

# **From Protest to Policy: Examining Youth Participation in Political Decision-Making in India**

**Subham Tripathy**

Research Scholar, School of Political Science, Gangadhar Meher University, Sambalpur,  
Odisha, India  
subhmatripathyjiku@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

*Empowering young decision-makers isn't just beneficial, it's essential for India's democratic future. India's youth, over 65% of the population carry enormous potential to shape the nation's political landscape. Yet, systemic hurdles, financial struggles, and the stereotype of inexperience often sideline them from decision-making. Even so, youth activism, digital campaigns, and emerging young leaders are redefining political engagement. This paper delves into their evolving role in governance, spotlighting both challenges and breakthroughs. It highlights figures like Moji Riba in Arunachal Pradesh, Chirag Paswan's rise, and K. Annamalai's transition from IPS officer to BJP leader. Beyond elections, young voices are driving change through activism and digital platforms. To boost youth participation, the study advocates for lower candidacy age, legislative youth quotas, financial backing for young leaders, and stronger political education.*

**Keywords:** Youth Political Participation, Decision-Making in Governance, Political Leadership, Electoral Representation, Youth Activism

## **Introduction**

India finds itself at a unique demographic advantage, with a significant portion of the population under the age of 35 (Singh 2016). This youthful energy holds great potential for driving political and social change. Yet, realizing this potential isn't without its hurdles. Understanding how young people participate in governance, shape policies, and contribute to decision-making is essential to harnessing this demographic dividend and ensuring inclusive national progress. Despite the promise, young Indians often find their political influence limited by structural barriers and entrenched social norms (Foa and Mounk 2019). Traditional power structures can make it challenging for them to actively participate or have a meaningful say in policy decisions. Even with the rise of digital platforms and social movements, where youth can voice their opinions and rally support, turning these efforts into tangible policy shifts remains a steep climb. Social media has undoubtedly created spaces for mobilizing against regimes, but making these movements translate into real governance changes is still a complex task (Youmans and York 2012).

This article aims to delve into how Indian youth engage in politics while identifying the obstacles that hinder their participation in governance. The core question guiding this analysis is: How does youth involvement impact political decision-making in India, and what structural barriers hinder their active role in governance? Through a qualitative approach, drawing from secondary sources like government reports, academic papers, and news stories, the study will paint a clearer picture of youth engagement in Indian politics. By examining case studies of youth-led political initiatives and emerging young leaders, the analysis will shed light on existing challenges and explore pathways to empower the younger generation. Addressing power imbalances and creating more inclusive spaces is key to fostering meaningful youth participation (Zeinali et al. 2020). This study seeks to highlight why integrating young voices into civic politics is essential.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, drawing on secondary data analysis and case study methodology to examine the role of young leaders in decision-making. To structure this analysis, the research introduces the Y-Impact Model, a framework designed to capture the diverse ways in which youth engage with governance. As shown in ‘Figure 1’, the model identifies four key channels of influence—Institutional Access, Grassroots Mobilization, Digital & Media Power, and Policy & Governance Impact; each representing a distinct avenue through which young leaders shape political and policy outcomes. By mapping these pathways, the study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of how youth participation extends beyond traditional political structures, demonstrating their capacity to drive change through both formal institutions and grassroots activism.



*Figure 1: The Y-Impact Model Maps Youth Influence*  
*Author's Contribution*

The relevance of the Y-Impact Model in real-world political dynamics is illustrated through five key youth leaders, three from India and two global leaders. Moji Riba's advocacy for indigenous rights in Arunachal Pradesh demonstrates how grassroots mobilization and policy advocacy can influence governance beyond conventional politics. Chirag Paswan's leadership in the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) highlights the role of young politicians in reshaping party dynamics and policy priorities within institutional frameworks. K. Annamalai's transition from an IPS officer to a BJP leader showcases the intersection of institutional access and digital influence, emphasizing how social media and grassroots outreach amplify youth political voices. Globally, Sanna Marin's tenure as Finland's youngest Prime Minister underscores the effectiveness of digital engagement and transparency in governance, while Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's success in leveraging social media and grassroots mobilization exemplifies how young leaders can drive progressive change. Analysing these figures through the Y-Impact Model reveals common patterns in youth leadership while recognizing the unique socio-political contexts that shape their decision-making roles.

## **Findings**

### **Current State of Youth Engagement in Indian Politics:**

#### **Electoral Participation**

India's youth, accounting for more than 65% of the population, have the power to significantly shape the nation's political landscape. Yet, systemic hurdles, financial limitations, and perceptions of inexperience often keep them from decision-making roles. Despite this, young activists, digital movements, and emerging leaders are changing how political engagement looks today. From Moji Riba's community work in Arunachal Pradesh to Chirag Paswan's political rise and K. Annamalai's transition from IPS to BJP leader, their stories show how youth impact policy beyond elections, especially through activism and online platforms. Strengthening youth involvement means lowering the candidacy age, establishing legislative quotas, offering financial aid, and promoting political education—steps vital for India's democratic progress.

#### **Non-Electoral Political Engagement**

Student unions in India, especially those in well-known institutions like JNU, DU, and AMU, have long been at the forefront of shaping political discourse and challenging authority. They give students a space to speak up on social and political matters, often pushing for change and questioning existing power dynamics. Whether it's the Nirbhaya protests, climate strikes, or anti-corruption rallies, young people have consistently shown their commitment to social justice and accountability (Jeffrey and Dyson 2014). Student activism not only expresses dissent but also drives collective efforts to highlight important issues and push for systemic reforms (Bowman and Pickard 2021). Demonstrations and organized actions have proven

effective in advocating for change, offering a way for young voices to make an impact (Ellis 2008). Through these movements, students actively participate in public debates and assert their role in governance.

### Digital Activism and Political Awareness

Social media has become a game-changer for political mobilization among Indian youth. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube make it easy for young people to connect, share ideas, and organize actions with others who think the same way (Saud, Mashud, and Ida 2020). They're not just spaces for socializing—they're places where opinions get voiced, debates happen, and leaders get called out. With the rise of youth influencers leading political conversations, it's clear that the way young people access and share political information is shifting. Instead of relying solely on traditional sources, they're increasingly looking to their peers for insights and opinions on important topics (Varol et al. 2014). Social media's role as a tool for mass communication is undeniable, offering a fresh and dynamic way for young voices to shape political discourse.

## Key Barriers to Youth Political Participation

### Institutional Barriers

Setting a minimum age for running in elections keeps many talented young people out of formal politics in India, limiting their ability to represent their peers. On top of that, the absence of mentorship and financial support makes it even harder for aspiring youth leaders to break into the political scene. They often struggle to find the guidance and resources they need to navigate the complexities of Indian politics (Stockemer and Sundström 2018).

### Societal and Cultural Barriers

Young people are often seen as too inexperienced or immature for politics, which can make it tough for them to gain credibility or move up the ranks. Established political figures and even the public sometimes overlook them. For young women in India, the hurdles are even higher (Varghese 2025). They often deal with societal expectations, family pressure, and discrimination within political spaces, making leadership roles harder to reach. Social media, though, offers a way to connect with young, educated middle-class voters (Rodrigues and Niemann 2019).

### Economic and Educational Constraints

Election campaigns can be incredibly expensive, and for many young Indians—especially those from less privileged backgrounds—it's just not feasible. Competing with seasoned candidates who have money and connections feels almost impossible without financial support (Sahoo 2023). On top of that, schools and colleges rarely teach political education, leaving many young people without the know-how to get involved or understand their rights as citizens. This lack of guidance makes meaningful political participation even more challenging.

## Case Studies of Youth Political Leadership in India and Beyond

<b>Moji Riba</b>	Arunachal Pradesh, (India)	Founded the Dipa Congress Committee (1946), mobilized youth for political participation, symbolized Arunachal's integration into the national movement.	<b>Grassroots Mobilization</b> (community organizing, political awareness) <b>Institutional Access</b> (role in independence movement)
<b>Chirag Paswan</b>	Bihar, (India)	Leveraged political legacy, used digital platforms to engage youth, positioned LJP as a key player in Bihar.	<b>Institutional Access</b> (party leadership), <b>Digital &amp; Media Power</b> (youth outreach through social media)
<b>K. Annamalai</b>	Tamil Nadu, (India)	Transitioned from IPS to BJP leadership, mobilized youth, shaped BJP's youth-centric policies.	<b>Institutional Access</b> (party leadership), <b>Digital &amp; Media Power</b> (online political mobilization)
<b>Sanna Marin</b>	Finland, (Global)	Youngest Prime Minister of Finland, focused on digital governance and transparent leadership.	<b>Institutional Access</b> (executive leadership), <b>Digital &amp; Media Power</b> (citizen engagement)
<b>Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez</b>	USA, (Global)	Used social media and grassroots campaigns to push progressive policies, engaged young voters in political discourse.	<b>Grassroots Mobilization</b> (activism and policy advocacy), <b>Digital &amp; Media Power</b> (social media influence)

*Table 1: Case Study of Youth Leaders*

*Source: Author's Contribution*

*'Table 1' shows the tabular representation of the following case studies on the youth leaders*

**Moji Riba (Arunachal Pradesh) – A Pioneer in Youth Political Mobilization:**

Moji Riba's early activism made a lasting impact on youth political engagement in Arunachal Pradesh, sparking a sense of political awareness that still shapes the region today. Back in 1946, when he founded the Dipa Congress Committee, Riba took the lead in inspiring young people to think critically about current issues and actively participate in democracy. His symbolic act of raising India's national flag in Arunachal Pradesh marked the state's connection to the independence movement, strengthening national identity and motivating young people to take charge of their future (Mahaprashasta 2009).

Chirag Paswan (Bihar) – Balancing Legacy and Youth Appeal:

Chirag Paswan's leadership of the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) shows how young leaders can build on their family legacy while also connecting with a new generation of voters. As the son of the late Union Minister Ram Vilas Paswan, Chirag stepped into a prominent political role, using it to advocate for marginalized communities in Bihar and establish the LJP as an influential force in state politics. He's been particularly effective at engaging first-time voters through social media and digital outreach, proving how vital it is to adapt to modern communication methods to reach younger audiences (Singh 2024).

K. Annamalai – From IPS Officer to Tamil Nadu BJP Chief:

K. Annamalai's journey from being a decorated IPS officer to emerging as a youth political leader shows how people from diverse backgrounds can step into politics and bring fresh ideas with them. His leadership style leans heavily on mobilizing youth and connecting through social media, reflecting a calculated effort to engage young minds and build a strong support base for the BJP in Tamil Nadu. By focusing on youth-centric policies, he's been instrumental in shaping the party's direction, proving how young leaders can make a real impact (The Hindu 2022).

Sanna Marin (Finland):

Sanna Marin made history as Finland's youngest Prime Minister, embodying the rise of young leaders taking on major roles and introducing fresh ideas. She's known for using digital outreach to stay connected with citizens, promoting transparency and fostering a more inclusive approach to governance. Her leadership style reflects a genuine effort to engage the public and make them feel involved in the political process (BBC News 2019).

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (USA):

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has shown how effectively young leaders can use social media and grassroots efforts to shape political conversations and drive progressive change. Her knack for building personal connections with voters and rallying support around her policies has made her a significant force in American politics. She's become an inspiration for young activists globally, proving that social media can be a powerful tool for political engagement (Lewinstein 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Youth involvement in decision-making isn't just a side note in modern politics, it is becoming a core element. We see this reflected in leaders like Moji Riba, Chirag Paswan, and K. Annamalai in India, along with global figures such as Sanna Marin and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. They bring new ideas, tech-savvy approaches, and strong grassroots connections into the political sphere. The Y-Impact Model highlights how youth engagement unfolds through Institutional Access, Grassroots Mobilization, and Digital & Media Power, which together shape governance and policy. With digital platforms transforming political dialogue and grassroots movements amplifying young voices, it's clear that their impact on governance can't be overlooked. To build a sustainable, youth-driven political future, governments, political

parties, and civil societies need to open up more inclusive spaces. Real progress means going beyond symbolic representation, giving young leaders a real voice in policymaking and leadership.

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