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Mobile/Social Media Use for Political Purposes among Migrant Laborers in Singapore

Abstract

Political participation has generally been evaluated among civic resident populations using the indices of voting and campaign participation. However, migrants' engagement with politics in their home country has become increasingly virtual with the advent of mobile/social media, suggesting a need to go beyond traditional theorizations. The paper tries to understand how affordances of new media are leveraged by migrants with different political orientations as they engaged politically with their homeland. Two contexts were identified to understand their transnational political exchanges: a) elections in homeland India, and b) the backdrop of various civil society movements. In-depth interviews were conducted among 31 Indian migrants in Singapore with diverse political ideologies and linguistic backgrounds. Calling, messaging, sharing of news stories/posts and commenting were the most commonly used mobile affordances. Social constructivist tradition in technology appropriation found support in the way respondents tested the affordances of mobile/social media before adding them to their usage repertoire. Due to limited political entitlements and lack of leeway in work schedules, no goal-oriented use of communication technologies was made. Political discussion hardly led to political action – such as demonstrations or public speeches – in the host country.

Keywords: migrant transnationalism, mobile phone, political discussion, social networking sites, political participation, new media affordances, qualitative method

Introduction

Diasporic communities and their political engagement with both host and home countries have received considerable academic attention (Chan, 2005; Laguerre, 2005; McGregor & Pasura, 2010; Tynes, 2007). The rapid diffusion of mobile/ social media among migrant population (see Vertovec, 2004 for percentage growth of phone calls between migrant-sending and -receiving countries during 1991-2001) has enhanced the chances of migrant communities to engage in transnational political communication. For traditionally marginalized guest workers, who have limited political citizenship rights in host countries, mobile/ social media have provided affordable opportunities to communicate and share views related to politics of their home country.

The objective of this paper is to understand how low-skilled workers from India in Singapore use new media technologies to politically engage with their home country. Following a qualitative case study, the research attempted to gain a descriptive understanding of different modes of communication exchanges and mobile/social media patterns among migrant workers in the lower strata in Singapore. The study draws on from theoretical knowledge in 'leveraged affordances' field (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Hutchby, 2001) and migrant transnationalism (Levitt, DeWind, & Vertovec, 2003; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) and reveals that political participation with traditional indices of voting and campaign participation has no significant relevance to migrants, especially in the lower strata. On the other hand, an exploration of migrants' communication over mobile phone and their social media usage would provide greater insights into the activities that strengthen or weaken their political identities in transnational spaces.

Scholars acknowledge that research on migrant transnationalism is chiefly based on case studies and are often contextual (see Guarnizo, Portes, & Haller, 2003, p. 1213 for a list

of case studies). For example, the amount of influence wielded by Latin American and Caribbean migrant workers in US in the politics of their homeland is unique to that population (Barry, 2006; Laguerre, 2005; Parham, 2004), whereas such political influence may not be observed to the same extent in other diasporic communities. Despite hailing from a major sending country, Indian diaspora's role in deciding the political climate of their home country has been minimal. In the case of migrant workers in the low-income group, financial constraints and job pressures disallow them to fly home to vote in elections, or use their mandate through absentee voting mechanisms. Nevertheless, social media bring them the opportunity to update themselves of the political happenings in their home country, even as they stay away from their homeland for long years. This study extends the scope of transnationalism studies by introducing low-income guest workers into the theoretical fold, in addition to exploring their mobile usage patterns from the point of view of 'leveraged affordances'. The focus on guest workers is justified considering that their number has been steadily increasing in many developed regions in Asia, including Singapore (MoM, 2014).

In order to evaluate how the low-skilled migrant workers from India imagined and asserted their political identity through various usages of the mobile phone, two instances pertaining to the nation's contemporary political atmosphere have been considered: (i) in the context of elections; and, (ii) in the backdrop of civil society movements. Earlier, in the course of another study among the same population (Chib & Aricat, 2012), it was observed that the respondents were accessing a wide variety of information over mobile phone related to the political affairs of their home country. Migrants assessed the odds of different political parties winning the elections in their home country, in addition to regularly keeping themselves informed of the political news. However, the migrants were neither inclined nor had the chance to participate in the political activities concerning their home country. Thus, the context of elections appeared a vantage point to study how mobile phone helped mitigate

the tension the migrants experienced within themselves – as citizens who maintained democratic rights in their homeland and as ‘politically marginalized’ migrant workers in Singapore.

Second, an inquiry was made on how mobile communication helped migrants learn about, support, criticize or disavow various civil society movements in India. Along with judiciary’s crucial interventions in setting the governance of the country in the right track, civil-society activism related to specific issues such as corruption, environment conservation and livelihood has become one of the defining features of the democratic polity of contemporary India. The emergence of civil society movements based on identities and regional governance issues has been identified a notable feature of modernity (Hall, 1992; Mercer, 1994). Migrants formed opinion about these movements through communication with their family and friends in the home country, as also through online news accessed over computers and mobile phone. When the study was conducted in 2011, ‘India Against Corruption’, the anti-corruption campaign led by Anna Hazare, a 74-year old Gandhian, had been a major civil society movement in the country. Discussion forums and social networking sites (SNS) were flooded with reports on this movement, which also ignited passions among many transnational Indian communities around the world (Suroor, 2011). Similarly, there had been regional movements such as anti-nuke in Tamil Nadu and anti-land acquisition in Odisha, to mention but a few. The study of these contexts was important for reason that the immediate family and relatives of most migrants were in India, and were affected by the policy changes and politics of the country.

Migrants and mobile/social media: Existing research frameworks

Traditional studies on the diffusion and impact of ethnic media on the diasporic populations centered on print, radio and television (Fathi, 1973; Zubrzycki, 1958). While

political exchanges of migrants across national boundaries had been the focus of some of these studies (Park, 1971; Yapple & Korzenny, 1989), others explored how migrants' usage of ethnic media in the host society helped them better adapt to their new living conditions (Krishnan & Berry, 1992; Reis, 2010; Subervi-Velez, 1986; Zubrzycki, 1958). Questions related to ethnic and national identities of migrants became more prominent with the diffusion of the digital media, and the creation of transnational virtual communities over internet (Chan, 2005; Bernal, 2006; Guarnizo, Portes & Haller, 2003; Kalathil, 2003; Metykova, 2010; Ong, 2003; Parham, 2004). The traditional method of analyzing the quality and quantity of ethnic news consumed by migrants through print media, radio and television (Fathi, 1973; Hao & Zhu, 2005; Kim, 1977) gave way to the analyses of various transnational exchanges online. Studies investigated how the nationalistic feelings, feelings of ethnic belongingness and pride as well as the citizenship of migrants were strengthened or dissipated by such transnational exchanges (Chan, 2005; Parham, 2004).

Many of the relationships established between new media usage and political participation among civic resident populations could not, however, be replicated in the migrant context. For example, political news consumption predicted political participation in resident populations, although mediated by political discussion (Cho, 2005; Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009). Since political participation was often operationalized as voting, campaign participation and civic participation of resident populations, the results of such studies failed to reflect migrants' reality, wherein the latter were permitted only limited citizenship rights in the host countries. In the case of non-resident migrant population, like guest workers, owing to their liminal existence and temporary work statuses, their political communication has not been given sufficient attention.

Migrants in the lower strata began receiving research attention in the first decade of the millennium, as mobile phones made inroads into this section of the population (Vertovec, 2004). Studies have mapped and analyzed the different patterns of mobile phone use in the day-to-day lives of both rural to urban and cross-border migrants (Chib, Wilkin, & Mei Hua, 2013; Law & Chu, 2008; Law & Peng, 2007; Paragas, 2009; Qiu, 2009). The most common transnational activities over mobile phone so far mapped include migrants' communication exchanges with family and friends in their country of origin, as also in other countries (Metykova, 2010). In addition, mobile phone has also been instrumental in migrants' formation of ties with host society members, as well as members from their own community (co-ethnics) residing in the host country (Thompson, 2009). These studies tried to answer questions such as 'how the migrants were empowered as a result of their mobile phone use' and 'how they appropriated different affordances of the technology to negotiate with various agencies in their day-to-day lives.' Meanwhile, a gendered approach highlighted how female migrant workers, as mobile phone users, experienced the same power relations they faced in real life as they tried to assert their gender identity in the new cities they had migrated to (Lin & Sun, 2010; Wallis, 2008). Political discussion over mobile phone has received no specific attention in such studies, although these migrants regularly discuss politics in offline and online spaces, and their lives are affected by political processes that go on in host and home countries.

Political transnationalism and democratic engagement

Although migrants are said to be engaging in transnational activities in different realms – economic, social, cultural and political – the meaning and consequences of these engagements vary widely. According to Baubock (2003), the key difference between 'political transnationalism' and transnational practices in the social and economic fields is

that in the latter case the imaginings prevalent among the actors do not necessarily involve state as an agent. As a result, political transnationalism “ultimately affects the very definition of the entity whose borders are crossed” (Baubock, 2003, p. 702). This contradiction in the very definition of political transnationalism is reflected in the two conflicting positions adopted by scholars on the role of the state in migrants’ lives. Some argue that the state’s powers among the migrant population have increasingly weakened in tandem with an outlook of universal rights based on personhood, the international democratization project, as also due to an increase in various cross-border networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). A key argument in this regard is that migrants help diffuse ideas and beliefs to their homeland that can make decisive changes in its politics: “the information that migrants channel to high-volume migration communities has an aggregate-level effect that alters attitudes and beliefs of members of those communities” (Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow, 2010, p. 120). Some scholars who adopt this position criticize the way social sciences have used nation-state as the most important category in the study of migrant transnationalism. According to them, the ‘methodological nationalism’ that treats migrants as part of “a bounded national container society” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 324), thereby homogenizing the differences that are prevalent among them, needs to be abandoned.

An equally valid position is held by some scholars who argue that the “state is here to stay”, despite all apparent weakening of its powers among migrant population: “... states reconfigure themselves and redefine national membership to maintain ties to and profit from their transnational constituencies” (Levitt, DeWind & Vertovec, 2003, p. 568). This study draws on from both the positions and argues that the Indian state’s authority over the migrant population at the lower strata has not been balanced with ensuring sufficient political rights to them. As a result, the migrants in the lower strata have remained outside the governmental processes, albeit temporarily. The study then focuses on how communication technologies

help them bridge this gap between their citizenship and non-belongingness to the day-to-day political affairs of their homeland.

Affordances or action possibilities of mobile and social media

In referring to social media and their effects on users, it has become increasingly difficult to define the media as singular and as having a centralized effect and character. Instead, the current trend among social media researchers is to break them down into various affordances and ascribe the observed effects to a particular affordance or a set of affordances. By definition, affordance is a combination of what technology can offer (ontological) and the users' perception of what they can do with a technology feature (psychological) (Gibson, 1977; Sundar & Bellur, 2011). While traditional mediums had limitations in offering affordances, social media have a complex mixture of affordances, which are overlapped on the digital platforms. E.g. A print newspaper allowed only for the reading of news stories and at the most, writing comments on them (like 'letters to the editor'), whereas the digital platforms of mobile phone and personal computer are capable of offering the same affordance, in addition to many others.

Earl and Kimport (2011) follow a middle path between technological determinism and constructivist (social and symbolic) positions. Their 'leveraged affordances' approach is a yardstick to understand how far political organization and activism have changed as a result of web usage. The level of change occurring in political organization, participation and activism, as a result of web usage, is a valid measure to understand how far research and practice have gone beyond the political theories of the pre-Internet and mobile phone era. The two vantage points from which Earl and Kimport (2011) observe the emerging web situation suit the investigations of this study also: (i) how far have the affordances of the new media been leveraged to reduce cost of political participation and organization; and, (ii) how far

have the affordances of the new media been leveraged to do away with co-presence, traditionally required for collective action (p. 37). As this study investigates how mobile phone affordances have been leveraged by the migrant workers in order to participate in political discussion and activities related to their home country, it deals explicitly with issues related to cost reduction and co-presence. Further, following the approach of social shaping of technology (SST) (Mackay & Gillespie, 1992), the paper brings to fore different personality types among the migrant population under study. These personality types highlight the interaction of diverse political ideologies and dispositions of migrants and their technology use. The personality types are presented as evidence against the notion of technological determinism, which posits that technology has autonomous, direct and total effect on society and not vice-versa (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999). How individuals appropriate and derive meaning from technology is decided by a complex set of factors ranging from their personal history to social norms that determine the usage (Winner, 1993). This approach draws on from symbolic interactionism, social constructivism and interpretive approaches, without overemphasizing the validity of any one approach.

Research questions

Based on the discussion above, the following questions have been posed to guide the investigation:

- 1) How do low-skilled and semi-skilled migrant workers from India in Singapore leverage various affordances of mobile and social media to discuss politics of their country of origin during their stay in Singapore?
- 2) How do the migrant workers make use of mobile and social media to respond to the causes of various civil society movements (anti-corruption, environment conservation, anti-nuke, livelihood issues, etc.) in India?

- 3) How do the migrant workers make use of mobile and social media to keep themselves abreast of and involve in the elections in their home country?

Methodology

The study relies on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with 31 Indian migrant workers in Singapore. The sample frame is defined as male low-skilled migrant workers in Singapore who are Indian citizens and who work in the industrial sectors of construction, oil refining, ship building and maintenance, etc. As of May 2014, the total population of Singapore was 5.4 million, among which 1.55 million were non-residents, comprising guest workers, long-term visitors and international students (Sing Stat, 2014, p. 2). Of the 1.3 million migrant workers in Singapore, 0.91 million (17% of the total population) had visa statuses of semi-skilled and un-skilled, which included blue-collar workers in construction and other industrial sectors such as oil refining and rigging (MoM, 2014). It is assumed that migrant workers from India, who constituted the population of this study, will be around half of the semi-skilled/ un-skilled labor pool (0.46 million). Indians constituted 9.1% of the resident population, of which Tamil ethnicity has higher proportion. Disaggregate data on different ethnicities among the resident and non-resident Indians were unavailable.

Respondents were recruited mainly through snowball sampling, with half the sample belonging to the same linguistic community – Malayali – as that of the researcher. Others belonged to Tamil, Telugu and Bangla linguistic communities in India. Those who participated in a related study (Chib & Aricat, 2012) were approached first, and references were taken from them for recruiting other respondents. Some respondents were randomly chosen and were directly approached by the researcher as part of the study. Only those migrants who possessed a valid work permit, or a higher variation ‘S’ pass, were recruited to

the study. Employees with these statuses are considered non-residents as per Singapore's visa rules. All the respondents were interviewed near their residences, generally a dormitory or in rare cases a Housing Development Board flat shared by several workers. The interviews were conducted during the period August 2011 – April 2012. Global standards and norms for conducting ethical social science research were observed while conducting the study. Consent forms were administered, respondents were compensated SG\$10 (1.27 SG\$ = 1 US\$) as an honorarium.

The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 48 with 31.8 as mean. Twenty among the sample earned between SG\$ 500 and 999 and the rest earned between SG\$ 1,000 and 1,999 a month. The respondents had been in Singapore for 3 months to 11 years, with the mean duration of residence being 50.9 months. All had at least one mobile phone of their own, with three having a smart phone in their possession. Almost one-third of the respondents accessed internet on their mobile phones, mainly for reading news from Indian vernacular dailies online (upto four such dailies in some cases). Respondents had seven to 16 years' of formal education and the average education was 12.5 years (refer to Table 1 for detailed demographics).

Table 1. Interviewees' profile

Serial no.	Age	Ethnicity	Education in years*	Marital status	Duration of stay in Singapore (in months; under different job contracts)	Monthly income**
1	42	Malayali	10	Married; 2 children	24	Slab 2
2	34	Malayali	13	Married; 1 child	72	Slab 3
3	24	Telugu	11	Single	54	Slab 2
4	25	Telugu	11	Single	60	Slab 2
5	25	Telugu	12	Single	48	Slab 2
6	48	Malayali	12	Married; 2 children	22	Slab 2
7	46	Malayali	12	Married; 2 children	96	Slab 2
8	35	Malayali	10	Married; 1 child	24	Slab 2
9	42	Malayali	10	Married; 2 children	48	Slab 2
10	28	Telugu	13	Single	48	Slab 2
11	41	Malayali	12	Married; 2 children	18	Slab 2
12	40	Malayali	12	Married; 2 children	18	Slab 2
13	35	Malayali	13	Married; 1 child	72	Slab 3
14	26	Tamil	10	Single	60	Slab 3
15	33	Tamil	13	Married; 1 child	132	Slab 2
16	41	Tamil	14	Married; 2 children	48	Slab 3
17	23	Tamil	14	Single	6	Slab 2
18	25	Bengali	12	Single	60	Slab 2
19	23	Tamil	16	Single	3	Slab 3
20	29	Tamil	16	Single	48	Slab 2

21	25	Telugu	7	Single	72	Slab 2
22	37	Malayali	14	Married	84	Slab 3
23	25	Malayali	14	Single	12	Slab 3
24	24	Malayali	13	Single	60	Slab 2
25	28	Telugu	15	Single	54	Slab 3
26	29	Tamil	13	Single	36	Slab 2
27	33	Malayali	14	Single	72	Slab 3
28	27	Tamil	13	Single	24	Slab 3
29	27	Malayali	12	Single	60	Slab 2
30	30	Telugu	15	Single	72	Slab 3
31	35	Malayali	13	Married	72	Slab 2

*Includes vocational training.

**Monthly income slabs used in the study are: Slab 1- below SGD 500; Slab 2- between SGD 500 and 999; Slab 3- between SGD 1,000 and 1,999; Slab 4- above SGD 2,000. Income is calculated inclusive of pay for overtime work.

The qualitative survey followed the narrative research techniques that valued the verbal recollections of the subjects under study (Creswell, 2007; Arasaratnam, 2008; Skuza, 2007). As a prelude to understanding how migrant workers used mobile phone and internet to discuss political matters, they were asked to give a brief outline of their political interest, orientation and background in both pre-migration and migration phases. They were also asked to predict how they would be engaging with the politics of their home country after returning to their homeland. In addition, question “how do you locate yourself within the larger political context of a growing India” was asked to reveal the tension they faced as migrant workers from a country that wielded increasing economic and political clout in the region. The questions related to mobile phone/internet use in the context of elections included “how has the mobile phone helped you know about and engage with elections in India” and “how have you been using internet to access information about various processes and events associated with (a specific) election in India”. In the context of social movements, the respondents were asked to respond to the questions “how has the mobile phone helped you know about, support or disavow the ongoing civil society movements in India.” Responses were coded under the sub-heads ‘leveraging of affordances for political discussion’ (RQ1), ‘mobile communication related to civil society movements’ (RQ2) and ‘mobile communication at the time of elections’ (RQ3).

The study draws from traditions such as social constructivism, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and interpretive research, especially at the data analysis phase. Social constructivism posits that no phenomenon is accessible to humans unaffected by social norms and structures (Pinch, 1992). This entailed that the migrants’ experience of engaging with politics in the mediated space of mobile phones was essentially determined by social conditions and norms. At the same time, the researcher also interpreted the data as allowed by the existing discourse on politics and mobile phone use. Similarly, symbolic

interactionism emphasizes the active involvement of an individual in the production of meaning of everyday social and psychological reality (Denzin, 1992). Phenomenology addresses the lived experiences of individuals, which are not captured using any *a priori* psychological categories (Skuzza, 2007). For interpreting the interview data, the study draws on from these traditions. A meaningful phrase, sentence or paragraph was considered a unit of analysis. Themes and usage patterns were allowed to emerge as the data analysis work progressed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) (refer to Table 2 for a list of themes identified).

Table 2: Themes identified from interview data

RQ1: Leveraging of affordances for political discussion	RQ2: Mobile communication related to civil society movements	RQ3: Mobile communication at the time of elections
Mobile calling to keep track of local politics	Social media to <i>share</i> already expressed views	Mobile calling to keep track of prospects of favourite candidates/party
Mobile calling to know the reality behind mainstream news	Signing of online petitions to support civil society movements	Mobile internet to access real time information during campaign, election and vote counting
Sceptical about the authenticity of shared messages in social media	Forwarding SMS supporting civil society movements (e.g. Anti-corruption drive in 2011)	Mobile calling to canvass vote for favourite candidates/party in home country
Mobile internet to access vernacular e-newspapers	Cynicism towards mainstream politics	Despite well-connected networks, no effort to utilize absentee voting
Mobile calling to link up with comrades and fellow-party workers	Lack of leeway in work schedule curtails creative engagement with politics in mobile/social media.	Disconnect between political expression in mobile/social media and offline political life in the host country
Greater attention to politics of home country than that of host country		Political parties do not campaign among migrants at lower strata.
Prohibition, ostracization, marginalization and self-censorship in host country		

Findings

Political background and orientations

All respondents recalled some experience of involvement with social and political activities from their life before migration. Half the sample was active in social welfare activities thinly bordered by party-based politics in their home country. Political activities in which the respondents had participated included house to house campaign, pamphlet distribution and fund raising for political parties.

“While at home, I used to do campaigning at the time of Panchayat [local self-government institution] election. At the Panchayat level, small issues, regional issues were important... nothing beyond that... yes, I used to attend election meetings... we become active at the time of elections...”

Respondents above the age of 30 in the sample were found to have involved in political activities in their country of origin more than those below that age in the pre-migration period. Similarly, those with a background in social or political activities were found less specialized in their work and had lower education level as compared to others. This finding runs contrary to the relationship established by earlier studies about political participation and education level (Nie & Hillygus, 2001; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003).

Respondents expressed a sense of loss for not being able to directly participate in the political affairs of their home country. For once-active political workers, their work-only migratory life contrasted sharply with their pre-migration life, when they had taken up social welfare and party activities. The feeling of loss was mostly offset with the help of communication technologies, which according to them, were capable of taking them closer to the socio-political happenings in their home country. Respondents' engagement with host country happened more in the context of the organization they worked with, without any possibility of collective decision making or assertion of rights (Chib & Aricat, 2012). On the

one hand, politics of the host country was outside their interest and reach, whereas on the other, expression of opinion was highly controlled even for the members of the host society:

“The politics here, it’s like there is a bit of campaigning at the time of election. Beyond that they have no politics. Then you see people are not that much interested [in politics] here, isn’t it? Here, it’s like, ‘work, earn money and spend lavishly.’ ... I don’t see proper election campaigning here... it’s restricted to town areas... I watched it on TV at the time of president election. I clearly see the difference [between the civic engagement in my country and here].”

Threat of repatriation, fine and imprisonment acted as prohibitive measures against migrant workers expressing themselves online, which virtually disallowed them from using social media for any higher level engagement with host country politics. Acculturating to the host cultures, the migrants also traded their active political past and politically sensitive democratic disposition with an aspirational lifestyle, which they acquired during their stay in other countries. In the absence of migrants’ engagement with host cultures, mobile/social media allowed for better retention of migrants’ ties to their home culture, which further exacerbated the problem of ghettoization observed by previous studies (Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008; Weiss, Nincic, & Nolan, 2005).

“I had to leave for Singapore exactly when the civil society movements became active in India, some five years back. After coming here I haven’t heard about anyone taking initiative to hold a public demonstration in favor of any social cause in India. I do feel that I’m missing the social activities back in my country. We had already started a group [in my hometown] to participate in social activities... I could have participated in that, if I were there.”

For questions on what kind of political life they would like to pursue after returning to India, three-quarter of the sample expressed their disinterestedness towards resuming an active political life akin to their pre-migration period, while the remaining said they are likely to be “led by their political ideology” even after returning.

“Today’s politics is totally different from the politics of old times. Today it’s opportunism that prevails... many are exploiting politics for selfish gains... only a few do social service... after returning to India in future, I don’t plan to involve in politics...”

The remainder of the section addresses specific research questions, viz. leveraging mobile/social media affordances to engage with politics of country of origin, usage of mobile/social media in the context of civil society movements and usage of mobile/social media at the time of elections.

Leveraging of mobile phone affordances for political participation

It is to be noted at the outset that political participation for the respondents entailed only political discussion on mobile phone and social media and no other offline activity beyond that. Accordingly, one of the dimensions of leveraged affordances followed by Earl and Kimport (2011) – related to overcoming the need for co-presence – has no significant meaning for the respondents. In other words, the affordances of web or mobile phone that helped organize and participate in a movement while being located at geographically distant places did not have significance for the migrants, as they were never part of any movement during the migration phase. In addition, the affordances leveraged by the respondents to engage in political discussion differed according to their interest in politics as well as their skill sets, age and income.

“Of course, I have a sense of loss that at present I am not able to involve in various social activities in my homeland... when I’m not there, nothing much can be done about social activities... I can just call someone and know about the happenings, that’s all.”

“No, I don’t feel a great loss for not participating in social issues... we have social networking, Facebook... all my friends from India are there, altogether around 400 friends. We discuss all political matters... I comment...”

While three-quarter of the sample accessed news pertaining to a wide variety of topics online, only seven respondents shared and commented on the news stories on SNS. Mobile phone calls were widely used to access information on politics in their home country, whereas political content was posted on SNS. However, the latter activity was affected by

limited freedom of expression in the host country and the respondents' own lack of time to engage in activities outside work.

In sum, those with active political past and who still retained their interest in politics, felt a sense of loss during the migration phase for not being able to engage with the politics of their country. Mobile calling, accessing online editions of vernacular dailies and gaining information on social media are the most common means by which respondents kept abreast of the politics of their home country. Print newspapers were widely read, sometimes in addition to mobile/social media while at other times exclusively, by respondents who were not proficient with internet.

Mobile/social media usage in the context of civil society movements

No consistent or goal-oriented attempt to spread the word about any civil society movement was observed among the sample. A common refrain from the respondents was "lack of time," which stopped them from involving in any such activity. Consequently, no offline activity – a demonstration in support of a cause, or a procession with placards – was planned or executed in the host country in support of a social movement in India.

"Only once I signed an e-petition related to the anti-corruption movement. I got the link from the internet... I don't have a Facebook or Orkut account... just a mail account... one day my friend opened that link... then he sent that link to me... yes, he 'shared'... then I also signed."

Mobile phone calling, texting and social networking were the key sources of accessing information and for political communication. Only one respondent ever signed an e-petition in support of a cause of a civil society movement.

"For political and social issues, I respond actively... especially using social media... at the time of Anna Hazare movement [a several days' long strike in India, seeking a strong Ombudsman to check corruption] we supported it using social media.... I haven't prepared any comments on my own, but I have shared... re-shared... On our own, we are unable to develop any ideas. This place and situation are not conducive for that. So, I don't do that... only sharing is doable at present."

Through mobile/social media the respondents took part in the discussions related to social movements in their home country. However, to what extent the respondents actively participated in the discussions was determined by their political dispositions and interest, which also decided their usage of mobile/social media towards this end.

“I have engaged in active discussions related to the anti-corruption movement, here [in our residence] and in our worksites also. I received two-three videos and news clips at that time. I have shared them... I regularly share the links. Isn't it good that we support a noble cause? Don't know about e-signatures.”

In sum, respondents' usage of the mobile/social media in the context of civil society movements in their home country was determined largely by external factors such as freedom of expression in the host country, accessibility and time available outside daily work. Individual-specific factors such as proficiency in using the mobile/social media, political disposition, interest and motivation also decided the usage. Increasingly, individual-specific gains were preferred over supporting a common cause or social welfare-based politics.

Mobile/social media in the context of elections

The ambiguity related to absentee voting in elections in India, as well as the many hurdles they had to overcome in order to register their mandate, deterred all the respondents from voting in elections. Even the most senior worker in the sample (11 years in Singapore) had not voted in any of the elections in India while staying in Singapore. No mobile phone or social media affordance could help them register their mandate in the elections. This clearly demarcates the political activity of migrants into online and offline, the latter not being enriched or supplemented by the former.

“There is opportunity to vote [in the elections in India]... something is there related to Embassy. We did not go for that.... No, not because of lack of interest. But, we have to take one or two days' leave from work. Firstly, there could be problems when we take leave and go... Then one has to take the trouble and go ... So, I decided not to.”

Five respondents who lacked internet browsing skills had to contend themselves with reading print newspapers, which cost six to ten times their actual cost in the respondents' home country. These newspapers arrived in Singapore two days late to its actual date of issue. Other respondents accessed online news on both laptop computers and mobile phones. Laptop computers were generally owned by a single individual, while the internet connection was often shared between a few. Frequency of online news access increased during elections, the ritualistic mode of everyday communication turning to goal-oriented exchanges involving election results and possible coalition of political parties who would form the next government (Carey, 1989). Around half the sample actively used social networking affordance on either laptops and or mobile phones. Although considered to be a good source of information on political and social issues, at least two of the SNS users cautioned against jumping on the bandwagon.

“When main issues emerge, we call home and get updated... call friends and Party workers... we enquire about Party issues... organizational issues, in addition to friendly matters... At present, the most interesting topic is elections in the five States, including UP [Uttar Pradesh].”

“Nowadays, votes can be ‘re-channeled’ using the SNS, using cartoons, etc. There were some cartoons on our candidate [whom I favor] also.”

“Especially for elections at the regional level, more than using mobile phone to receive information, I have used it to make people think favorably towards certain candidates....”

There was also skepticism on the veracity of ‘news’ spread on SNS. The main contention was that SNS caused spread opinionated news clips and comments.

“For political issues, I don’t rely much on Facebook after coming here. What we get through it is very different... [It] is not an exact representation of what a person actually said. If a leader said something, it is not the original matters that appear on Facebook. Fake news abound.”

In contrast, mobile calling affordance (usually, the direct calling option in low-end mobile phones with pre-paid calling cards) was considered a handy tool that could bring a

hidden truth to the fore, which would have not been possible with any other technology.

Respondents considered information available from people closely related to them as far more reliable compared to what they received from traditional media such as newspaper and TV.

“Last year, I watched news about our State election. One candidate won, I knew him, he was from an established party... I was doubtful... So, I called my friend near this constituency. He explained, ‘yeah this is true... actually this fellow... this party lost. The other party had won. But internally they adjusted’... Because, he is one of the leaders’ son, right? So, he is in a big position... so, he shouldn’t lose...”

In sum, mobile calling enjoyed greater popularity among respondents for several reasons, (a) it helped link up with local connections and family back in respondents’ home country and helped in knowing election-related news in a detailed manner; (b) it acted as a mode of verifying the truth behind the news read/viewed on traditional media such as newspaper and TV; and, (c) it helped canvass votes for respondents’ favorite candidates. However, respondents were cautious over the authenticity of news spread on social media.

Migrant political personalities

Based on the political orientation of the respondents and the patterns observed in the leveraging of affordances, four migrant personality types could be identified. These types are not exclusive categories, but traits observed among the respondents in various degrees as they engaged with politics offline in pre-migratory phase and over mobile/social media during the migratory phase. Respondents’ political ambitions in the future have also been considered while identifying these user types.

The old Party mobilizer: As the name suggests, an ‘old Party mobilizer’ had actively involved in Party-based politics in the pre-migration phase. While leading a migrant life, the ‘old Party mobilizers’ retained links with Party cohorts in their home country, an intense manifestation of such a commitment is when they canvass support for candidates

contesting elections in the home country. 'Old Party mobilizers' were avid news consumers, from sources ranging from print newspapers to mobile/social media. They were also open to discussion on political matters, even while leading a politically marginalized existence in the host country.

The disillusioned critic: They were onetime Party activists, who got disillusioned about the political processes during the migratory life. *Disillusioned critics* were of two types: (i) those who reasoned out that their very condition of being migrants was resultant of inefficacious politics of their home country, and (ii) those who wanted to systematically detach themselves from their political past, after gaining upward mobility during their migratory life of few years. The prospects of *disillusioned critics* becoming active in politics after return to homeland were slim. The more they accessed political news on traditional or new media, the stronger their cynicism grew.

The apolitical reveler: They were mostly young people with specialized jobs. Their mobile/social media use was mainly for entertainment and social purposes. They were the least politically-oriented among all the four categories and they rarely took active effort to initiate or participate in a political discussion. Nevertheless, 'apolitical revelers' had advanced Information Communication Technology (ICT) skills and were in possession of advanced mobile devices. Often they trained fellow migrants on the usage of advanced ICTs, thereby acquiring for themselves the status of 'opinion leaders' in the area of advanced ICTs.

The patriot: Patriots were active users of mobile/social media for political purposes. Much of what they accessed from such sources was used in their political discussion with fellow migrants, who included migrants from other countries. Characteristically, they talked high about their home country and often justified official stand of the state with regard to civil unrest and territorial disputes with neighboring countries.

Discussion

The enquiry on cross-border migrants' participation in political activities over digital media sources is becoming increasingly relevant as guest workers move to developed regions in large numbers leaving their family and friends behind in their home countries. Earlier studies have not given sufficient attention to this segment of migrants since they usually lacked economic power and social standing to influence the politics of their home countries. In the host country, these guest workers live politically marginalized lives, under temporary resident statuses. Nevertheless, mobile phone and social media have emerged as affordable and easily accessible channels for them to express their political views.

Analyses of the political orientation of migrants revealed that disinterestedness and cynicism towards political activities were prevalent among a large section of the respondents, although many cherished memories of an active political past. Young respondents who were specialized in their career were found to be less interested in political participation both offline and on social media platforms. This is contrary to the findings of previous studies that have established correlational, if not causal, links between education level and political participation (Nie & Hillygus, 2001; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003). However, the view that education is a causal factor for political participation has been countered by research supporting education only as a proxy to factors affecting political participation (Kam & Palmer, 2008). The type of education received by the migrants in this study needs to be contextualized here. Respondents in this study were involved in specialized vocational training, hence more number of years' of formal education does not translate to greater civic education. It may be noted that the pressures of pursuing a specialized career in life might have prevented young people from taking active interest in political matters in both pre-migration and migration phases. However, a thorough investigation into the effects of cohort

and extent of work specialization on the political interest of migrants is required to verify these preliminary findings.

Many migrants who were active in politics in pre-migration phase were found to have lost their interest in politics after migration. Even the political parties in India did not count on the mandates of this section of migrants. For instance, while it is a usual practice for political parties to set up chapters in immigrant settlements and for politicians to campaign among the expatriates (Guarnizo, Portes & Haller, 2003), no such activity was reported among the population under study. Thus, there is a need to look at the political participation of migrants in the lower strata beyond the traditional categories of voting and campaign participation, whose applicability is restricted to citizens and other resident segments of a society (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009). Taking leveraged affordances of mobile and social media as a vantage point, this study attempted to gain understanding on the trans-border political activities of migrants.

By choosing elections as a context to understand discussions over mobile phone, the study also acknowledges a widespread belief in India that the run up to any election is the only time when ‘aam aadmi’ (Considered a time-tested rhetorical phrase among politicians for ‘common man’, ‘aam aadmi’ has been adopted as the name of a new Party that made rapid inroads into the political sphere in a State legislative election in Delhi in 2013.) critically follows political matters. Similarly, the backdrop of social movements provided the study a vantage point to understand the vibrancy of political discussion among migrants. Moreover, despite the migrants’ temporary absence from their country of birth, the government policies directly affected their family and relatives who were still in their home country.

One special characteristic of modern day politics in secular, democratic states is the emergence of civil society movements based on identities and regional governance issues

(Hall, 1992; Mercer, 1994). However, for those who have witnessed and actively participated in these political developments, migration represents a rupture from their prior involvement in political activities. Similarly, there is also a parallel trend of respondents' decreasing participation in civil and political activities, which is best captured by a falling graph: A graph that was at its peak in the pre-migration period and which steadily fell in the migration period and which would be at its lowest point in its projected future of 'return to homeland.' The factors that helped develop such disinterestedness among migrant population require a deeper investigation. One explanation is, perhaps the hardships of long years of migratory life might have played a major role in inculcating a self-oriented lifestyle and outlook in these workers. This contradiction emerged and re-emerged when respondents narrated stories on what their political life was during their migratory life: They made constant attempts to locate their toilsome daily lives within the rhetoric of an 'economically growing India.' Thus, the contention of one group of scholars in transnationalism studies that the powers of the state have weakened with increasing migratory movements (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) needs to be understood in context. For the migrant population in this study it amounts to disenfranchisement and increased 'virtualization' of political thinking. On the one hand, host society discourages any kind of meaningful engagement of migrant workers in the political sphere using measures such as prohibition, ostracization and marginalization. While on the other, an aspirational migrant responds to the prohibitive atmosphere by distancing himself from anything sensitive or volatile, but also by acculturating to the aspirational lifestyle of the host society. With individual differences, a multiplicity of meanings were derived by migrants with varying ideologies, political disposition, motivation and interest, which manifested as different political personality types among them. From the perspective of technology adoption and usage, these political personalities validated that different symbolic

meanings were derived by users subscribing to a range of political ideologies and with different socio-economic backgrounds.

Similarly, the findings of this study critique a prominent line of research in new media and democracy. Social networking has been found to be a booster for representative democracy (Jenkins, Thorburn, & Seawell, 2003). Treating the web networks as opportunity structures, scholars consider that the social ties formed along these networks have “significant implications for the revitalization of representative democracy in civil society” (Yuan, 2007, p. 668). Findings of this study complicate the social situation and reveal that given the liminal existence of migrants in a host country that espouses limited freedom of expression, democratic potential of social ties developed and strengthened using mobile and social media networks remained low. In the contexts of both elections and civil society movements, calling, messaging, sharing of news stories/posts and commenting were the most commonly used mobile/social media affordances. However, no relationship between the level of utilization of social media affordances and migrants’ political interest could be observed. A respondent might be an avid user of laptop, internet and/or smart phone, yet could remain neutral and disinterested about political matters. On the other hand, migrants with no presence on social media sought news through print media and showed interest in participating in the politics of their homeland. Further investigations are required to understand this complex phenomenon, wherein neither higher education nor usage of social media has positive relationship with the political engagement of migrants. Moreover, in order to achieve a more inclusive meaning for the concept of ‘empowerment with the help of ICTs’ (Qiu, 2009; Lin & Sun, 2010), political activities of migrants need greater attention in research studies.

Comparative advantage of direct mobile phone calling

Direct calling using pre-paid calling cards, usually with low-end mobile phones, still remained the handy tool for an average migrant worker to connect with his home country. This suggested that despite the rapid ongoing diffusion of smartphones and advanced mobile handsets, an average migrant worker resorted to one-on-one mobile phone calling while talking to family and relatives in the home country. In the context of political communication, mobile phone calling was also used to verify the truth behind the news that migrants accessed on television or a video on internet. This healthy democratic ideal propelled the status of mobile phone as a major tool for those who wanted to go beyond what was readily available and visible through the mainstream media. The respondents sometimes distanced themselves from state institutions as well as from institutionalized (mainstream media) and even non-institutionalized (e.g. the information via YouTube videos) supporters of democracy. Instead, they relied more on the vocal testimony of those who were known to them. Mobile phone was thus an affordable means for an oral vindication of the truth behind a local event in the respondents' country of origin. This reflects the relationship between mobile phones and trust as found in earlier studies that compared business transactions and communication among friends (Molony, 2007). Information over mobile phones does not elicit the same amount of trust as compared to face-to-face interaction in business contexts, whereas among friends there was sufficient trust in mobile phone interactions. In the present study, the respondents were using the personal network circles to receive news from the home country. Hence, they accorded greater trust for information over mobile phone. This tendency of increased trustworthiness for information from personal network circles also suggests tele-cocooning, albeit as an inverse relationship (Kobayashi & Boase, 2014). Citing the case of Japan, Kobayashi and Boase (2014) argue that even though general trust level in the country is less

the mobile phone diffusion is high, which motivated them to infer that texting over mobile phone “brings about tele-cocooning which narrows their [the youth’s] social scope and lowers the level of general trust” (p. 682). Future research can explore the relationship between trust and tele-cocooning in the context of migrants’ political communication on mobile phone. Similarly, studies exploring migrants’ friendship ties in host and home countries have highlighted ethnic and work-related features as influencing the formation of such ties (Lin & Sun, 2010; Thompson, 2009). The findings of this study extend the scope of earlier studies and show that political discussion is one key element in the formation and sustenance of friendship ties among migrants.

Neither a typology of political communication using mobile phone nor a pattern of mobile phone use based on the respondents’ demographics was discernible from the data. However, a behavior much closer to the democratic practice in offline space was observed at the time of election: Some respondents used the calling affordance of the mobile phone to seek vote for candidates whom they individually knew. Although not widely practised by everyone in the sample, this behavior is worth examining in future research in order to understand the role of opinion leaders in political discussion among migrants.

Overall, the respondents adopted a trial and error method of mobile phone and internet use. This involved different phases of disillusionment and problem-solving, decided by their limitations in making political interventions, pressures of employment, available skill sets for using a communication technology, and above all, their financial resources. Such usage patterns of mobile phone support the constructivist tradition of technology appropriation that emphasizes the role of human agency and social processes in the shaping of technology (Pinch, 1992). However, there is hardly any evidence to suggest that an existing political orientation of a respondent changed with the usage of an affordance or as a result of engaging with a particular type of content available from it. There has been

disillusionment about mainstream media and information disseminated via SNS, following which various affordances of mobile/social media were trialed and tested and finally fitted into the usage repertoire in the backdrop of each social issue. This led the workers to categorize the affordances into different utilitarian categories: SNS for maintaining contact circle, mobile calling for knowing the truth of local news, etc. These rudimentary patterns can help guide future research in this area.

The study participates in the political transnationalism debate on whether the state's powers have weakened among migrants (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) or political transnationalism has, by its very definition, defied the national boundaries (Baubock, 2003). Based on the findings, it may be argued that the Indian state's power has remained weak as it fails to ensure participation of low-skilled migrants in politics, elections and policy matters involving state institutions. However, this vacuum is being filled by migrants through a virtual engagement with the politics of their home country, and also with regional governance issues. 'Methodological nationalism' that treats migrants as belonging to a bounded national container society also stands rejected with the delineation of the political personality types (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Rather than bounded by a unifying political imagination, the low-skilled migrants from India in Singapore had diverse ways of identifying and participating in the politics of their homeland, often facilitated by the mediated spaces.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to gain a descriptive understanding on how mobile and social media facilitated transnational exchanges of a political nature among low-skilled migrants from India in Singapore. It went beyond political participation analyzed in a traditional way, as voting and campaign participation, and explored migrants' political activities in digital spaces. Two contexts were chosen in order to guide the investigation: At the time of elections

in migrants' homeland and in the backdrop of various social movements. Respondents in the study leveraged the affordances of calling, messaging, sharing news stories/posts and commenting frequently. Certain affordances were accorded higher credibility than others in the context of specific issues (e.g. calling one's friends over mobile phone to verify the truth of YouTube videos).

The political participation of blue-collar migrants in the study was limited to exchanges on mobile/ social media; the interventions did not ever lead to any offline political activity in the host country. Unlike some transnational Indian communities in Europe and US who hold street demonstrations in the wake of social or political developments in their homeland, no Indian migrant worker demonstrated in host country Singapore. Their precarious statuses in the host country, lack of financial resources and human capital for organizing events, as well as their marginalized livings in the social and political spheres stopped them from airing their opinions publicly in offline space. A goal-oriented communication behavior noticed was their usage of calling affordance to seek vote for candidates during elections in their homeland. Whether such mobile phone canvassing had direct or indirect impact on the results of any election can be a topic for further research. Given the non-randomness of the sample and the low sample size, generalization of the results to other migrant sections and political conditions should be done with caution. Nevertheless, the emphasis in this study on the external conditions determining the extent of political participation of migrants advances scholarship in the field of both new media and political studies.

The study specifically addressed the problems of migrants at the lower strata and their technology use in the context of political transnationalism. With the support of evidence, it opposed the techno-deterministic approaches towards the study of ICTs and argued that individual-specific realities decided how the technology was appropriated and meanings were

created by users. It adopted a combination of approaches from social constructivism to symbolic interactionism and interpretive techniques to substantiate that internal factors such as political dispositions, motivations and interest of the migrants interacted with their technology skills and accessibility to determine how they used mobile/social media for political purposes. It adds to the understanding of political transnationalism of migrants with limited resources and lack of political rights, or in other words, the transnationalism of those who straddle between a parliamentary electoral democracy (India) and an authoritative democracy (Singapore). While a section of migrants actively engaged in the politics of their home country using mobile and social media even in the face of adverse external conditions, others systematically withdrew from political discussion and diverted their attention on mobile/social media to non-political issues and entertainment.

Based on this evidence, a few recommendations to the governments of both migrant-sending and -receiving countries may be made. Firstly, a public sphere that promotes discussion on politics should be accessible to the migrant population in the host country, both in the offline and online spaces. Secondly, while information communication technology platforms may be utilized to introduce absentee voting among migrants, regular awareness and training programmes should be organized for helping less technologically-proficient users learn the skills. Ensuring fearless exchange of ideas is decisive in nation-building and secular democratic governance. One reason behind the recent rioting of migrant workers in Singapore is their lack of say in matters affecting their own lives (“Singapore’s angry”, 2013). Hence, the importance of allowing these migrants more spaces to air their opinion is higher than ever before.

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