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When revolutions go viral

Thanks to Facebook and Twitter, the urban Indian youth, famously detached from the goings-on in the country, came out on the streets to support the anti-corruption movement — not only here but abroad as well. TOI-Crest looks at the anatomy of a modern protest movement

NEHA THIRANI
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

I try to change my display picture, update my BBM status and send out a tweet as often as possible. I feel like I really need to do my bit for the country," a college student was overheard saying outside Mumbai's Azad Maidan where protests against the anti-corruption movement are still under way. Once used to reconnect with long-lost school friends or to post vacation pictures, social networking sites have surfaced as the new forum for political activism. The world's attention is now on the potential of the digital sphere in historical revolutions as witnessed in Egypt and Tunisia. Though set in a vastly different political context, and used to different ends, the power of social media to drive citizen action in India has become apparent as Team Anna's call to action resonates through the Internet.

From earlier this year at Jantar Mantar to the culmination of the protests when Anna Hazare became a household name, the anti-corruption movement has harnessed technology and social media tools to engineer large-scale protests. Not only has the movement deviated from traditional methods of mass mobilisation, but it has also brought young urban India into the fold of political activism. Ritesh Singh, a third-year computer science student at IIT-Kharagpur, created the 'India Against Corrup-

tion' Facebook page in December last year. Since then, the page has gathered more than four lakh supporters. There are also several regional chapters and over 150 unofficial Facebook pages devoted to Anna Hazare and India Against Corruption.

The 'Students Against Corruption' group has been encouraging students to use social media for the cause by sending out messages such as "Students should share and promote this page for the goodness (sic) of the nation... This is the thing that we can do for our nation... This is what India needs... Promote it, share it, blog it, discuss it... then feel the change." Petitions, calls to action and encouragement to join Hazare's fast also became commonplace in the last three months. The blog post '10 Ways to Support Anna Hazare on Social Media' by social media manager Sorav Jain has been shared 256 times on Facebook.

Relying on symbolism such as Gandhian photographs and references to the freedom struggle, Team Anna has created a media phenomenon. Text messages such as '*Behri sarkar ko janta ki awaz sunai nahi de rahi hain!* Lets show ppl anger!' and '*ANNA ki aag shuru ho gayi hai, Inquilab Zindabad*' have helped in creating mass support. Meanwhile twitter has been abuzz with dialogue, support and reactions to the protests, as Anna Hazare's campaign became the top trending topic in India over the past few weeks. While the image of Hazare meditating at Raji Ghat became iconic on August 15, 2011, Team Anna's voice was heard on



Sunil Khaitan, an investment banker working with Deutsche Bank in Hong Kong flew down last Friday to attend the protests at the Ramlila ground and address the crowd at Mumbai's Azad Maidan. Khaitan, 28, is originally from Kolkata and graduated from IIM Bangalore in 2006. "I was involved in the Right to Information movement in 2005, have been in touch with Professor Trilochan Sastry at IIM Bangalore, and have been tracking this movement from the days of Jantar Mantar," he says.

Khaitan is also active in the Hong Kong chapter of IAC, which organised a meeting on August 21, 2011, attended by over 300 people. "There is a clearly outlined process on the IAC website which tells you how to conduct a meeting," says Khaitan. "As the news channels are not available in HK, so many people are not aware of the real cause. So we talked about the points of contention and showed videos with Arvind Kejriwal, Kiran Bedi and Hazare addressing the crowd." He argues that harnessing social media has helped get people from different walks of life involved with the Hazare movement.

the TV, on mobile phones, YouTube and even on T-shirts. Developers are in the process of launching an India Against Corruption game, India Against Corruption mobile applications, India Against Corruption browser toolbars and more.

Though digital activism is often criticised as passive armchair activism or slacktivism, the use of technology in organising social protests has brought a different kind of activist on the street: young, urban India. "It's not as if what is happening is new, but it is happening on an unprecedented scale," says Nishant Shah, research director for the Centre for Internet and Society, Bangalore. "Traditional media has also done this in different ways, but in the past the protesters have been the disenfranchised. The use of social media has mobilised a new constituency — it has brought the urban middle class to the street. However, the use of such tools is producing a different kind of exclusion. There is a

Team Anna's voice was heard on the TV, on mobile phones and YouTube. Developers will now launch an India Against Corruption game, mobile apps and browser toolbars

noticeable lack of poor urban people in the protests. This is not the representation of 1.2 billion Indians as it is being made out to be."

The use of social media has garnered support for Team Anna from the unlikeliest parts, catapulting 'India Against Corruption' (IAC) into a global phenomenon. Young Indians living in places like New York, Singapore, London and Hong Kong are tweeting, facebooking, organising and gathering to talk about Hazare and his cause. Some young professionals have even taken time off from their careers to fly down to India and physically support the cause.

Social networking sites have also helped create a close-knit Indian community in Hong Kong. "Anna has also made a big point about the youth being present in the protests, and it is easier to connect with the youth through social media," says Khaitan.

"Peer pressure also comes into the picture in that age group — people want to get involved to appear impressive to their friends." But though technology has brought a new demographic of Indians into the realm of protest, it manifests its power through the oldest form of networking — word of mouth. ■

Keeping Anna wired

Gaurav Bakshi, who created the Anna Hazare Facebook page, on how social media was used to fuel a revolution

RUHI BATRA
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

For more than a week, a nation has been sitting in rapt attention, watching drama and chaos unfold at the Ramlila Maidan in Central Delhi. Children, their parents and even grandparents wearing the now-ubiquitous 'Main Anna Hoon' cap have been making daily treks to watch actors, singers and the common man turn up in support of fasting Anna and his dream.

Hundreds of volunteers have signed up to spread the message, to collect support and even to control the crowd. While mediators like Right to Information activist and Parivartan founder Arvind Kejriwal and ex-tough cop Kiran Bedi of the "core team" have got the dialogue going with the government on the Jan Lokpal Bill, the 22-member Team Anna — "it represents the people" — includes MBAs, doctors and other professionals. One member of the team, Gaurav Bakshi, who created the Facebook page for Anna Hazare, is a classic example of how social media was effectively harnessed in fuelling a social revolution.

The 34-year-old Bakshi's tryst with the campaign began when he experienced rampant corruption that is so embedded in the Indian system. After having spent close to a decade in the United States — he completed his Masters in business administration from the Univer-



MAN ON A MISSION: Leading a protest march against corruption in Noida

sity of Georgia and was a part of the world of corporate finance as a consultant with Chamberlin Edmonds & Associates — he returned to India in 2009.

His first stop in India was a spiritual foundation in Coimbatore where he spent some time in solitude and searched for something "more meaningful in life". "I wasn't dissatisfied with my life. I just wanted to be involved in something meaningful," Bakshi tells TOI-Crest as he drives to television studios in Noida for now what is becoming a daily occurrence. So last May, he set up

the Bharat Jagran Trust, "an independent non-profit aimed at creating a platform to connect the common man to meaningful causes and organisations, and provide them an actionable forum". Bakshi had worked in the social sector in America as well, where he headed the Atlanta chapter of an NGO known as Asha for Education.

As he got more and more involved, the ugly face of corruption manifested itself in virtually every day-to-day activity connected with the government. In July 2010, he initiated proceedings to adopt Azara, the

daughter of the woman he had just married. "I wanted to become her legal father and I thought it would be an easy enough process," he recounts. But that one experience changed his life.

Everything would have been done in a jiffy if Bakshi had allowed his lawyer to follow the 'regular' procedure — pay a bribe and get the papers processed. There was no question of his agreeing to do so, but his lawyer, without informing him, paid Rs 6,000 to the registrar at

the Noida office. "I went back the next day and confronted the registrar, and he brazenly said that yes, he had asked for a bribe. I made him apologise and return the money. Slowly a crowd of 50 to 60 people started crowding my father and I."

That's when Bakshi committed the beginner's error in an undercover mission: he revealed that he had recorded the entire conversation. "I made the mistake of saying that I had evidence and that I would go to the police," he says. After which the sub-registrar, the secretary of the deed writers & bar association, and employees and goons of the Sector 33 Noida registrar office followed the Bakshis and assaulted them, just metres away from the police station. An FIR was filed and pictures of the incident and a scuffed-up Gaurav even made it to the newspapers but the police did not file a case, saying that it would lead to "riots".

A firm believer in change and democracy, Bakshi started the 'Choosna Band' campaign on November 24, 2010, just days after he attempted to expose the shenanigans at the registrar's office. After months of protest, one clerk was suspended on charges of bribery and one of the five assailants was arrested and jailed.

It was during this period that Arvind Kejriwal, whom he'd met before, invited him to join the now well-known Indian Against Corruption movement. Bakshi joined as a volunteer and his main job has over time evolved to mobilising people, delivering talks at places like IITs and colleges, writing the speeches for Kejriwal and most importantly, interacting with the media.

Suave, comfortable with English and Hindi and most importantly a confident performer — his modelling and theatre background clearly came in handy here — Bakshi has slowly slipped into a more public role.

"I agree there can be an overload of information but Facebook has given you the controls to see and read what you want to read. Social media has not reached the age of maturity in India yet," says Bakshi

"There are a lot of wonderful people who have been working on this campaign but not everyone has the knack of getting their point across," says Bakshi, who stepped into the role of media handler because there was no one else doing it.

The fight against corruption has seen tremendous support online, and it was another area where Bakshi chipped in. The India Against Corruption campaign already had a Facebook presence thanks to the efforts of Shivendra Singh Chauhan, a reporter with a Hindi daily, who took leave without pay to manage the social networking sites. But it was Bakshi who realised that it was Hazare who would end up as the face of the movement. And he did.

He created the Anna Hazare page on Facebook and today can count 3,52,961 people who follow it. "Within six months, we've been able to garner so much support," he says. "It's the easiest way to disseminate information about the movement, the bill, activities and, most importantly, just to mobilise people. On Facebook, we invite people to join the movement and show their solidarity." The Internet and social media allows people to raise a collective voice that gets progressively louder as messages are re-pasted and retweeted. #annahazare and #janlokpal have been trending on Twitter for days.

Bakshi, who ran a Facebook campaign after the adoption debacle, knows fully well the reach and impact of this. "Within five days of launching my campaign, it attracted almost 600 people. I also managed to get some 60 people for a dharna from my Facebook supporters. Social media plays a huge role in mobilising mass movements," contends Bakshi.

Can this outpouring of support thanks to the social media be compared with Egypt? Bakshi doesn't quite agree. "In Egypt, the message went viral. It started with one guy walking out of the house and thousands joined him within hours. Here, it's been a slow process but in the past one week the movement has definitely picked up speed." And to all those who've been complaining of their walls and inboxes being spammed, Bakshi, who ironically runs a construction material company — "the most corrupt sector" — has this to say: "I find it strange when people complain. I agree there can be an overload of information but Facebook has given you the controls to see and read what you want to read. Social media has not reached the age of maturity in India yet." ■



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