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Climate Strikes in Millennial India: Social Capital and "On-Ground" Networks in Digital-First Movements

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In September 2019, young people in India led a series of protest events, taking inspiration from a digital campaign for a series of Climate Strikes. Our article explores these events in the context of "millennial India," particularly in terms of the networks that emerged in the course of climate action in two different regions. By using evidence from Delhi in the north and Bengaluru in the south, we also develop a comparative sociology of digital-first environmental movements and show how the significance of Twitter can only be understood in relation to the formations of social capital on the ground.

Keywords: Social Media Activism, Climate Strikes, Class, Hashtags, Twitter

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The prominence of climate change in recent years can be attributed to the actions of young citizens who organized around ideas (and hashtags) that first emerged on digital platforms.[1] But we cannot understand the success of these campaigns without taking into account their regional dimensions. Theories as well as popular accounts emphasize the role of "placeless" and "leaderless" coalitions in these movements, but they overlook the complex ways in which ground-level realities continue to define the networks and leaders that emerge out of such action and sustain the movement over time. In this article, we consider how online action requires "offline work" (Bakardjieva, Felt, & Dumitrica, 2018) and explore how climate action via digital means could enable less privileged groups to join movements that challenge existing social hierarchies.

Through this work, we aim to address a gap in the literature on environmental politics in India, particularly emphasizing how digital technology use intersects

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with demographic change and politics, in other words, the social life of digital-first movements in "millennial India" (Udupa, Venkatraman, & Khan, 2019). As accounts about #Occupy have shown, hashtags are pivotal to galvanizing social movements around a "digital vanguard" (Gerbaudo, 2016), and such mobilization in turn produces progressive discourses that can inspire a new generation to push back against the excesses of capitalism and rising inequality. India has experienced a steep rise in inequality since liberalizing its economy (Piketty, 2020, p. 21). Addressing the disturbing rise in inequality requires that we pay keen attention to the interaction between digitalization and capitalism, including the amassing of "social capital" (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) that can be better understood by analyzing the digital participation of citizens from across social divides. Framed in terms of re-orienting capitalism in urban India, we thus consider the environmental domain as a crucial arena for contestations around social and political hierarchies.

A network perspective: concepts and methodology

We analyze the dynamics of digital-first movements through a network perspective and focus on the ways in which youth organized themselves in the course of the *Climate Strikes* (*Strikes* from now on) "on ground" and not just online. To operationalize our research concern, we consider how diverse classes came together in the course of the *Strikes* in September 2019 and we analyze to what extent these events enabled groups with less resources to gain access to new connections or if groups from largely affluent backgrounds dominated the network. We selected Delhi and Bengaluru because both cities have seen rising instances of public protests on environmental issues, and our project's human subjects included a cohort of volunteers from both cities. We hosted a series of focus-group discussions with activists (at Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology-Delhi, and National Law School University of India in Bengaluru) in late 2019 and conducted participant observation and interviews during various *Strikes*-related events, which took place in diverse venues in the two cities.[2] We surveyed nearly 200 individuals who had joined local environmental clubs and volunteered either on the ground or participated in public discussions that local environmental or youth organizations hosted.[3]

In addition, we studied the Twitter discourses of our respondents and developed network plots to understand how the networks that formed through the use of hashtags common to the communities manifested "on-ground." Similarly, we analyzed comments posted on Twitter to identify the networks that formed among those users in the cohort who used the same hashtag in their tweets. We interviewed several leading organizers of these events, and followed the hashtags promoted by leading youth digital mobilization organizations such as *Haiyya* in Delhi and *Jhatkaa* in Bengaluru.[4]

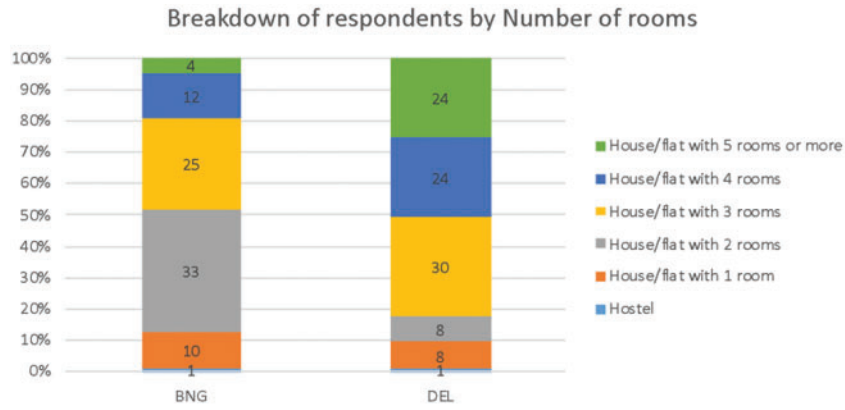

Figure 1 Class composition of Bengaluru cohort (n = 99) and the Delhi cohort (n = 95).

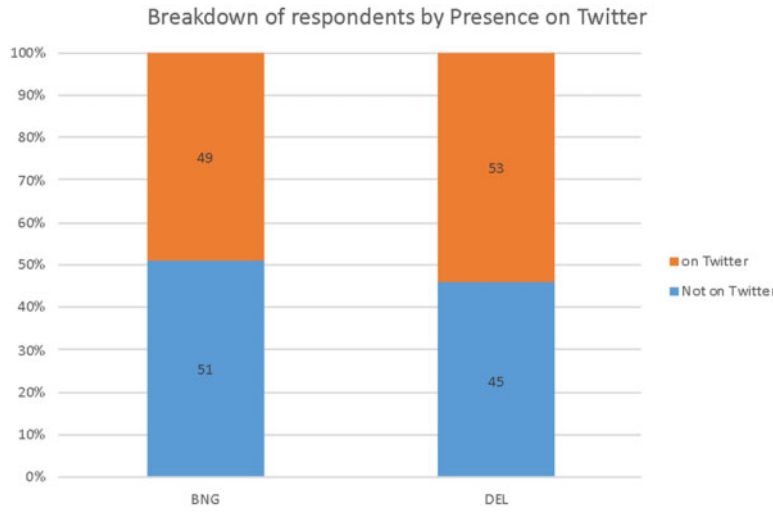

Figure 2 Respondents who reported having active presence on Twitter in Bengaluru (n = 99) and Delhi (n = 96).

As Figure 1 shows, the Delhi cohort is clearly more affluent (with home size serving as a proxy for class) when compared to their peers in Bengaluru, where a majority of the respondents came from less privileged backgrounds.

Our selection of Twitter to draw a comparison with on-ground activities was also based on the fact, as Figure 2 below shows, that nearly half of all respondents in each of the two cohorts had a presence on the networking platform.

In the subsequent discussion, we present the results of our combined analysis of the events on the ground, and of the networks that formed through Twitter—based on the use of shared hashtags in their tweets they posted between June and December 2019.[5]

Discussion: a network view of the capital formation in the *Strikes*

Environmental movements, like other social movements, face the challenge of building cohesion and purpose among participants. Their encounter with capital creates opportunities to re-organize society and build inter-group solidarities and "social capital" for those who have otherwise little control over the material resources or financial stakes in their region's economy (Bourdieu, 1986). If we think of the *Strikes* as symbolic of the public spaces where individuals from different social classes forge solidarity, it is important to consider whether those lacking economic capital are able to gain central positions in the emergent movement formations on the ground and online.

If we take a network view of their engagement, we can see new forms of organization taking shape as each respondent co-attended the events in Delhi and Bengaluru with another individual from the cohort. In the case of Delhi where we found that more than half of the respondents had attended at least one of the *Strikes* or a climate related event, those from higher economic strata were quite central to the emergent network formed through their interactions. We found that 50 respondents attended at least one of the several events that contributed to the *Strikes* (including sit-ins in front of relevant ministries and also a march to the Parliament in late September 2019). At the same time, 38 lived in dwellings of two or more rooms. If we use the size of the dwelling as a proxy for their economic background, we can say that the on-ground attendance of events in Delhi had a higher participation from the upper middle-class or social elites—limiting the scope of the *Strikes* to have the potential to alter entrenched social capital and economic hierarchies.

In contrast, in Bengaluru, the not so economically well-off individuals held more central positions vis-à-vis those from stronger economic classes. Although we found that a smaller fraction of all respondents in Bengaluru (36 out of 99) actually attended any event, we could see that the less well-off volunteers were more likely to attend multiple events than their affluent peers. While the divergence in the role of less well-off social groups in the two cities was already evident in the overall cohort (Figure 1), an organizational perspective helps us grasp the real distinction. Additionally, our observations and interviews suggest that a majority of attendees in Delhi primarily came from colleges and educational institutions (17 out of 50)—suggesting that we have a transient demographic that may be unable to sustain their commitment beyond a point while a majority in Bengaluru who attended the events were employed residents, indicating a higher likelihood of sustained commitment and building a stake in local environmental issues.

In addition, we also wanted to re-consider the role of Twitter and whether it opened up a space for non-elite groups looking to build solidarity with others online. Based on an analysis of the tweets that active respondents posted, we found that only a small fraction of respondents (across both cities) used any kind of climate-related hashtag on Twitter. In Delhi, only 19 of the 51 respondents who are active on Twitter used a *Strikes*-/climate-related hashtag which was also used by another respondent in the cohort. In Bengaluru the number was even lower, with only

nine out of 49 active social media respondents using any of the hashtags which were also used by another individual in the cohort.

If we consider common hashtags as symbolic of Twitter's capacity to allow users to plug into a "networked" public (Rainie & Wellman, 2014), the limited usage of shared hashtags shows that at least in India, Twitter does not appeal even to those participants who otherwise attend the same events together on ground. Moreover, among the nineteen respondents who did use common hashtags in Delhi, a majority were from relatively more well-off backgrounds (those with houses with more than three rooms) than the average for the cohort. This reflects an interesting contrast to the networks that emerged among the respondents in Bengaluru who tweeted about the *Strikes*. The contrast was evident in the way Twitter in Delhi has largely become an exclusive space for the affluent, anglophone class rather than a public sphere engaged with the concerns of working class youth.

In the case of Bengaluru, even though only nine respondents had tweeted about *Strikes* using a shared hashtag, several of them came from less privileged backgrounds and the network that formed reflected an emerging cross-class solidarity. Moreover, the presence of a small but active and socially diverse group of volunteers using more impactful hashtags such as #climateemergency reflected our general observations during the *Strikes* in the city, where we could see that organizers and volunteers were keen to build inter-group solidarity and a commitment to social justice rather than amplify messages about environmental change as was often the case in Delhi. In the course of our survey in Bengaluru, we saw that organizers often mobilized participants from a wider cross-section of society, and even their campaigns online had strong connections with local working class youth (for instance, with local NGOs and communities engaged in waste-recycling). A crucial factor here was the use of hashtags and slogans that relied on the regional languages rather than English, a trend that was also evident in the way these groups reached out to local Kannada speakers as well as professionals working in the city's IT/ITeS sector.

The *Strikes* reflect the emergence of distinct organizational structures and cultures of climate action in Southern India, while in Delhi, we see more continuity than change in terms of elite domination, with an entirely anglophone Twitter further accentuating the existing hierarchies. As this brief analysis of the *Strikes* of 2019 shows, networking platform use differs across regions and in each case, politics is crucial in the ways that existing relations between capital, class and the digital-first environmental movements intersect with one another. It would be fair to say that Southern India has seen a better model of a climate capital emerge, with digital technologies providing new possibilities of inter-group solidarity.

Notes

1. In our article we consider the case of *Climate Strikes* to stand in for a whole range of climate related global movement including campaigns, activist networks and events that took place in the last week of September 2019.

2. Several news media covered the *Strikes*, see for example: https://qz.com/india/1712995/the-global-climate-strike-inspires-protests-in-indias-cities/ (accessed September 2020).
3. The survey was conducted via email, between November 2019 and February 2020, and we received a total of 96 responses in Delhi and 99 in Bengaluru.
4. The project devised a survey questionnaire which was shared via email from October 2019 until February 2020. Our survey included a cut-off age and only respondents above 18 and were able to fill in. Among other details, we also included a question related to social media handles, and the following analysis is based on the data collected in this survey.
5. The tweets collected using Twitter API were no older than 3 June 2019 and were collected until 10 December 2020. We manually selected all the environmental hashtags and found the following which were then used to build the network graphs used later in the chapter: "climateaction," "climatechange," "climateemergency," "climatecrisis," "globalclimatestrike," "fridaysforfuture," and "extinctionrebellion."

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