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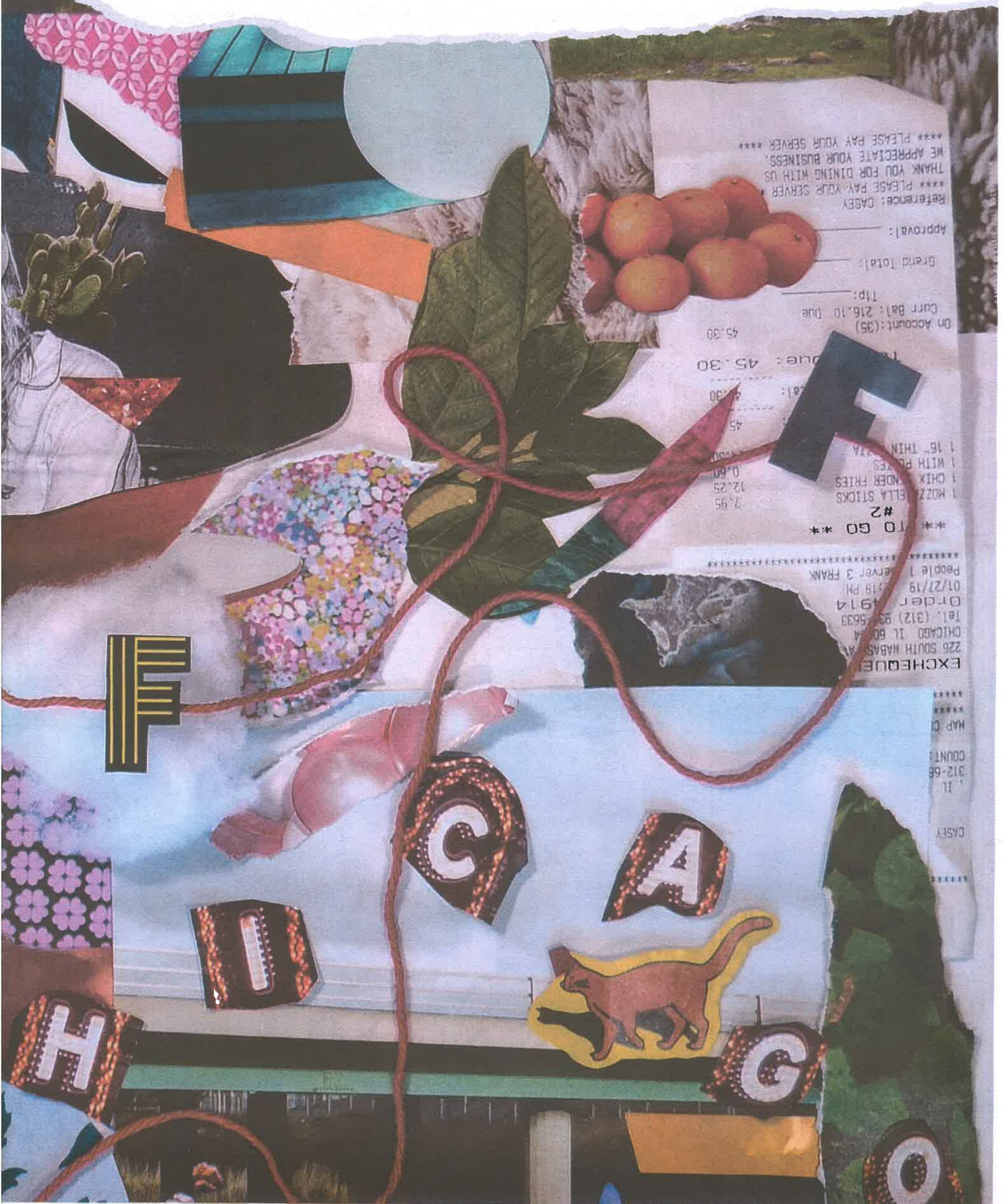
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Passport to the Polls

Indian citizens living abroad struggle to exercise voting rights

by Karishma Dotia

This February, the Election Commission of India clarified that Non-Resident Indian (NRI) voters have not been extended the right to cast their votes online in the upcoming national elections. According to estimates from the Ministry of External Affairs of India, there are about 31 million NRIs living in different countries across the world. Currently, NRIs can vote, but only in person. They must register online for Voter IDs, go to their constituencies back in India with the original passports issued to them when they had moved abroad, and cast their votes. However, to be eligible to vote, they must also possess a valid Indian passport. Most importantly, they must be at least 18 years of age as of January 1 of the year in which the electoral roll is published.

Many of the Indian undergraduates at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) come to the United States when they are too young to vote in Indian elections. Once they are of voting age, many aren't able to go home and vote because the elections are usually held between early April and late May, when these students are busy preparing for final critiques and year-end submissions. This year's election is scheduled to be held in seven phases, beginning on April 11, when preparation for finals is at its peak at SAIC. The last phase happens on May 19, right after the semester ends, when international students are about to leave the United States for the summer.

Amay Kataria (MFA 2020), a student in the Art and Technology department, told F Newsmagazine, "I feel I have no say," adding that he feels "disconnected from the Indian political system and my country because I won't be able to exercise my rights in this election term as well." The 2019 Indian general election overlaps with his college schedule and graduation ceremony. Having left India at the age of 18 to pursue higher education, Amay has not been able to vote in the elections in the past 11 years.

Amay adds,

"If there was a proxy system of voting in place for NRIs like me, who may not be able to fly back home during the election season, we would feel more included and have our say in our country's progress."

Proxy voting is a system where a vote is cast by one person as a representative of another, when the latter is not present in their constituency during the election period. In India, this system is currently in place only for Service Personnel. The 2017 Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill may allow NRI voters to avail the proxy voting service. This Bill has passed in the Lok Sabha — House of the People — but is yet to be signed by the Rajya Sabha — Council of States — after which the provisions in this bill could be enacted. This would permit an NRI to choose an adult relative or friend who is registered in their constituency as their proxy. The proxy can then cast the NRI citizen's vote on their behalf.

In an interview with the Arabian Stories, Dr. Shashi Tharoor, an Indian Parliamentarian and Chairman of Indian External Affairs Ministry Standing Committee, said that even if the bill does pass in the Rajya Sabha, NRIs will not be able to vote in the 2019 general elections. "The government would have had to frame the various rules and procedures to oversee proxy voting," Tharoor said. "That would have been a time-consuming process and therefore, I do not believe that they would have been ready to implement it for the 2019 elections."

An SAIC Liberal Arts faculty member from India, who requested anonymity, feels skeptical about the proxy system. They have been in the United States since 2011 and told F

News, "I would be more comfortable voting in person — maybe at a nearby Indian embassy in

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the city — where I could physically cast a vote without worrying about how my proxy vote in India could be manipulated by another person."

In the last general election to choose a new Indian government, about 830 million citizens were eligible to vote and more than 550 million people cast their ballots. This term, election authorities speculate the number will swell to 900 million. There are about 31 million Non-Resident Indians who can only cast their votes if they fly back home.

The faculty member at SAIC also feels that of the many Indians who live abroad, few permanently return to India or plan to anytime soon. Many left India when the country had very different cultural, political, and social landscapes than it does now. With outdated ideas of the contemporary political scene in India, the faculty member adds that it can be a major drawback for NRIs to impose "idealizations of the past through their votes."

Sujit Joshi, a graduate student in the SAIC's Designed Objects department, feels the same way. Joshi explained that NRIs returning to vote "often would not necessarily have the context of current societal situations and political representatives to decide for their constituencies." However, he believes that an online voting system at a nearby Indian embassy might be an effective way to ensure that NRIs — who frequently travel back to India — can exercise their rights.

Currently, flying back to India is the only option for NRIs who are registered to vote. According to the electoral roll data of 2014, only 11,846 of the estimated 10 million NRIs were accounted as "overseas electors," or NRIs who go home and vote. In the last three years, the number of overseas voters has jumped to 24,348, though it is still a minority of the total NRI population. With current estimation of the NRI population at 31 million people, many look to the Indian government to address this growing issue.



Illustration by Catherine Cao

Karishma Dotia (BFA 2020) is a student in the Designed Objects department. She seeks to solve word problems, but hates math problems.