in relation to, and not independent from the revived politics of caste, class, region, and religion. Far from flattening the differences with the presumed above-the-ground scope of digital circulation, conflicts continue to be exacerbated with digital media growth as they reenergize connections along the historical fault lines.

As a framework, “millennial India” thus runs counter to prevalent assumptions that digital media fuel political action solely because of the affordances and digital performances. Echoing the analysis of Hirschkind et al. (2017), it reads against the arguments that

contemporary digital forums foster practices of self-representation and self-revelation bereft of the dialectics of representation and transfiguration, [leading to] . . . mass mobilizations . . . with little relation between participants other than the collective recitation of the rally slogans that brought them out to begin with. (S7)

Concepts like “protest collectivity,” for instance, argue that digital social media have led to open structures of organizing protests (Kavada 2015, 883). “Millennial India”

emphasizes that public life and mass mobilizations mediated by social media are not as unmoored as such accounts seem to suggest. One argument is that the logics of predigital movements cannot be imposed on new digital movements. Although it is fair to propose that the spontaneous and fluid gatherings enabled by social media technologies should be considered as meaningful and successful even if they do not meet an “end goal,” it is difficult to assess the efficacy of protest collectivities or political action without considering larger structuring factors.

Although acknowledging the novelty of digital temporalities and visibilities, the framework of “millennial India” thus allows us to see “digital technology in continuity with ‘previous’ or existing social, political, and economic structures, and not only in terms of change, revolution or novelty” (Reigeluth 2014, 249). This concurs with what Wasserman (2011, 150) defines as the “context-centered model” of media’s role in the formation of collective action. Equally, political possibilities of digitalization have to be assessed in relation to the challenge of propagandistic media use undercutting public demand for any substantive change. Heavily funded social media teams launched by major political parties in India in the last decade are an indication of organized digital influence emerging as a major factor in electoral processes and for democratic politics more broadly.

Admittedly, the essays collected here are only a first step in grappling with the complex mediations of digital speed and scale that animate contemporary India. What is clear however is that the continuities and discontinuities of millennial India are growing beyond an elite imaginary of “Digital India” that is tied to transparency in governance as the next big promise of technological modernity. “Millennial India” unsettles the elite, celebratory rhetoric of a digital India which seeks to overlook the realities presented in this special issue. For scholarship on global digital politics, this would mean taking lived social and cultural lives as the starting point for analyses of digital culture rather than as an afterthought for explaining ongoing sociocultural changes globally.<sup>7</sup> This calls for placing the emphasis back on the interactions between prevailing structures of power, historical fault lines, and the turbulences engendered by digital mediations, and a departure from the contemporaneous bias of affordances-based analysis.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors wish to thank the participants of the symposium, “Digital politics in millennial India” held in New Delhi (March, 2018). Thanks also to TVNM Co-Editor-in-Chief Jonathan Corpus Ong and all the reviewers who added great value to the special issue.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Sahana Udupa’s work on this collection was generously

funded by the European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme [Grant Agreement Number 714285].

## ORCID iD

Sahana Udupa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3647-9570>

## Notes

1. Studies on feminist activism in India have documented the growth of “solidarity networks” on social media that contest ideologies of gender-based dominance and sexualized violence (Gajjala 2004; Raman and Komarraju 2018).
2. This is not an exhaustive list of available studies, as there is a growing body of insightful scholarship which is not referenced due to constraints of space.
3. See [http://www.iamai.in/research/reports\\_details/5006](http://www.iamai.in/research/reports_details/5006) (accessed on 20 September 2018). Government estimates pitch the figures even higher, according to which there were 463.66 million broadband (>512 kbps, both wired and wireless) subscribers in August 2018, [https://traai.gov.in/sites/default/files/PR\\_No.107of2018\\_TSD\\_Aug2018.pdf](https://traai.gov.in/sites/default/files/PR_No.107of2018_TSD_Aug2018.pdf) (accessed 15 November, 2018). The comparison between India and China is only in terms of the number of Internet users, although the actual nature of online access differs vastly between the market models of digitalization in India and state controlled online spheres of China (Schroeder 2018).
4. Temporalities as an analytical lens include at least two other important aspects: the politics of futurity in urban development (Roy 2016) and a revival of national memory and collective caste-based memory (Chopra 2006), which are not addressed here for constraints of space.
5. In 2015, Facebook was available in eleven Indian languages and Twitter in six regional languages.
6. Easy and jestful language use, which is one of the features of colloquialism, is by no means a new phenomenon. “Vernacular performative publicness” in colonial India relied on jestful and witty enactments to both subvert imperial regulatory measures and as a reflection of cultural idioms proper to the lived worlds (Mazzarella 2013, 57). Digital colloquialism has mainstreamed this practice through user-driven discussions.
7. We thank the anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

## References

- Ayyub, Rana. 2018. “In India, Women Are No Longer Prepared to Stay Silent.” *The Guardian*, October 21. <https://doi.org/> (accessed October 24, 2018).
- Beck, Ulrich. 1997. “Subpolitics: Ecology and the Disintegration of Institutional Power.” *Organization and Environment* 1 (1): 52–65.
- Castells, Manuel. 2000. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, Manuel. 2012. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Cody, Francis. 2019. “Millennial Turbulence: The Networking of Tamil Media Politics.” *Television & New Media*.
- Chakravarty, Paula, and Srirupa Roy. 2015. “Mr. Modi Goes to Delhi: Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian Elections.” *Television & New Media* 16 (4): 311–22.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1999. *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Chopra, Rohit. 2006. "Global Primordialities: Virtual Identity Politics in Online Hindutva and Online Dalit Discourse." *New Media and Society* 8 (2): 187–206.
- Dattatreyan, Gabriel. 2019. "Policing the Sensible in the era of YouTube: Urban Villages and Racialized Subjects in Delhi." *Television & New Media*.
- Dent, Alexander. 2017. "Paraguayan Horses: The Entailments of Internet Policy and Law in Brazil." *Current Anthropology* 58 (15): S113–22.
- Department of Telecommunication. 2018. "National Digital Communications Policy—2018." <http://www.dot.gov.in/sites/default/files/Final%20NDCP-2018.pdf?download=1> (accessed November 15, 2018).
- Doron, Assa. 2016. "Unclean, Unseen: Social Media, Civic Action and Urban Hygiene in India." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39:715–39. doi:10.1080/00856401.2016.1218096.
- Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gajjala, Radhika. 2004. *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Gerbaudo, Paolo, and Emiliano Trere. 2015. "In Search of the 'We' of Social Media Activism: Introduction to the Special Issue on Social Media and Protest Identities." *Information, Communication & Society* 18 (8): 865–71.
- Ginsburg, Faye, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin. 2002. "Introduction." In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, edited by Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, 1–36. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Govil, Nitin, and Anirban Kapil Baishya. 2018. "The Bully in the Pulpit: Autocracy, Digital Social Media, and Right-Wing Populist Technoculture." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 11 (1): 67–84.
- Habermas, Jurgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (translated by Thomas Burger). London: Polity Press.
- Hegde, Radha Sarma, and Ajaya Kumar Sahoo. 2018. *Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora*. London: Routledge.
- Hirschkind, Charles, Maria Jose A. de Abreu, and Carlo Caduff. 2017. "New Media, New Publics?" *Current Anthropology* 58 (15): S3–12.
- Internet and Mobile Association of India. 2017. [http://www.iamai.in/research/reports\\_details/5006](http://www.iamai.in/research/reports_details/5006) (accessed September 20, 2018).
- Iyengar, Rishi. 2018. "The Future of the Internet Is Indian." <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2018/11/business/internet-usage-india-future/> (accessed August 22, 2019).
- Jeffrey, Craig, and Jane Dyson. 2016. "Now: Prefigurative Politics through a North Indian Lens." *Economy and Society* 45 (1): 77–100.
- Kavada, Anastasia. 2015. "Creating the Collective: Social Media, the Occupy Movement and Its Constitution as a Collective." *Information, Communication and Society* 18 (8): 872–86.
- Khan, Aasim, and Nishant Kumar. 2013. "Internet in the Age of Mass Surveillance: The Domestic Dimension." *Economic and Political Weekly* 48 (47). <https://www.epw.in/journal/2013/47/web-exclusives/internet-age-mass-surveillance-domestic-dimension.html> (accessed September 21, 2018).
- Khan, Aasim, and Faiz Ullah. Forthcoming. "Untangling the Politics of Free-Wifi: Case Studies of Three Cities in India." In *Diginaka: Subaltern Politics and Digital Media in Post-capitalist India*, edited by Anjali Monteiro. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- Khilnani, Sunil. 2004. *The Idea of India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Kumar, Sangeet. 2015. "Contagious Memes, Viral Videos and Subversive Parody: The Grammar of Contention." *The International Communication Gazette* 77 (3): 232–47.

- Livemint. 2017. "India Now Has Highest Number of Facebook Users, Beats US: Report." <https://www.livemint.com/Consumer/CyEKdaltF64YycZsU72oEK/Indians-largest-audience-country-for-Facebook-Report.html> (accessed November 12, 2018).
- Lokniti. 2019. "Social Media and Political Behaviour." Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, New Delhi. [https://www.cdsd.in/uploads/custom\\_files/Report-SMPB.pdf](https://www.cdsd.in/uploads/custom_files/Report-SMPB.pdf) (accessed August 3, 2019).
- Mandavia, Megha. 2018. "Twitter Is Looking for Expert to Fix India Story." *The Economic Times*, October 10. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/twitter-is-looking-for-expert-to-fix-india-story/articleshow/66142360.cms> (accessed May 2, 2019).
- Margetts, Helen, Peter John, Scott Hale, and Taha Yasserli. 2016. *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mazzarella, William. 2013. *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mitra, Ananda. 2001. "Marginal Voices in Cyberspace." *New Media and Society* 3 (1): 29–48.
- Neyazi, Tabereh Ahmed, Anup Kumar, and Holli A. Semetko. 2016. "Campaigns, Digital Media and Mobilization in India." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21 (3): 398–416.
- Pal, Joyojeet, Priyank Chandra, and Vinod Vydiswaran. 2016. "Twitter and the Rebranding of Narendra Modi." *Economic and Political Weekly* 51 (8): 52–60.
- Pal, Mahuya, and Mohan J. Dutta. 2012. "Organizing Resistance on the Internet: The Case of International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 5 (2): 230–51.
- Paul, Subin, and David O. Dowling. 2018. "Digital Archiving as Social Protest." *Digital Journalism* 6:1239–54. doi:10.1080/21670811.2018.1493938.
- Postill, John. 2018. "Populism and Social Media: A Global Perspective." *Media, Culture & Society* 40 (5): 754–65.
- Poushter, Jacob, Caldwell Bishop, and Hanyu Chwe. 2018. "Social Media Use Continues to Rise in Developing Countries but Plateaus Across Developed Ones." <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/06/19/social-media-use-continues-to-rise-in-developing-countries-but-plateaus-across-developed-ones/> (accessed November 13, 2018).
- Punathambekar, Aswin. 2010. "Reality TV and Participatory Culture in India." *Popular Communication* 8 (4): 241–55.
- Raman, Usha, and Sai Amulya Komaraju. 2018. "Policing Responses to Crime against Women: Unpacking the Logic of Cyberabad's 'SHE Teams'." *Feminist Media Studies* 18 (4): 718–33.
- Rao, Ursula. 2013. "Biometric Marginality: UID and the Shaping of Homeless Identities in the City." *Economic and Political Weekly* 48:71–77.
- Reigeluth, Tyler. 2014. "Why Data Is Not Enough: Digital Traces as Control of Self and Self-control." *Surveillance & Society* 12 (2): 243–54.
- Relly, Jeannine E., and Rajdeep Pakanati. 2018. "Freedom of Information Lessons from India: Collaboration, Co-production and Rights-Based Agenda Building." *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. Published electronically December 11. doi:10.1177/1464884918817032.
- Roy, Ananya. 2016. "When Is Asia?" *The Professional Geographer* 68 (2): 313–21.
- Schroeder, Ralph. 2018. *Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology and Globalization*. London: UCL Press.
- Sen, Biswarup. 2016. *Digital Politics and Culture in Contemporary India: The Making of an Info-nation*. New York: Routledge.
- Sengupta, Shuddhabrata. 2012. "The 'Terrorist' and the Screen: After Images of the Batla House 'Encounter'." In *No Limits: Media Studies from India*, edited by Ravi Sundaram, 300–23. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.



- Siddiqui, Zeba. 2018. "Indian Police Arrest 25 in Latest WhatsApp Rumor-Led Lynching." *Reuters*, July 15. <https://in.reuters.com/article/whatsapp-india-fakenews/police-arrest-25-in-latest-whatsapp-rumour-led-lynching-in-karnataka-idINKBN1K50VD> (accessed August 3, 2019).
- Statista. 2017. "Monthly Active WhatsApp Users in India." <https://www.statista.com/statistics/280914/monthly-active-whatsapp-users-in-india/> (accessed September 20, 2018).
- Statista. 2018. "Top 15 Countries Based on Number of Facebook Users." <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/> (accessed September 20, 2018).
- Statista. 2019. "Number of Active Twitter Users in Selected Countries." <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/> (accessed May 2, 2019).
- Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. 2018. "The Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicators April-June 2018." <https://main.trai.gov.in/sites/default/files/PIRJune03102018.pdf> (accessed November 15, 2018).
- Tenhunen, Sirpa. 2018. *A Village Goes Mobile: Telephony, Mediation and Social Change in Rural India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thakur, Arvid Kumar. 2019. "New Media and the Dalit Counter-Public Sphere." *Television & New Media*.
- Thomas, Pradip Ninan. 2012. *Digital India: Understanding Information, Communication and Social Change*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Udupa, Sahana. 2015. *Making News in Global India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Udupa, Sahana. 2017. "Gaal Cultures: The Politics of Abusive Exchange on Social Media." *New Media and Society* 20 (4): 1506–22.
- Udupa, Sahana. 2019. "Nationalism in the Digital Age: Fun as a Metapractice of Extreme Speech." *International Journal of Communication* 13:3143–63.
- Ullah, Faiz. 2019. "Digital Media and the Changing Nature of Labour Action". *Television & New Media*.
- Venkatraman, Shriram. 2017. *Social Media in South India*. London: UCL Press.
- Wasserman, Herman. 2011. "Mobile Phones, Popular Media, and Everyday African Democracy." *Popular Communication* 9 (2): 146–58.
- Webb, Martin. 2019. "Digital Politics in the Diaspora: Aam Aadmi Party UK Supporters On and Offline." *Television & New Media*.

## Author Biographies

**Sahana Udupa** is Professor of Media Anthropology at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany, and is the author of *Making News in Global India: Media, Publics, Politics* (Cambridge University Press 2015).

**Shriram Venkatraman** is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi. He is the author of *Social Media in South India* (UCL Press 2017).

**Aasim Khan** is Assistant Professor of Sociology of Media at Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi with cross-disciplinary interests in the politics and policy of new media in contemporary India.