

Youth : The difficulties and challenges of defining this constituency and addressing their needs

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Mohan, aged 24, belongs to a scheduled caste and works on a construction site. He has been working since he was a child of eight. He was married two years ago and has a daughter. Mohan sends most of his earnings to his village for his wife, child and aged parents. He knows no other trade and has very little leisure.

Praveen, aged 19, has just begun his studies in a medical college where his father paid a hefty sum as donation to get him admission. He does not want to be a doctor, but since his father owns a nursing home, he has been told that he has no choice. He wants to be a film maker, yet realises that this will be an unfulfilled dream.

Priya, now 21, has a few months to go before her final year degree exams. In the meantime, a “good” proposal has come for her and her parents feel that she should not let go of this opportunity. The boy is studying in the USA. Priya, does not want to go to the US, she feels rooted here with her family and friends. She also wants to finish her degree and then study social work as she wants to do something for the underprivileged. Her desires are disregarded by the elders who are convinced they are acting in her best interests. In the end she gives in and hopes for the best.

Salim, aged 24, is from a small town. For the past two years, having finished his graduation, he has been trying very hard to find a job. All his efforts are to no avail as he is not able to find anything in his town and he cannot move to the city and compete with the urbane English speaking boys who somehow manage to get at least marketing or sales jobs. Being a Muslim, he faces an added disadvantage.

Anjali, aged 19, has been a domestic worker from the age of 12. She is sometimes sexually harassed by her employers. Yet she has no choice but to do domestic work. Her father abandoned her mother and Anjali has been the major breadwinner for her mother and little brother. She sees to it that her brother attends school regularly and has pinned all her hopes on him.

Kishore aged 29, is an adivasi whose lands are threatened with submergence if a dam is built. Since his parents have no land, they are ready to accept the rehabilitation being offered by the government and move to the resettlement area. Yet Kishore knows that the dam itself is a disaster and realises that it should be opposed. Now the richer youth from the area are ridiculing him for being willing to accept rehabilitation. He does not see any future in living as per the tribal traditions and feels it is better to change but does not know what is the best thing to do.

Radhika, now 17, lives in a big city in one of its numerous chawls. She was taken out of school two years ago. She blames this on her body and that fact that she is female. She

does not know if she is a girl or a woman as she is treated differently at different times. While she is considered old enough to be married soon, her opinion is not sought. She watches other better off girls going to college and envies them their camaraderie, their fashionable clothes, their mobility and access to knowledge.

While names have been changed, these examples represent real people, people who are loosely referred to as youth. What do all these young people have in common? Does their “youthhood” mean that they share similar problems and dilemmas? Does their being young bestow on them similar privileges? Can youth be addressed without looking at the social and political context in which we live?

Youth : A concept that defies definition?

To begin with let us look at how youth as a concept has been defined and understood. Most often, the concept of youth is defined purely in terms of age. In fact the Ministry of Human Resource Development categorically includes all those in the ages between 15 and 35 as youth, though those between 18 and 25 are perceived as a special category of youth going through a critical stage. According to this classification, there are 35 million youth in the country. On the other hand, the 1997 Draft Youth Policy (DYP) seeks to include those in the age group of 10 –14 into the category youth. In both cases, age has been the predisposing factor.

The Oxford Dictionary however defines youth as “ the period between childhood and full adulthood” and makes no mention of specific ages. In disciplines like developmental psychology and sociology a number of efforts have been made to define youth on the basis of age and other social, educational, psychological, economic and cultural factors. All these efforts basically grapple with the same questions i.e. when and how does the phase of childhood end and that of full manhood / womanhood begin? On what criteria does this depend and who defines them? How can we measure the actual number of youth in the country?

Though every individual goes through a period of youth, the concept of youthhood itself is historically a new phenomenon very much linked to the processes of modernisation, industrialisation and the concomitant changes in family structures. It is within these processes that the roles of children, youth, adults and the elderly have been defined. The social function of youthhood has therefore evolved as a preparatory phase for adulthood and integration into the development paradigm of each society.

On the ground, in Indian society, those in the age group of 15 to 25 are commonly considered to be youth though legally adulthood, with the right to vote and right to marry, is conferred at the age of 18 itself.

Therefore discussions about youth in India have been focused on the 15 to 25 age group and that too on those from urban middle and upper classes. These youth who attend college and then seek employment in the formal and organised sector, form a small portion of all those Indians who are in the 15 to 35 age bracket. The poor rural and poor urban youth engaged in the informal sector who form the vast majority of the 15 to

25 age group in this country, are often disregarded in discussions about youth. Is this because they are considered as adults? What about all those in the 25 to 35 age group? Whether urban or rural, people in this age group hardly consider themselves as youth. They mostly see themselves as young adults and have taken on many “adult” responsibilities.

Our own experiences indicate that the ages between 15 –19, 20 –25, 25 - 30 and 30 –35 each have their own difficulties and opportunities and are unique phases in a persons life. In addition the male/female, rural/ urban and formal/informal sector divides also determine the nature of issues in each phase. The need to distinguish between the urban and rural and the formal and informal sectors is very important as the very notions of youth-hood are vastly different in these two worlds. In fact even the notion of the two worlds defies definition as it encompasses more than mere location and includes cultures, lifestyles, opportunities, sexual mores, caste and religious composition of the population. Every permutation and combination of these factors creates several worlds, each with its own distinct problems for young people and the concept of youth-hood seems to defy definition.

An attempt at classifying youth to recognise disparate issues and experiences

Clearly, the challenges and difficulties in addressing diverse needs of a large and disparate population of youth with different life experiences, problems, priorities and roles in the development process are immense. For the purpose of making a simple and coherent presentation of the issues involved, we will briefly categorise these into three sectors : Urban middle class youth, urban poor youth, rural youth. Within rural youth we will look at both the poorer sections and the middle/affluent sections.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that while the primary institutions of socialisation and education i.e. families, educational establishments and mass media exist in all these classes/sectors, their very nature, their reach and the ways in which they mould, support, encourage and oppress youth are varied. As a result the opportunities and the dilemmas facing youth from these different sectors is diverse. However it is not only the rights, privileges or internal tussles, traumas and coping mechanisms of the youth within each class/sector/ age bracket that one is concerned about. **In this paper we attempt to throw light on some of these and to argue that the notions of youth-hood and the needs of this disparate group are in some ways similar, in some ways vastly different and in some ways even in conflict with each other.**

RURAL YOUTH

As the majority of Indians live in the rural areas it follows that the large majority of youth¹ are rural. In fact the number of rural youth is 2.5 times that of the urban youth. However there are variations within this category of rural youth itself. With 74.4% of all rural households owning less than five acres of land, for the majority of the youth from these families, especially from the rain-fed areas, survival itself is a struggle. For those who belong to landed and upper caste families, though survival is not an issue there are other oppressive realities which often go unnoticed.

Poor Rural Youth

Let us begin by looking the former category first. For the poor youth from rural areas, childhood itself is denied and adulthood descends before they even know it. Youth-hood as a separate and distinct phase in life is for some an unheard of luxury. Often they work in fields and farms from the age of five or six and by the time they are in their so called “youth” years of 16 to 25, they have assumed full responsibilities of an adult. Among young girls, motherhood and surrogate motherhood for smaller siblings means that household responsibilities and the need to earn take precedence over all else.

With these early responsibilities thrust on them, the notion of the moratorium in youth and childhood which is available for the rural middle class youth, is not available to the rural poor even if they enroll in schools/ colleges. This has taken its toll. Today 11% of our rural youth are illiterate and their large proportion in our population has meant that 43 % of the total youth, remain illiterate².

More important than enrollment or mere literacy is the need to stay on in the school system and learn enough to be socially and economically useful and enlightened. In many cases public funded educational institutions are either not available locally, or perceived as irrelevant or not accessible for class, caste and gender related reasons. The dropout rate from schools is therefore very high among rural youth with 28% dropping out at the primary level and another 30 % dropping out at the middle school levels.

For those who are able to stay on in school, the neglect of agriculture, rural crafts, technologies and diversification options in the curriculum ensures that those who are educated get alienated from these vital areas. Further, the quality of teaching, the abysmal facilities in the rural schools and colleges and the lack of proficiency in English all together ensure that academic performance is substandard and the chances of gaining admission into courses of higher education are very small.

Today it is common knowledge that the pass percentage in PUC and SSLC is mostly around 35% to 40% with many failing in English. So even the “educated” are mainly “SSLC fail” or “PU fail” and only 4 % of rural youth are graduates.. This leaves most of them stuck in the middle of the educational spectrum neither able to go forward for

¹ All figures are from the 1991 census where the definition of youth is those in the age group of 15 - 25. Unless specifically mentioned, it is this age group that the figures quoted refer to.

² What is significant is the rural urban difference because though 24% of urban youth are illiterate, 83 % of the total illiterates are rural. (1991 Census figures)

higher studies, nor able to enter the organised labour market. At the same time, it leaves them unwilling to return to agriculture and the poverty, insecurity and indignity of small-holder farming.

While, for many urban dwellers, an SSLC pass is no big deal, it is not insignificant in a rural setting. With many being first generation “educated” and literate, the expectations from the family and the village community that they will “make good” are also not easy to deal with and add to a sense of frustration among the rural youth. This is especially so in the case of young men. Many migrate to the cities in search of work in the informal sector. A very small percentage (less than 1 % and mostly from slightly better off families) are able to gain admission to technical courses and try to enter the organised workforce hoping for small but secure salaries. This again invariably means shifting to towns and cities. For the youth who migrate, the alien culture at the factory/ work place and place of residence and the pace of city life is not easy. The lack of community they experience is often reported as a cause of a great deal of stress.

What about the rural female youth?

Many rural girls are withdrawn from school at puberty. For the few young girls who reach the SSLC level, the frustration is that of not being allowed to pursue higher studies even if they have passed. Marriage is seen as the prime source of security and being wife and mother is portrayed as the primary vocation for young girls. Though the age at marriage has shown an increase over the years for both males and females, it is still the lowest where rural females are concerned and often they have very little choice in the matter.

Do they have any Youthful phase at all? For the young women from landed families, even mobility within their villages is sometimes restricted and they are kept secluded and “pure” for marriage into a family of equal stature. Their youth years are then spent in the immediate pre and post marital phase. This is a phase which has tremendous stress and calls for much adjustment from the young minds and bodies of our rural girls.

The fact that 9% of rural women in the 25 to 35 age group are divorced or abandoned implies that the security of marriage cannot be taken for granted. The obsessive focus on grooming girls for their marital home at the expense of helping them develop their income earning potentials needs to be thoroughly shaken up. Not only does such socialisation leave them defenseless if divorced/ abandoned, it also stunts their confidence and personal growth³.

Rural Youth: Personal “choices”, schisms and dilemmas

From the arguments presented above, it becomes apparent that for rural youth economic choices have been limited to a de-humanising scale. This is also the case where personal

³ What is alarming is that marital break up is higher among rural youth than urban youth. Further such separation leaves a higher percentage of rural women alone than among rural men, urban men or urban women. Not only are their numbers large, their access to assets is almost nil and their poverty is compounded by the stigma attached to them.

choices are concerned. Apart from these, there are other psychological issues caused by the urban and upper class/ caste hegemony in society. For the youth from the underprivileged classes, landless families and scheduled castes, their fear of those above them and their anger at the deprivation and oppression they encounter has to be constantly masked to ensure their survival. Expressions of anger are almost always countered with strong repressive measures by the powerful who are backed by the state and militant strong movements which can withstand such pressure are a rarity.

In the case of rural youth from middle class and rich families who are normally envied for their economic security, other forms of oppression are evident. While physical mobility is not restricted for the males, the freedom to choose another vocation or marry someone of their own choice is absent and the threat of being disowned, disinherited and socially ostracised is always there. Not having any other skills or means of supporting themselves, they find that their hands are tied. Of course there are also those who are rich and/or sufficiently educated whose financial independence and migration to the cities then assures them other freedoms, but these are still a small minority, though an increasing minority as it appears.

At the same time, the rural middle class and well-off young men, who walk around with a swagger in their own villages, become like timid little mice when they come to the towns and cities. They somehow feel that because they do not wear jeans, speak English and are not “urbane”, they are lesser humans. The deep sense of inferiority inflicted on them has meant that they don the garb that seems to get them respect. So jeans and “I love USA” T shirts are acquired and behind this “western”/ urbane/ liberal facade one encounters some base feudal thoughts !! These schisms among the youth need to be explored in more detail so that the stress and contradictions caused by such dualistic identities are understood and addressed.

What can be done?

The scenario presented above suggests that the “educated”, the dropouts, the illiterate, the poor and well off rural youth are all disadvantaged, albeit in different ways. However the vast majority are poor and end up in the vast pool of small agriculturists /unskilled labourers who remain at the bottom of the social and economic order earning paltry wages for their work. The so called fruits of development either bypass them, trickle down too slowly or even impoverish them further.

For these young people, the rigid caste class and gender-specific expectations from them are a heavy burden to carry along with their elusive dreams. As a large number of poor rural youth cope with disillusionment, despair and shattered dreams, something that strikes us time and again is that even their dreams are so humble and so limited. We often hear about “ambitions” of becoming teachers, technicians or petty government employees. There is little exposure to the outside world as we urbanites know it, limited resources and therefore little idea about the various new vocations and work options available. This is a tragedy that needs to be addressed, so that abilities and aspirations are enhanced and for those who have the aptitudes, entry into the vocations of their choice is

facilitated.

Yet there are also those who resist or who create spaces for manouvre and who break away from the forces that can so easily crush them. With the help of small leverages provided by education, family support or “connections” they are able to get over many of the obstacles outlined above and chase their dreams.

However, it is crucial to recognise that an approach which targets rural youth per se will not help much as deeper structural issues remain. To address these land reforms, wage reforms and social movements are necessary to change the caste, class and gender based inequities that provide the basis of the deprivation of our rural youth. Further, employment avenues in rural areas need to be created, work in agriculture needs to be accorded dignity and small holder farming needs targeted support by the state as that is the only real option available to the vast majority of our youth.

URBAN INFORMAL SECTOR YOUTH

The urban youth in the informal sector often escape our attention. In fact it is only when crimes are committed by them or when they “participate” in some “anti- social” behaviour that they come into the limelight. Yet they are everywhere in our cities working as office boys, domestic maids, tempo drivers, shop assistants and a variety of such invisible occupations. The fact that illiteracy among urban youth in the 15 to 35 age group is as high as 24% itself is hardly ever highlighted. Further, 14% of urban youth drop out after primary schooling, other 20% at SSLC level. While 18% of them finish their PU only 11% complete their graduation

Urban poor youth: Education and employment

With most of them enrolling in corporation schools or private “convents” in/ near the slums and chawls, the few who are able to make it to college attend the corporation run colleges or other substandard colleges. To find schools in ramshackle sheds and colleges in the first floor of a busy market place is not uncommon.. But even this is a privilege and families expect something to come of this education in terms of material contributions. Here again the pressure to earn early in life means that there is hardly a youthful phase with freedom and pressures are high.

Most of these illiterate and drop out youth are working in what is loosely known as the informal sector, where labour is unorganised. While the illiterate do mostly manual work, the dropouts often work in all kinds of small establishments, delivering newspapers, selling milk, hawking vegetables, working in petrol bunks or as waiters, or in the garages, shops and sweat shops that dot our cities doing unskilled and semi-skilled work. Some are apprentices working with plumbers, electricians, painters, carpenters and other such workers.

For the small portion of these youth who have the opportunity, the drive, the time and the resources to do their PU or degree courses, working alongside their studies is a common

feature. For most of them, the motivation to study is the hope that somehow their formal education will get them into the organised labour market and to them the actual job itself is irrelevant. It could be selling postal stamps or reading water meters, the questions of job satisfaction and creativity are sidelined. The parents of these youth themselves are working in small trades as masons, tailors, vendors, street sweepers etc. and for them the ultimate success is to get a government job as it has PF and pension benefits. Thus security becomes the overwhelming priority and dreams and aspirations of these youth all revolve around this one facet of life. There is hardly any time or space to reflect on their condition and the causes for it as the urgency of their financial situation clouds all else.

Frustrations and pressures

While dreams soar high, security and success remain out of bounds as only few are able to get a precious foothold into the organised sector. Even this comes at a price and the “black market” for jobs sends many families into debt. For the majority however a life of insecurity and drudgery becomes their reality.

Yet fantasies of material gain or romance and frustration remain and is compounded by the fact that these youth live amidst the opulence and wealth of a few. While suicides, dowry harassment and dowry related suicides are the most severe manifestations of their frustration, eve-teasing, gambling, alcoholism and petty crimes are more common. In fact for some their very occupations are branded illegal and the harassment of vendors, touts, commercial sex workers by the police is an everyday occurrence.

What can be done?

The quality of education available to the rural and urban poor has to be radically improved so that the youth from these sections are better equipped and have more options. There also is a need for creating niches for these youth to analyse their situation and explore the spaces and options available to them. Much talent goes down the drain for want of opportunity and much more goes undiscovered and unrecognised. Facilities to develop such youths potential should be accorded a high priority.

With the trend towards increasing privatisation, transnationalisation of capital and fragmentation of the labour force, the chances of these youth getting public sector or organised sector jobs in the future is greatly diminished. The only hope for better living conditions lies in the trade union movement in the informal and private sector. This movement itself is in its infancy, but only if more and more construction workers, miners, domestic workers get unionised, and better salaries, housing, health care and training opportunities become a reality, can there be hope for a better future. And if miner's daughters can actually become writers or pharmacists, much would have been accomplished.

URBAN MIDDLE CLASS YOUTH

While we know that only 11% of urban youth complete their graduation, and an even smaller minority complete professional courses, it is this small minority that is most

visible and most articulate. For these youth schools and colleges ensure a protected space or a moratorium “only to learn”. They enjoy better facilities and teaching, have more avenues to develop artistic, sporting and other talents and have many options as far as recreation is concerned. They are confident and self assured in many ways. On the surface it seems as though they cannot ask for anything more.

Urban middle class youth and education

Yet, the purpose of these schools and colleges is to integrate them into the existing social and economic order. The inequities of this order have been elaborated above. Integration into the present day mainstream development paradigm and industrial world, means that these students are taught to “function” in the industrialised sector, contribute towards production of goods and services and participate as consumers in the market. Individualism and competition are therefore actively promoted in these institutions’ methodology and curriculum.

What does all this imply for the youth themselves? Many cannot tolerate the burden of uncreative learning, rigid syllabi and corruption in the institutions. While few rebel, most of them struggle to “adjust” and some cynically get on with their careers. Unfortunately some find the constant pressure to compete oppressive and withdraw into themselves or even from life itself.

Urban Middle Class youth and the job market

College does not last for ever and before they even realise it, urban middle class youth search are searching for courses of higher education. Doing an MBA or a computer course is seen as essential for survival in a fiercely competitive job market. While those with “contacts”, professional training and money get the plum jobs and others work their way up the corporate/ bureaucratic ladder. In today’s economic scenario a job with a multinational is seen as the ultimate success and the American dream still grips many. Government jobs are perceived as boring and unremunerative while the corporate world is perceived as exciting and paying. The abnormal stress of working long hours in very competitive surroundings is seen as normal. Even the fact that these jobs force them to put personal relationships on the back burner is increasingly seen as normal.

Mass media and pressures of consumerism

For these youth, the notions of romance, success, and security are much influenced by a western oriented media. The mass media seems to have assumed unlimited purchasing power among urban and middle class youth and has decided that youth should always be presented as consuming all kinds of products, frolicking and making merry without a care in the world. The consumption of all kinds of branded items is equated with happiness. As youth try desperately to keep up with such consumption, the stress of youth-hood and difficult choices are ignored by the media. Here again schisms are created between what the youth really need and what they are supposed to want. The spiral of “needs” being constantly created leaves these youth, who have so much to be grateful for, perpetually dissatisfied.

While families continue to be havens of nurturing and support, expectations are also high. The family's expectations of success make many young people bolt themselves into a phantom of a doctor, engineer or an "educated" housewife against their wishes and aspirations. Also physical and sexual violence within urban middle and upper middle class families and familial pressures leading to psychological disturbances among youth are no longer rarities.

Gender relations

For the young girls education and employment makes them want a certain amount of freedom and they are no longer willing to be subordinated. However family norms and gender relations have not changed in a fundamental way and this creates turmoil within the young women and between them and their natal/ marital families. Until the assertive and independent young woman is perceived as an equal and accepted as an ideal, a great deal of strife seems to be imminent.

Pressurised by college/ job, family and the media, what do these young people do? Some are able to find their own niches, niches which are removed from the family and school/college or job related structures. However, peer groups are also sources of pressure. It has become imperative to dress a particular way and spend leisure in particular kinds of activities. Life therefore becomes a tussle, a struggle to survive in the world of the college, job market, family and peer group.

There are also those who are not easily coopted, who question the very concept of education and find the development process it engenders to be unjust. They are looking for niches where they can express these concerns and raise the questions that trouble them. They resist the pressures that are mounted on them and struggle to find a way out professionally and/or personally. For some, volunteering or associating with movements, NGOs and alternative development protagonists has become an increasingly attractive option.

What can be done?

As these youth with their access to education and privilege later occupy positions of power and influence in our society, there is a need to sensitise them to the issues that concern the large majority. As future lecturers, policy makers, lawyers, business managers, engineers or artists the decisions they will take need to be guided by a vision of what kind of changes are desirable in our society. This is one of the biggest challenges facing those who work with young people today.

Further, these youths problems of individual isolation from families and from close and supportive relationships, needs to be focused and a culture of discussing their personal issues, power needs, status needs and social interactions should be promoted. Only through deliberate efforts can the process of individualisation be constructively harnessed so that individual potentials are tapped for social responsibilities and a more meaningful life. Their own attitudes with regard to caste, class and gender need to be questioned so that the restrictions that come from these are not seen as absolute.

The alienation of these sections of youth from each other

One of the most dramatic reminders of an apparent conflict of interests among youth erupted with the agitations and protests against the Mandal commissions recommendations on reservations for public sector jobs. How does so much anger and distrust emerge? A cursory glance at the list of colleges in Bangalore City tells us that different colleges are founded, managed and patronised by caste based groups. With separate colleges for men and women and for different classes and castes of students scenario how can students learn to understand each other? The debasing attitudes of upper class and caste youth about the poorer youths entitlements in terms of wages, working conditions and housing needs is one result. Notions of masculinity that deprive young women of basic freedoms is another.

While the stratified nature of our social structure gets further polarised by our educational system, family structures and the development process itself it creates more poverty, more inequality and more concentrations of power/resources. For instance, the increasing consumerism among urban middle class youth and consequent natural resource degradation deprives poor youths of a part of their livelihood base.

One of the most stark examples of such a silenced conflict is regarding the weekend resorts which are mushrooming around our large cities. On the one hand there are the middle and upper class youth who feel they have a right to weekends away from the stress and the hurly burly of city life. On the other hand are the youths whose fathers have sold out to the resort companies due to difficulties in small holder agriculture. These youth are deprived of their inheritance and means of livelihood so that a leisurely weekend may be enjoyed by a few. Studies show that such sales are most often made by small farmers who then go on a downward spiral of pauperisation. Then there are also the daughters of the poor farmers who are married off with the dowries “earned” by sales of their parents land and who have been treated as burdens since childhood because of this dowry being perceived as inevitable. The whole business depends also on youth from lower or middle class families who have been given jobs to market the resorts to the upper echelons. And there are those youth from the villages who have turned into brokers and who peddle small farmers land to the big resort companies making a handsome commission for themselves.

Yes these are all youth - with different responsibilities, stakes and pressures. Can they ever be targeted as a homogenous category when their stakes are not only different but also in direct conflict with each other?

CONCLUSION

In a society that is fractured on class, caste and gender lines, it is not possible to treat all those in a particular age group as a homogenous entity. After all, age is a transient concept with today's youth being yesterday's children and tomorrow's adults. What is necessary is an approach to youth that will transform our society. Youth therefore have to

be helped to break away from the forces that coopt them into the existing order. This is an order that not only suffocates all youth, but bestows privileges on a small minority at the expense of a large majority. Therefore it is in the interests of youth and society as a whole to provide spaces for explorations into alternate social structures and development paradigms. This will liberate youth from the shackles they face, strike at the root of our feudal and patriarchal structure and force us to re-consider our colonised notion of development.

This is not such an impossible task and it is a task that some youth have always taken upon themselves. Despite high levels of pressures that have reached de-humanising levels, there are youth from all sections of society who resist and create spaces for themselves, who push against the wall. It is this characteristic of youth that spells hope. And it is this impetus that requires nurturing and support.

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