Contextualizing Youth Studies in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

Youth in India are yet to be accepted as researching social substrate and, therefore, youth studies in India is in nascent stage. This paper focuses on the problem posed by multiple arrays of definitional criteria that obstruct the social understanding of youth in the contemporary contextual frames of the Indian society. It simultaneously advocates for the need to re-understand youth, subjectively, as responsible agents for self and society. Contemporary seminal researches in youth studies point to this fallacy of age categories and underline the changing modes of youth adaptations to the new social conditions, in globalized world. Some studies emphasize that age cannot be a segmenting characteristic in young people' lives as it downplays other important valences of life transition. This paper argues for qualitative, subjective 'reflexive' perspectives generated towards making sense of the modes through which youths navigate, negotiate, and shape their lived experience as well as that of their different communities of practice. That would help India make sense of the youth situations and harness the youth bulge potential efficiently.

Keywords: Youth, India, Globalization, Reflexivity

Introduction

The Census of India 2011 highlights that youth population in India is highest in the world. This constitutes 356 million or 28 per cent of the total population. The Census further emphasizes that 41 percent of the population is less than 18 years of age. The United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) in its report *The State of World Population* 2014 stresses, that the world never had so many youth and marks that it is a sign of potential that the world should look to harness for social and economic benefits. On the other hand the report also cautions us to be prepared to meet the needs and aspirations of this young population that "will define our common future." Therefore, this population boom is both an opportunity as well as a threat. Countries across globe are

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trying to tap this critical double-edged resource, which has the potential to direct the course of socio-political and economic developments. India is no exception to these tapping measures owing to its high youth population. In fact, India should take concrete measures. The harnessing of economic aspect cannot be denied but the needs and aspirations of the youth needs to be taken into consideration.

The Annual Report 2014-15 (p. 2) Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India resonates this concern and anticipation of *The State of World Population* 2014, citing, and comparing situations of the economy, that India will be in years to come, i.e. by 2025. "India is expected to become the 4th largest economy by 2025, only after the United States, China and Japan." Then it comes to appreciation that India has for its youth, stressing that:

> *"While most of these developed countries face the risk of an ageing workforce, India is expected to have a very favorable demographic profile. It is estimated that by the year 2020, the population of India would have a median age of 28 years only as against 38 years for US, 42 years for China, and 48 years for Japan. This 'demographic dividend' offers a great opportunity."*

These changes through globalization have effectuated a huge change in the orientation of youth towards society, culture, and self. World Youth Report (2003: 291-308), Bourn (2008), Nisbett (2009), Vijayakumar (2013), Cuzzocrea and Mandich (2015) delineate the changes that globalization has on the socio-cultural and identity affairs for and of the youth. Bourn (2008) in case of United Kingdom, Nisbett (2009) in case of Bangalore, India, Dyson (2008) in case of Uttarakhand, India, and World Youth Report (2003) specifically delineate the changing priorities and concerns of the youth. These works try to situate the need of, to recognize, and give importance to the hitherto sidelined huge population. This emphasis and recognition of youth get reflected in The United Nations General Assembly's 80th plenary meeting in 1985. The meeting underlines the fact that youth are important vectors to shape the futures. In the same vein, the World Youth Report 2005 mentions in its foreword "Young people hold the key to society's future. Their ambitions, goals and aspirations for peace, security, development and human rights are often in accord with those of society as a whole (p. iii)." The importance of the UN General Assembly decision is to focus on acknowledgment of youths as a serious concern. The Asembly has adopted guidelines for the improvement of the channels of communication between the United Nations and youth as well as their organizations. The UN General Assembly, decided to celebrate 1985 as International Youth Year: Participation, Development, Peace. This indicates the importance it granted to youth in their participation at national, regional, and international levels, treating them as part of the solution to the emerging problems of the social world.

It can be deduced that the UN General Assembly was taking a two-prong approach towards youth where the problem and solution emanated from youth themselves, through their participation. To reiterate this, comparative project report by International Council on National Youth Policy (ICNYP) in 2005 makes an important observation in view of the consequences globalization has on youth. It states that apart from the "macro social-economic concerns … many of the youth related issues are symptoms of the larger processes of personal development young people undergo." (ICNYP, 2005: 17). The situation however turns problematic in the process of classification of youth, bound by categories of age. The policy documents globally follow guidelines of bracketing youth into age bound categories ranging from 19-24 years or 14-35 years to design policies for youth.

Does Age Matter?

The contemporary researches around youth points us to the fact that age categorizations through number of years have accumulated inherent discrepancies, which "obscure more significant difference, such as gender, race, sexuality, class, ability, or geographical location" (Stewart, 1998, p. 36). The interaction of, and among, these various parameters within the purview of youth secure a different spectrum of opportunities and threats and understanding hitherto veiled by age binding parameters. Existing youth situations demand a relook into these prevailing parameters of definitional aspects that hinder the comprehension of the situation youth traverse in a globalized world. The layers of hindrance are diversified and corroborated in the wake of current youth unrest and their aspirational claims towards future. The needs and aspiration of youth across globe are changing from acquiring education, job preferences, married life, having children, and to have a certain kind of lifestyle.

Stewart (1998) and Furlong (2011) advocate in their arguments that there is assumed homogeneity in the understanding of young people which frustrates the cultivation of new theories of the youth. These assumptions, they argue, has hampered the debates of contemporary social theories by directing the arguments, through separation of the important factors under the axes of economic, cultural or class based mostly institutional and structural, leaving unexamined the experiences of youth.

Maira and Soep (2004, p. xv) also show a glimpse of this diversity of interaction and new aspects of youth alternatives. They write that even "the gun-toting high-schooler, the Palestinian rock-thrower, the devious computer hacker, the fast-talking rapper, the ultrafashionable Japanese teenager teetering on platform heels" are youth. The concept that an age group between 19-24 years or 14-35 years would be considered youth seems phony when it

turns out that the crowds during Arab Spring in Tunisia, 2010, Occupy Wall Street in New York, 2011 or, in the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, 2014 were onset by this age group. The ranges of problems that the youth undergo have diverged. Hence, it becomes now important to re-examine the current situation of youth.

The paper discusses trends, mainly focused on Indian youth that should guide the policy insight towards youth transforming their perception about world and at the same time being reflexive towards their own stabilities, aspirations, and life opportunities. This makes us ask- if our current research methods are considering the key organizing forces shaping the lives of young people? Taking into consideration these we need to revise our research methodologies in youth studies as well.The vitality of youth in mutual shaping of variables of social, cultural, political and economic cannot be overlooked.

Youth studies in India: An Outline

The consideration of youth as distinct population category took too long to be realized. From a policy perspective, the International Youth Year, 1985 declared by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) provided inspiration and paved way for development and formulation of Indias' National Youth Policy of 1988. The central theme of UNGA was Participation, Development, Peace with the global agenda of harnessing the "energies, enthusiasms and creative abilities of youth to the tasks of nation-building, the struggle for self-determination" realizing the fact the youth could contribute to the development of the world order. This motto was futuristic in the sense that it then directed nations towards safeguarding the specific needs, opportunities and aspirations the youth would care for in their future, for their multiple transitions, socially, culturally, and economically on a global scale.

The Indian National Youth Policy of 1988 had the central theme of promotion of personality and functional capability of the youth. The policy focus was more holistic setting to achieve an integrated target from individual to the community and thereby national development. However, there was no mention of any particular target group for special attention, which refers to the age groups. In their recent work, Mukherjee and Choudhury (2010) highlight this that in the National Youth Policy of India it was only in the 2003 policy that the differentiation based on age was included, which ranged from 13 to 35 years. Subsequently that there was division of this into two categories: (i) 13 to 19 years, and (ii) 20 to 35 years.

This differentiation based on age, as the policy document suggests, is to cater to the diverse groups of youth which Singh (1960) explains is based on

when youth are in direct interaction with the social structures, when we consider youth as "group of actors" (p. 1627). These interactions, Singh argues, shapes the character, situation, and problems a youth experience. Youth studies in India have not much focused on these interactional experiences. Singh in the same argument stimulates our understanding of these differing set of problems of youth divided in the urban-rural geographies, and male-female dichotomies. Thereby, pointing the importance of social structures and geographies in dealing and researching the problems and devising policies of the youth. The 2003 National Youth Policy pays attention to Mukherjee and Choudhury (2010) note that the National Youth Policy formulates this categorization through the targeting process, of who would be the recipient of particular intervention/s, "the rural and tribal youth, the out-of-school youth, disabled youth, female adolescents, and youth who are victims of trafficking, street children and the like. In this way National Youth Policy 2003, seeks to be qualitatively different in its scope from the earlier policy which posed youth as a rather uniform category." A huge shift we note in terms of the recognition of motifs of youth in society.

The contemporary youth researches in India are starting to focus on these hitherto marginalized areas of qualitative aspects of different problems and different situations the youth contemporarily come across. The diverse debates around political, economic and cultural complexes have spotlighted on new spaces for youth lives, both theoretically and empirically. These situations of blur is further accentuated by the uniform and complex assent of conditions of youth globally, taken as almost homogeneous in terms of the insecurity of their job, education opportunities, and economic avenues. One has to be careful to observe this precarity of youth generated off contemporary circumstances. Until most recently, youth researches have been exploring the social, cultural and, economic aspects affecting youth. However, Furlong (2011: 54) reminds us that youth studies reflects "social change, the reproduction of social inequalities, cultural dynamics, generational relationships and the dynamics of the relationship between social structure and culture." Furlong also makes us rethink youth researches as contemporary world events are radically affecting and transforming youth lives thereby sprouting a succession of interrelated research gaps in the field. These gaps demand refreshed comprehension of the situations from the perspective of the researched and not only fixed to traditional tenets but in integration towards the concepts of structure and agency of the youth.

Studies by Vijayakumar (2013) and Dyson (2008) in India deal with gendered urban and rural female problem dichotomies. The paper by Vijayakumar (2013) focuses on the changing nature of urban females who are becoming more career oriented- caring about their own future and their

families and at the same time self-conflicting to find themselves in the rapidly globalizing economy. His insights into the experiences of youth women within institutional structures of family, caste, and gender in Indian middle class depict the hidden anguish but also aspirations of the youth. The respondents of her study expected the differences of their future and their pasts enmeshed within the different understandings of family as a grooming institution. Vijayakumar makes an important observation through one of her respondent, Parvathi, 32, who explains the cautions of her life, which is entangled with future of her children. She notes for Parvathi, "If you're doing education . . . you start having a lot of desires. . . . I want to do this, I want to do that. You lose interest in your children, too." There are explicit images of what Indian youth are about. Education molds their worldviews where one can compare her present status with the past generations.

Dyson (2008) paper deals with the structural interaction experiences of rural female vis-s-vis their quest of distinct identity other than the ascribed normative gender. She maintains that that youth are key social and economic actors who are exposed to diverse contexts of the social complexes and that, they "are often highly strategic, self-reflective actors, and they sometimes play important political roles in processes of spatial change" (p. 160). Dealing with the rural landscape it deciphers the social understanding of youth sketched through the everyday lives and work an individual performed. The perceptions of future construction are, contrary to Vijayakumar (2013) where the individuals hold the responsibility of self. The author argues that the education and other factors viz. being earning member, economically independent obviously deconstructs the societal norms of acceptance as adults.

There is a sharp contrast between the literatures produced five years apart of how the youth conception constructions have diverted from the nature of 'youth' as (i) a unit of social system: collective and (ii) as a group of actors in the social system: individualistic and subjective (Singh, 1960. p. 1627). Studies on youths in India by Nisbett (2009), Jeffrey and Dyson (2016), and Dyson (2008) are very relevant which directly or indirectly point towards the need to understand youths of India as a separate category. These researches guide us towards new comprehension of Indian youths who despite traditional moorings and gendered thresholds (see, Vijayakumar, 2013) are realizing their stakes in the society guided by "the capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 59-84). The capacity to aspire generates a sense of self-recognition that propels Indian youth as active agents who could reflect on how to perform within everyday space, congested and contested by the paradox of globalization.

Nisbett (2009), Jeffrey and Dyson (2016) work come in handy to understand the capacity to aspire and the urge of sense of self recognition.

Nisbett (2009) in his study of the urban youth deciphers their dilemmas and anxieties of being educated and unemployed. He also underlines this realization of being educated-unemployed and the aspirations of family pinned onto them realizing the harsh realities of living in a country with a limited infrastructure of opportunities. Nisbett claims that this quest to have an independent sense of self-recognition is strong. This can be taken as a cue to understand the difference between the problems of urban and rural youths. Apart from this in the urban areas, the youth spent most of their time waiting, preparing for their imagined future, which was not a passive activity rather it offered an 'opportunity to convey a youthful adaptability to circumstances' (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 474). In the other case of rural male youth Jeffrey and Dyson (2014) the waiting time or timepass was not an activity rather they resorted to constructive activities of their communities terming this as '*sewa*' (p. 968). Jeffrey and Dyson highlight this significant change in their study, the transition of youth from timepassing to indulging in activities. Rather than waiting for opportunities in the future they grasp it creatively as "not as a point on the horizon but as the precipitate of their daily activities" (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2016, p. 77). This work also initiates us to a different image of Indian youth from just being a timepass to an active agent engaged and accepting their resourcefulness to their community. Jeffrey and Dyson (2014, 2016) draw attention to this difference and approach of youth towards their imagined futures, which comprehends from his/her everyday lives.

The contemporary works on youth, on this strong improved sense of self beyond waiting, is significant. Jeffrey and Dyson (2016) highlights this by comparing their own studies of Bemni and Meerut, in India with the reaction of youth on everyday issues 'in the now' and their reflection 'on how to perform within everyday space' (ibid, p. 96). Youth have now 'stressed their refusal to wait for government and political parties to deliver benefits and the importance of acting immediately on one's own to improve the local social environment. In addition, young people in both places tended to reject talk of a future 'utopia', focusing instead on their social acuity in the present (p. 82). These studies implore us towards multiple and contrasting understanding of youth in India. Jeffrey and Dyson (2016, p. 95) assert that this helps youth to improve "with an emergent vision of the future wherein they imagined that their present actions would slowly change wider society."

Youth studies in India: Way Forward

Researches in India on youth are radically changing and, yet, the approach to understand youth beyond statistical categories or demographic dividends for the state is needed. It is interesting to note that the insights in youth lives that we have gained overtime are either in form of youth being statistical

numbers and projected demographic dividend or as static potentials of social overhauling. However, there are directionalities towards newer cognizance of youth lives. For instance, Kelly (2000) and Giroux (2012) argue for this in light of the focuses, which have rapidly come to decipher the actively engaged roles of self, family, community and, policy discourses, hinting us towards casting new moulds of knowledge for contemporary youth.

Critical observations by Giroux (2012) around institutions help him conclude that these statistical numbers and projected demographic dividend create blind spots for youth within the institutional structures. He came up with what he calls- "disposable youths." Giroux here emphasizes the anti-relationship between youth, futures, and official violence disrupting neoliberal policies. This is also reflected in Jeffrey and Dyson (2016) where the youth are taking the problems of the local as opportunities to serve and actively seek for states response by being facilitating middlemen for communities' progress. Giroux warns that many of us have been inspired by the hope for a better future which these youth represent. Giroux (2012) also highlights the urgency to guide and promote critical pedagogy of the pedigree of Paulo Freire maintaining that critical pedagogy is an ongoing project which is taking place in a number of different social formations and geographies and in which the youth are embedded in their daily lives.

Youth researches are rapidly transecting towards uncovering the individual aspirations, anxieties, identities, values and place in social structure embedded in the social relations, which actively help, understand, and curate the world in which youth sustain their everyday lives. What Kelly (2000) argues on a larger space of generalized conditions of youth across globe as problems, Singh (1960) discusses this specifically in relation to India. Singh in 1960's appealed for what Furlong (2011: 54) reminds us. However Singh remained localized in the Indian context. The new methodologies and approaches for youth research invite us to consider the proposals of researching youth as separate categories. Singh (1960) understands the youth situation from the post-independence period in India when the society was in flux and where there is always scope for social and personal adjustment.

This position of mal-adjustment in contemporary times is represented by globalization, which asks us to revise the question from 'Who are the youth? to 'How are the youth?' These methodologies highlight the conflict between the generations and their mutual adjustments to the drastic changes they witness en-process of adjusting. Raj and Raj (2016) in their work underline these adjustments and highlight the 'fast' individuals who are 'leading a lifestyle which is neither common nor traditional in India' (p. 29). This is what Jeffrey and Dyson (2016) call 'regional modernity' where the individual

'complained of being 'stuck' in the village, which they regarded as somehow outside the 'modern' time-spaces of metropolitan India' (p. 86).

The question of 'How are the youth?' in youth studies is essentially 'intertwined with modernity' (Raj, 2007, p. 63). The youth researches hence needs to be oriented more towards understanding youths as part of solution teams rather than segregated populations reeling problems to the society through openly representing their aspirations and choice which their parents and others might consider not appropriate to be disclosed or entertained (Raj and Raj, 2016, p. 29).

Conclusion

The contemporary situations for youth in India are challenging moreso in terms of their being individuals with "aspirations without opportunities" (Kumar, 2016, p. 103). This translates into "temporal anxiety, which reflects frustration about unemployment, exclusion from secure adulthood, and isolation relative to time–spaces of "modernity" and "development" (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 466). Kelly (2000) is concerned with to how young people should be schooled, policed, housed, employed, or prevented from becoming involved in any number of risky (sexual, eating, drug abusing or peer cultural) practices. These conditions nudge for critical re-formation of youth research methodologies investigating youth lives by creating spaces for their reflections about their transitions and navigations through both personal and social rite conduits. Giroux, Kelly, Furlong through their works and other researchers on youth implore researchers for the critical responses that are required to accept the long desired singularity of research focus on youth. The youth realize their agency and have worldviews of development in the present and for the future, the questions of poverty, religion and, politics, extending to the anxiety and aspiration for their own futures. The new methodologies should prompt the reception of youth as separate category.

In India, especially, these new moulds through youth narratives of experiences are generating fresh understanding about Indian youth. The current literature on youth suggests that to understand the youth collecting numerical data is no source to be relied. The multitude of attractions offered by globalization, in spheres of education, job, social and, political situation reflect on youth conditions. The life transitions youth undergo, passing through the complex societal rituals have remarkable information towards their situation in the world. A firsthand account of struggles of transitions opens up new frontiers for policy makers and the society as well.

The paper endeavors to grasp the various trends in capturing the debates around defining youth enmeshed within the confusing policy paradigms

changing overtime to capture different shades of age. The paper advocates for new trend for defining youth, beyond the prevalent category of youth as a social construct, consciously spilling to accommodate the new emerging trends in youth lives. This is in keeping view the transitions the youth are undergoing in contemporary times in India and elsewhere due to the forces of globalization. The paper urges to create spaces for discerning that the age categorizations over-overlap each other and obscure the importance to experiences, of the youth, which are beyond the categories of age. The paper proposes that individual personal experiences do provide remarkable insights into the lives of youth, mirroring their struggles and appreciations, adjustments and dissents. These methodological changes would not only broaden the spectrum of being youth but also would rejuvenate the passivity of political, social and, economic institutions to be able to appreciate the spectrum of youth beyond demographic categories.

We would rather suggest that the politics of binding youth into age categories have done more harm than good to the main ingredients of "demographic dividend" and "youth bulge". These categories have initiated a directioned blueprint of researches that have constantly eclipsed the manifestations of the effects of institutions that hinder, at times exclude and, control the autonomies of youth. We will reason for a shift in methods of researching youth. These methods should promote the inclusion of biographical and subjective experiences of youth to inform theorization of, about youth. This methodological turn we suppose would help us positioning youth beyond age categories, thereby making it less difficult to theorize youth. It does hence become indispensable to re-investigate where and 'how do youth' cog into the current structure of, already highly contested, development discourse.

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