

# Young voters have numbers to set India on new path

By Katy Daigle

The Associated Press

**B**ANGALORE, India — What do India's youth want from their politicians? Clean water, universal healthcare, women's safety, food for all, better education, less corruption, better roads, more investment, and, above all, more jobs.

In short, they want it all, and they want it fast.

As India goes through its weekslong election process, the enormous population of ambitious, tech-savvy, and politically engaged youths has great potential to sway the outcome. More than 378 million of India's 814 million eligible voters are between 18 and 35 years old, according to census records.

And while the youth vote is a diverse and unpredictable bloc in a country of 1.2 billion people, India's young voters have a world view that in many ways is strikingly different than their parents' and grandparents'. They have grown up in a time of enormous international opportunity, technological innovation, and high-speed economic growth.

"Our parents believed you can be happy only with financial security," said Sushant Bangru, a 21-year-old biology major at the Indian Institute of Sciences in Bangalore. "But we know that passion and knowledge is above money. It's about doing what you love to do."

Nowhere is the power of India's youth more clear than amid the bright cafés and technology companies of Bangalore, seen as the economy's beating heart and brain trust. With 63 percent of its population under 25, Bangalore is one of India's youngest cities.

Interviews with dozens of young adults in Bangalore suggest that the most pressing priorities are financial: more jobs and better economic opportunities.

India's once red-hot economic growth has slowed in recent years, after a decade under a coalition led by the Congress party. With many worried about finding work, the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has honed in on that weak spot, presenting itself as a purely capitalist, pro-business party. Congress, led mostly by the Nehru-Gandhi family since the country's socialist beginnings in 1947, is considered more of a welfare party, mixing capitalist reforms with handouts for the poor.

The main national parties in the



**YOUNG ELECTORATE.** Indian voters wait in queues to cast their votes during the first phase of elections in Dibrugarh, in the northeastern state of Assam, India. With 814 million eligible voters, India is voting in stages over a five-week period in a staggered approach made necessary by the country's vast size. Voters are choosing representatives for the 543-seat lower house of parliament. (AP Photo/Altan Qadri)

states of India's remote northeast. The vote now moves south into mainland India's 22 other states and territories.

Voting is geographically staggered to give millions of police and paramilitary forces time to move around as voters cast their ballots. Whether or not the youth vote swings the result, analysts agree their participation has turned India's political scene on its head.

"Indian democracy is at a peculiar stage of maturity or evolution. There has been a particular way democracy has been functioning for the last 30 years, and there is a backlash against it," said Jagdeep Chhokar, who heads the Association for Democratic Reforms in New Delhi. "With all the talk of the young electorate, the political parties are now scrambling to do whatever they can to grab young voters."

The engagement of India's youth in politics reached a pinnacle three years ago, as they joined urban middle-class protesters marching in protests against endemic corruption. Their demands for honest governance and an independent anti-corruption watchdog led to anti-graft legislation and the formation of the AAP, which has become the third national party.

The AAP delivered a stunning upset in Delhi's December regional election, launching Kejriwal to national renown and a 49-day stint as Delhi's chief minister. He quit the post, saying the entrenched political system prevented him from enacting real reforms. Instead, he said his scrappy party would focus on national elections and on denouncing deep graft in Congress and BJP.

Some voters say they're already disillusioned by politics and unhappy with the candidates. But they plan to cast their ballots nonetheless, taking advantage of a new choice on the ballot — for "None of the Above."

running are heavily courting young voters, launching social media campaigns and introducing new candidates from outside traditional political circles. Rank-and-file members of the BJP are up in arms over the party replacing party stalwarts with dozens of untested candidates.

Congress party leaders have reportedly quarrelled over letting younger members take more control, even as 43-year-old Gandhi family heir Rahul emerges as the most likely prime ministerial candidate. Despite his youth and dimples, Rahul Gandhi is seen as having failed to connect with many young Indians, instead appearing privileged, aloof, and out of touch with everyday Indians.

The upstart Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) — or Common Man's Party — has drawn in droves of students and other young voters attracted to party leader Arvind Kejriwal's outsider status and his anti-corruption platform.

Anxious to pursue their dreams, young people are particularly concerned with India's ability to add jobs. India added fewer than 3 million jobs between 2005 and 2010, far below the 1 million needed each month to keep up with student matriculation and the growing ambitions of Indians.

India's first-time voters came of age in an era of economic reforms that eased

socialist-leaning policies and allowed more imports and foreign investment. Annual per-capita income nearly tripled between 2002 and 2010, while India moved from a country mostly concerned with securing food and shelter to one in which priorities are jobs, electricity, and infrastructure.

But the riches have rolled out unevenly, creating a conspicuous wealth gap that has fuelled frustrations by putting lavish lifestyles in close proximity with the 400 million Indians — a quarter of the country's population — living in poverty and making less than \$1.25 per day.

Those gaps are even more visible and public with the technology explosion. Twenty years ago, people had access to only a single state-run television channel and most had no telephone. Today, there are more than 200 television channels — with some 40 devoted to news alone — while three in four Indians has a cell phone.

"We have no toilets in my home village, but everybody has a smartphone, and we all check every day for what's happening in the campaign," said 22-year-old Hanamanthray Biradar in the southern state of Karnataka, where Bangalore is located.

The massive election is held in April and May. Ballots will be counted May 16. The first two days of voting took place in the six

## South Koreans crave Asia's smelliest fish

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making hongoe is to put the fish on a bed of hay in a clay pot, pile more hay on top, and leave it.

Learning to love, or at least tolerate, what many consider the smelliest fish in Asia, takes perseverance. Fans commonly say that if you try it four times, you'll be hooked. Nonfans may be mystified by how anyone could meet that threshold.

"It's a freaking punch in the face," said Joe McPherson, the founder of ZenKimchi, a Korean food blog, and an eventual devotee of the fish. "Like everyone else, I gagged the first time."

Natives of the southwest say hongoe should be eaten plain. They sometimes complain that the copious garnishes provided at restaurants disguise the taste and smell.

Most first-timers, however, tend to embrace all the extras they can, creating a hongoe "sandwich" with garnishes that can include red pepper paste, salty mini shrimp, raw garlic, chili salt, slices of fatty boiled pork, and some extraordinarily strong kimchi.

Even with "some of the most powerful flavors in the world to put up against it ... it does not cover up the flavor at all," McPherson said.

The extremely chewy texture — spongy flesh and hard cartilage — also makes for tough swallowing. And the smell of ammonia is so powerful it lingers for hours on clothes, skin, and hair.



**PUNGENT & POPULAR.** Skates are displayed at a fish market in Mokpo, South Korea. Learning to love, or at least tolerate, what many consider the smelliest fish in Asia, takes perseverance. Fans commonly say that if you try it four times, you'll be hooked. Nonfans may be mystified by how anyone could meet that threshold. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

The second time, if there is one, is usually a little better.

One trick is to inhale through the mouth and exhale through the nose while eating. This helps fight the smell some and also intensifies a surprising tingling and cooling — almost minty — sensation in the mouth, throat, and face.

There are various theories explaining the food's popularity. Some Koreans describe their craving as similar to the desire for a cigarette: You want it despite its obvious negatives. McPherson says the fish is also valued for its interesting texture and the sensation it produces in

the mouth — two things that can be as important to Koreans as flavor. There's also something convivial about hongoe restaurants, where large amounts of strong Korean booze are as ubiquitous as the fish.

Still, while some Korean restaurants in the United States serve hongoe, it's unlikely to catch on except "in hardcore foodie circles," McPherson said. "I can see maybe college fraternities hazing their freshmen with this, but it's very much a 'dare' food. Like live octopus."

AP writer Jung-yoon Choi contributed to this story.

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