YOUTH IN INDIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Bhanu Joshi
Eesha Kunduri
Centre for Policy Research

ABSTRACT

India is the youngest country amongst the BRICS. It is estimated that by 2020 the working age population in India would be about 592 million, second to that of China's (776 million). Theorised in terms of the 'youth bulge' or 'demographic dividend', this holds out prospects as well as challenges for a developing country like India. This note approaches the question of youth in contemporary urban India by shedding light on a variety of perspectives: the institutional structure and governance framework for young people in India, the involvement of and interest of young people in politics, employment-unemployment amongst youth, aspirations, and everyday politics of the youth. By considering both formal politics and political representations among youth as also more everyday forms of politics and aspirational dimensions of youth engagement, this note attempts to develop a holistic snapshot of contemporary urban youth.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this note is to provide a snapshot of young people in India. It covers the following themes:

- Institutional structure and governance framework for youth in India

- Involvement of young people, specifically in the political process

- Understanding employment-unemployment and youth aspirations

- Youth resistance and mobilisation

At the outset, we would like to suggest that India is transitioning from rural to urban, and there is further confusion since the categories of rural and urban are themselves getting blurred. Before we proceed, therefore, it is important to point out that within both the urban and rural youth, there is much diversity and in the case of urban youth, there is also a degree of transition as several of them are rural youth who are coming to the city. We shall touch upon the question of migration and urbanisation while addressing the question of youth employment and unemployment. Let us begin by looking at the institutional structure and governance framework for young people in India.

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN INDIA

India is the youngest country amongst the BRICS. It is estimated that by 2020 the working age population in India would be about 592 million, second to that of China's (776 million). The median age is expected to be about 29 years, way lower than China (42 years), Russia (38 years) and South Africa (27 years). However, in absolute numbers, India has the largest number of young people. In other words, this has been understood as the 'youth bulge' that is expected to lead to a demographic dividend—the idea is well known, and fairly extensively researched (James 2008[1] ; Chandrasekhar, Ghosh & Roychowdhury 2006[2]).

Various Ministries are working for young people in India, such as the Ministry of Labour and Employment, and the Ministry of Human Resource Development. However, institutionally, we have the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports at the federal level, and a few state-level ministries specifically targeting development of youth affairs in India.

The vision document that guides youth policy in India is the National Youth Policy (NYP 2014), which defines youth as

those in the age group of 15-29 years, comprising as per the Census of India 2011, about 330 million, close to 27.5 % of the population.[3]

Budgetary allocation for youth-related activities

One among the eleven priority areas in the NYP 2014 is that of 'participation in politics and governance', which mostly talks about facilitating participation and civic engagement at all levels of governance. Yet, funding is disproportionately directed to the department of sports, as Figure 1 shows. Most of the funding in this department dedicated to youth is for sports infrastructure development, maintenance and promotion. This is not unique to India. Brazil, South Africa, and Italy have in the past renamed their Ministries along similar lines. The fundamental point to note is that on issues of National Policy, there is a conflation of youth affairs and sports which hinders a nuanced perspective and effort.

INVOLVEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE, SPECIFICALLY IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

While the policy talks about very progressive measures for youth involvement and their participation, the following questions emerge: What kind of young politicians are we getting? Are young people interested in politics? What kind of young people are participating in the elections? Who are the ones winning elections?

Youth, Politics and Dynasties

This is an image (Figure 2) of the Yadav family, which formerly headed one of poorest and biggest states in India.[4] This is also a state that sends the largest number of political representatives to the Lok Sabha[5] which means that it is a very important state politically. Surprisingly, this is not the only family.
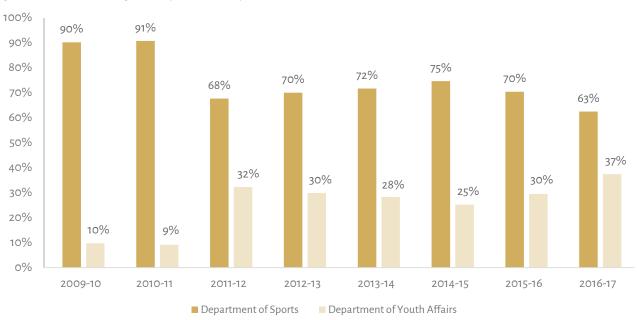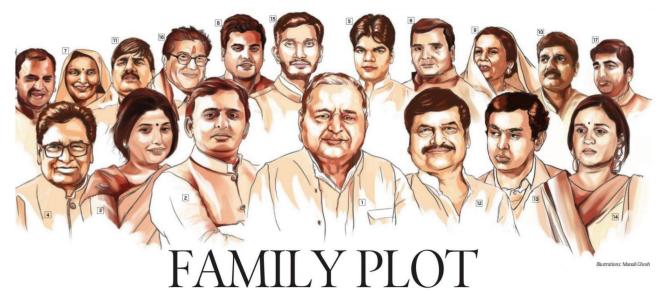
Figure 1: Allocation of budget to Department of Sports & Youth Affairs

Source: Budget documents and annual reports of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports available at http://www.yas.nic.in/documents/budget

Figure 2: The Yadav family

FAMILY PLOT

Illustrations: Manali Ghosh

Source: The Indian Express, September 25, 2016[6]

Here are some quotes from other political families:

"Thanks to the family I belong to, I knew that at least my entry would be at a level suitable enough for me to make a contribution."[7] (Omar Abdullah, third generation dynast from Kashmir. His father and grandfather were Chief Ministers of Jammu and Kashmir.)

"There are three-four ways of entering politics... "First, if one has money and power. Second, through family connections. I am an example of that. Third, if one knows somebody in politics. And fourth, by working hard for the people."[8] (Rahul Gandhi, Nehru-Gandhi scion. His father, grandmother and great grandfather were Prime Ministers of India.)

"To have the benefit of a track record is reassuring. I tell people the political legacy is my sanskar or values."[9] (Jayant Sinha, son of former Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha)

"This family system runs because of credibility, why do people want to buy a Mercedes car? Or a BMW car? Because they they know the credibility of that car. You come out with a new car and nobody knows, nobody will buy it."[10] (Sukhbir Badal, Deputy CM and second generation dynast. His father was the Chief Minister of Punjab.)

We wish to make three points here. One, as Patrick French (2014)[11] writes, all young people in the Indian Parliament are dynasts. Two, most of the dynasts who are elected are male and are from the upper castes, the historically socially advantaged people in India. Three, they have less experience compared to the non-dynasts. As Boehlken (2016) shows, these dynasts have not served in the local governments and are mostly bypassing the system.

Paradoxically, dynastic politics has also had an inclusive effect, because it provides representation to members of social categories – women, minorities and youth, members who would have been otherwise not represented. In this sense, dynastic politics can be said to have performed the same function as quotas for under- represented groups, except that it may not be appropriate to call this group under-represented. An interesting way of seeing this is that if dynasts occupy the higher level of government, then it makes way for young people to participate in local government, however that has not happened. There are also deeper underlying concerns about the unequal distribution of political influence and what constitutes political influence (Chandra, 2014).[12]
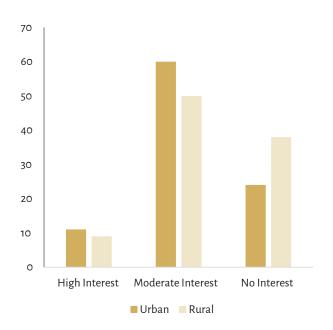
Interest in politics among youth

Let us now turn to the question of youth interest in politics. A cross-sectional survey of youth population (18-33 years) found that contrary to popular opinions of alienation and disconnect, the youth are actually quite interested in political issues.[13] This is different from experiences in the US, where apparently young people do not participate in voting. In 2012, a presidential election year, 45% of the young (18-29) voted while 72% of the oldest (65 and older) voted.[14] But interest in political issues does not neatly translate into political participation, such as voting in elections, membership of political party/student wing of any political party, participation in election campaign activity, participation in election rallies and meetings, participation in fund collection

for political parties or political activities and related activities. Survey results from the Centre for the Study of Developing Society (CSDS) indicate a consistent trend of increasing political participation over the years, both in urban and rural India.

In the 1990s, India witnessed a major participatory upsurge among the socially underprivileged, across caste, economic class, gender or localities. This phenomenon was termed as the second democratic upsurge. The interest of Indian voters in politics and their participation in election-related activities has been consistently rising since the 1990s and urban youth is no exception to this trend. While the level of electoral participation is on the rise, though marginally, there is hardly any rural-urban difference in the level of electoral participation amongst urban youth and rural youth (Figure 3). The findings of the study conducted in 2009 indicate that both urban and the rural youth participated in electoral activities in more or less similar numbers. Furthermore, the findings indicate that electoral participation is not limited only to upper-class urban youth. Participation in an electoral activity was seen across all economic classes among urban youth though the participation was slightly higher amongst the upper class urban youth than those in the middle or poor class. But electoral participation was much higher amongst rural youth than urban youth irrespective of the economic class (Figure 4).
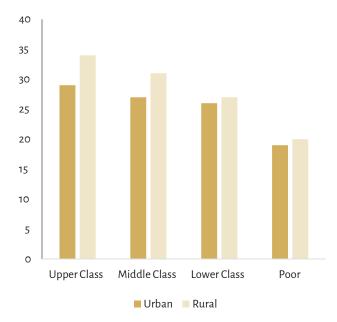
UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYMENT-UNEMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH ASPIRATIONS

We now turn attention to the issue of youth employment and unemployment. Let us begin by looking at the macro-picture. Data from the Census of India 2011 reveals that youth (15-29 years) in urban India start working late, but the real story is that more than half the young women do not work—only 39% of women aged 25-29 are in the workforce, compared to 87% of men. The gender gap is starkly visible.

Further, among urban non-workers, 21% of the youth are reported to be 'seeking work', way higher than the corresponding figure for all ages that is about 9 %. It is crucial to note here that any consideration of youth employment and unemployment is incomplete without looking at how migration is (re)shaping Indian cities. Estimates from the National Sample Survey on Migration in India, a nationally representative survey conducted in 2007-08, show that almost half (47.5%) of male out-migrants in India from rural and urban areas who move for employment-related reasons [17] are young (15-29 years). Among these, as many as 54 % move in search of employment or better employment.

Let us now present some insights from fieldwork conducted by one of us (Eesha Kunduri) among migrant industrial workers in two cities in North India, namely Delhi and

Figure 3: Interest in politics among urban and rural youth

Figure 4: Class wise level of interest among rural and urban youth in politics and electoral activities

Source: Adapted from Sampat & Mishra (2014)[15] , p. 31
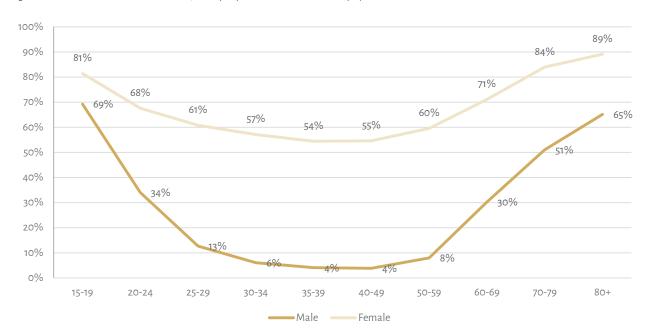
Source: Adapted from Sampat & Mishra (2014)[16] , p. 36

Figure 5: Non- workers (urban areas) as a proportion of total urban population

Ludhiana. The fieldwork suggests that a large proportion of young migrants move to the cities for aspirational reasons. Several young, 'educated' ('educated' in quotes as the workers identify themselves as so) workers in informal industrial work perceive working in agriculture as inferior and sub-standard. Education may be as widely articulated as ranging from high school to graduation or even industrial training, but what is remarkably crucial to note is the individualistic undertone that underlies several accounts, framed in terms of the desire to work outside of the village and outside of agriculture, aspirations to 'see' the city and experience city life, and the yearning to break away from village-level hierarchies such as caste, and escape from family feuds and tensions. What one worker said summarises well the commonly encountered opinion on the field, "*what am I educated for if I had to plough the fields only*".[18]

We wish to highlight that these narratives flow from an understanding is both externally imposed from the larger rural society, which perceives working in agriculture as a waste of educational skills, but also internally felt and experienced by the workers themselves, who articulate the city as relatively modern and progressive—thereby deploying a modernity versus tradition trope.[19] For many educated workers, then, working in agriculture is not a desired option due to it being a devalued occupation and out of line with their status as educated people. Grace Carswell and Geert De Neve's (2014) study of a knitwear industry in a South Indian town has similar observations about young, socially disadvantaged (low caste) workers looking down at agriculture as a 'second-best option'.[20]

At the same time, however, these tropes of modernity are seemingly one of the ways through which migrants in general negotiate precarious conditions of work and living. It is pertinent to note here that even in formal industries, employment may well be informal—implying that it is devoid of the benefits that are typically associated with stable employment. The most recent estimates indicate that though 10.5 million manufacturing jobs were created between 1989 and 2010, only about 35% (3.7 million) were in the formal sector (Economic Survey 2015-16, pp. 140-141). This is a critical aspect to note as regards the employment landscape in India.

YOUTH POLITICS AND MOBILISATION

What implications then does the lack of stable, secure employment have for youth politics and mobilisation? What are the negotiations underway? The work of Jeffrey (2010)[21] is insightful in this context. It shows that despite parental strategies and investment on education of the youth, there emerged an entire generation of unemployed youth, "who had spent long periods in formal education but who failed to acquire secure salaried work" (p. 34). Jeffrey understands this as a form of 'waiting', during which unemployed young men hang out in spaces like tea stalls, street corners and

intersections etc. in a wait for secure employment ('timepass'). Such activities had a gendered dimension in the sense that very few women hung out at these tea stalls. This state of 'limbo', he finds, gives rise to forms of politics and activism on university campuses against issues like corruption and tuition fees. He posits limbo as a context that gives rise to forms of 'cross-class action' and political engagement. Often, young men from wealthier, well-off backgrounds become 'fixers', helping people in low-income settlements (ibid.).

Jeffrey's work can be seen as speaking to wider debates over youth discontent and dissatisfaction in contemporary times, a point that has been brought home by recent student protests about fees in South Africa or about state scholarships in Indian universities, as also more recently about caste inequalities in Indian higher education. What these movements suggest, are the everyday nature of youth politics, which may not necessarily get streamlined into formal politics, as the data on youth in political leadership presented earlier shows. What is noteworthy, however, is that the university as a site of resistance continues to raise critical questions about citizenship, democratic ideals, and what public institutions should or should not be about. While we do not have the expertise or the research to be able to grasp the nuances of this, we want to suggest that these resistances remain as critical as formal politics or party-based student mobilisation, and therefore, any questions on youth and governance must engage with this complexity. Of related interest, is the question of the role of social media such as twitter, facebook and whatsapp in youth mobilisation, and whether or not that marks a point of departure? It is questions such as these that we hope to collectively embark on in the near future.

NOTES

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3. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. (2014). National Youth Policy. Retrieved December 4, 2016, from http://yas.nic.in/documents/national-youth-policy-2014

4. In the elections to the Uttar Pradesh State Assembly in early 2017, the Samajwadi Party (which the Yadav family belongs to) lost power to the Bharatiya Janata Party.

5. Lok Sabha (House of the People) is the lower house of the Indian Parliament that comprises elected representatives from parliamentary constituencies across all states of the country.

6. For details of the image, see: http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/samajwadi-party-leadership-mulayam-singh-yadav-akhilesh-yadav-shivpal-yadav-uttar-pradesh-politics-family-feud-3048539/

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16. Ibid.

17. Employment-related reasons, as captured by the National Sample Survey 2007-08 include: 1. in search of employment; 2. in search of better employment; 3. business; 4. to take up employment/better employment; 5. transfer of service/contract; 6. proximity to place of work.

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