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ISSUES LIKE CORRUPTION AND PRICE RISE HAVE MADE MUMBAIITES POLITICALLY ACTIVE TODAY, SAYS SURENDRA JONDHALE, POLITICAL ANALYST

## AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

**Vote code** A number of new politically inclined outfits is aiming to trigger and facilitate dialogues and actions on good governance, democracy, civil rights

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Last Monday, an assorted group of professors, bankers, social workers and students sauntered into the Bandra Bandstand amphitheatre. Resting on the steps, a few played cards, some fiddled with their gadgets, while others engaged in animated political discussions.

Sound and lights checked; on stage lay two bean bags.

Just then strolled in the evening's guest, Aam Aadmi Party's Mayank Gandhi, whose candidature was incidentally declared the same day from the Mumbai north-west constituency, barely three days after Arvind Kejriwal resigned as Delhi's chief minister. "Ask me the toughest questions," announced Gandhi.

And that's precisely what the audience did. "What are your views on section 377?" asked Sonal Giani, 26, an advocacy officer with an LGBT rights NGO.

"Your party uses smart marketing strategies, but are you ready to run a government?" questioned Trisha Shetty, a 23-year-old law student and Dadar resident. "What is the kind of work your party intends to do in Mumbai?" asked Renu Nauriyal, a professor. "Why should we vote for you?" demanded another media student.

So on and so forth. Crisp confrontations continued at this second event in the series of hangouts organised by Operation Black Dot, a non-partisan, not-for-profit outfit run by a group of 40 under-25 volunteers. Founded last October, it aims to make politics engaging and fun for the urban youth.

Like Operation Black Dot, in the past three years, Mumbai has witnessed the emergence of at least four politically inclined outfits — Know Your Vote, GrassRoute India, iForIndia and Haiyya — all of which singularly aim to trigger and facilitate dialogues and actions centred on good governance, democracy and civil rights.

Now, barely a couple of weeks away from the General Elections, unlike traditional NGOs, this new crop of organisations, led by young working professionals, are stirring the city's political consciousness by reaching out to Mumbaiites via voter registration drives at pubs, neighbourhood watch programmes, websites detailing MLAs and MPs track records, and facilitating informal interactions with elected representatives in public spaces, and via social media tools like Google hangouts and Twitter chats.

According to Samyak Chakrabarty, 25, director of Operation Black Dot, this spurt in the number of non-partisan political organisations can be attributed to how youngsters in Mumbai are increasingly feeling stifled by living in a space between rising ambitions and declining opportunities. "This is brewing frustration," he says. "Earlier Mumbai's middle- and upper-middle class was relatively safeguarded from unemployment and other forms of insecurities. Now, with an edgy economy; however, city's educated young professionals are feeling compelled to engage with politics in order to make informed choices."

Experts feel that in a city where less than 50% of voters participated in the General Elections in 2009, just months after 26/11, and only 45% registered Mumbaiites voted in the last civic elec-

**WE ARE NOW SEEING UPWARDLY MOBILE MUMBAIITES TAKING INTEREST IN POLITICS BECAUSE OF THEIR EXPOSURE TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND VARIOUS DISCUSSIONS CENTRED ON DEMOCRACY - ON TV, OVER DRINKS AND AT DINNER TABLES.**

NITAI MEHTA, managing trustee, Praja Foundation, a city-based NGO

tions in February 2012, the efforts of these organisations should assuage the level of political apathy typically associated with Mumbai.

"Given the size and scale of the private sector in Mumbai, people here didn't bother much about larger national issues as much as in other parts of India," remarks political analyst Surendra Jondhale. "It was comparatively still easy to make a living in Mumbai, so the anger against the government got diluted. Today, however, issues like corruption, price rise and pink slips have left even the not-so-politically inclined Mumbaiites with no choice but to become politically aware and active."

Vivek Gilani, 37, an environmental engineer and founder of MumbaiVotes.com — a website founded in 2004 to help Mumbaiites monitor performances of MPs, MLAs and Corporators — says that the more such organisations crop up, the better. The website compares their promises with deliverance through legislative and criminal records and news report analyses.

"The focus should be on the quality of votes," says Gilani, a Bandra resident. "Technology and social media has widened the reach and impact of issues in real time. And with so much in-your-face information, people are now being forced to engage, even in Mumbai."

For Kshmta Mantri, a project manager at a finance firm, who recently registered for a voter ID card at an Operation Black Dot kiosk at Hard Rock Café, her new-found interest in politics makes her feel like a responsible citizen. "As a Mumbaiite, the safety of women and the security threat to our city are two issues that I worry about the most," she says.

According to psephologist Uday Nirgudkar, Mumbai is now taking interest in politics because unlike the mid-80s and 90s, where elections were fought on emotive and caste grounds, there are now more objective parameters of achievement.

"Irrespective of who is in power, people are asking tough questions like how many jobs have been created, how much investment has been made, how much water and electricity has been made available," says Nirgudkar. "And these questions are being asked by the 'Global Kids.'" Mumbai being the financial capital, the youth here are increasingly aspiring to become the archetype "urban, educated tech-savvy young and vigilant Indian citizen," adds Nirgudkar.

Sonal Giani agrees. "Everything is going up, except for our salaries. Because I feel the pinch, I now feel the need to participate."



## POLITICKLE

### KNOW YOUR VOTE

The recent Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements showed that social media, if utilised properly, can create widespread change," says Dhruv Sarin, founder of Know Your Vote. "While organisations like Agni and ADR are doing some phenomenal work in the civic rights space, the new organisations bring a lot of energy and enthusiasm to the table which can rub off on the most cynical of voters. In addition to the creativity, they leverage technology and their ability to better connect with the youth."

Know Your Vote's core activity in the city will be to establish chapters in schools and colleges within Mumbai. More recently, says Sarin, the organisation has also been approached by offices and apartment complexes to provide similar workshops for their employees and residents.

Other than on-ground activities, the organisation is promoting political awareness and disseminating relevant information through creative use of social media. Their Facebook page, for



[www.knowyourvoteindia.org](http://www.knowyourvoteindia.org)  
March 2011

A non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation, it focuses on alleviating youth voter apathy while empowering them to demand accountability and play an active role in governance through leadership development and mentorship programs. Founder: Dhruv Sarin, 23, an analyst with an MNC. The complete team, including the core team members, volunteers and interns fluctuates between 10 and 16 individuals.

instance, is peppered with bite-sized informational capsules like, 'According to Justice Verma Report, a child goes missing in India every eight minutes' and 'One woman gets raped every 22 minutes in India'.

## GRASSROUTE INDIA

The organisation creates interactions between civil society and politicians through a combination of online and offline activities. Founder Deepa Kumar (right) is a political science graduate and a LAMP (Legislative Assistants to Members of Parliament) fellow, and works with a team of three, a research analyst, graphic designer and finance head.

[www.facebook.com/GrassRouteIndia](http://www.facebook.com/GrassRouteIndia)  
June 2013

A non-partisan, for-profit organisation, it aims to facilitate interaction between civil society and politicians. Founder: Deepa Kumar, 22

In the past 10 months, it has organised Google hangouts and Twitter chats with politicians across party lines. Through offline efforts, the outfit crowd-sources opinions, questions and viewership for these interactive sessions. "Via online efforts, we've reached over 20 lakh people in the city," says Kumar.

"This kind of outreach is much better than 'Go Vote' campaigns," says Aldin D'Souza, a marketing consultant.



[www.iforindia.org](http://www.iforindia.org)  
August 2013

A non-partisan website, it allows people to rate MPs and MLAs on certain parameters. Founder: Ankur Garg (right), 31, a former Microsoft employee, and Tarun Jain, 28, a former business analyst.

## IFORINDIA

The website rates MPs and MLAs on four parameters — basic needs, governance and administration, growth and progress, and reputation. The idea is to bring accountability in politics by driving data-based discussions on real, tangible metrics that are important to the common man.

"One of the major reasons why Mumbai usually sees a low voter turnout is that there are many migrants here," says co-founder Ankur Garg. "They are not able to relate so well to local politics." This time around, though, Garg says, people across India are frustrated. "Today's youth demand a lot more accountability from their elected representatives."

That's why people in Mumbai too are coming together and motivating others to join them to be a part of this inflection point in Indian politics, adds Garg.



ILLUSTRATION: SHRIKRISHNA PATKAR

## RAISING THE BAR

"Today's youth has a lot more expectations than their earlier generation. They demand greater accountability from their elected representatives."

- Ankur Garg, co-founder, iForIndia



■ A participant at a Know Your Vote event. (Right) Young Mumbaiites gather at the Bandra amphitheatre at Operation Black Dot's interactive session with Aam Aadmi Party's Mayank Gandhi on Monday.



## A day in the life of AN ATM VAULT MANAGER

### 'I GUARD EACH PENNY LIKE IT'S MY OWN'

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Ganesh Patil, 38, had always dreamed of being a fashion designer, but he had no idea where to start. So he graduated in commerce and began assisting at a tailoring shop in the Andheri chawl where he grew up. But the tailoring business was seasonal and paid little.

By age 28, Patil was a husband and father, with his own father set to retire as a cloth store manager. This was when he realised that he would have to give up his dream and find a job that would bring in the necessary money into the household and help his two elder siblings support the joint family. During an interview for the

position of security guard, Patil met the Mumbai branch manager of a security agency that specialised in ferrying cash from banks to ATMs.

The manager offered Patil a job driving the money van. "It sounded exciting," says Patil. "And it was. Every day, I was driving a van loaded with Rs 60 lakh to Rs 1 crore in cash, accompanied by a custodian and two gunmen. Of course, there was also the constant stress of spending all day in a van sealed with grills, in the company of tense armed men. That is why, it was a relief when I was promoted to custodian 18 months later."

As custodian, Patil did supervisory rounds in a similar van. After another six years, he was promoted to his current posi-



tion of vault manager. He is now responsible for keeping track of all the cash moving in and out of the security agency, as it makes its way from bank to ATM.

Every day, Patil handles between Rs 12 crore and Rs 13 crore.

"My eyes have to be as focused as the cameras put up in and around these vaults," he says. "I guard every penny like it is my own."

Earning Rs 10,000 a month him-

self, Patil still lives in the chawl where he was raised, next door to his parents, sharing a two-room home with his wife, Sunanda, and 12-year-old daughter.

He starts his day at 7 am, with a bath and a glass of milk that is his only breakfast.

Then he gets onto his motorcycle — he calls it "my most prized possession" — and rides the 20 minutes to work.

WE ONCE HAD A VEHICLE BREAKDOWN WHILE CARRYING LAKHS IN CASH TO AN ATM. IT TOOK US THREE HOURS TO GET BACK ON THE ROAD — THE MOST NERVE-WRACKING HOURS OF MY LIFE. I ALSO HAD TO CARRY A BAG WITH ₹5 LAKH IN CASH AT DADAR STATION. HAVING A GUNMAN ALONG ONLY ATTRACTED MORE ATTENTION.

GANESH PATIL, 38

At work by 8 am, he begins to sort cash into stacks for the first batch of vans, which will in turn distribute the money across 500 ATMs in the city.

By 10 am, the first batch of vans has arrived and Patil begins supervising the loading of the cash. This usually takes until 1 pm.

He then heads home for lunch, where he usually feasts on butter

chicken kept ready for him by his wife, who works as a loan agent.

"This is one of the greatest perks of my new position," he says. "Earlier, I would have all my meals on the go or at ATM outlets. There was no time to stop, nowhere to sit down and eat in peace."

Back at work by 2 pm, Patil begins tallying the money brought in by another set of vans from the bank, and stacking the bundles in the vault for the following day.

By 6 pm, Patil is done for the day and rides home to spend some quality time with his daughter, doing homework and school assignments.

Then it's time for TV and dinner before bedtime at 12.30 am. On weekends, Patil and his family go on rides to the outskirts of the city.

Family vacations are spent with relatives at Patil's hometown of Belapur, or in Pune.

"At the end of each break, it's always hard to leave our relatives and return to the hectic pace of the city," he says.

(This weekly feature explores the lives of those unseen Mumbaiites essential to your day)

MUMBAI LOCAL

VIDYA SUBRAMANIAN/HT