

The new young

Sonalde Desai | August 27, 2014 12:26 am



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SUMMARY

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From Naxalbari to the Arab Spring, our popular imagination has seen the youth as the harbinger of revolution that breaks down the bastions of privilege. How do we reconcile this with the decisive victory that modern Indian youth have handed to the BJP, whose manifesto focused on entrepreneurship rather than redistribution? I would like to argue that a large number of first-time voters, combined with fertile social and economic conditions, made for a perfect storm. On one hand, modern

Indian youth are at the vanguard of a social transformation that reflects rising education, economic aspirations and participation in global culture. On the other hand, their lives are circumscribed by limited opportunities and deeply conservative social mores. So it is not surprising that a manifesto which promises to increase economic opportunities while protecting a conservative social fabric finds resonance with them.

Levels of education have risen sharply in the past decade and along with them, the aspirations and expectations of the youth and their parents. The India Human Development Surveys (IHDSs), organised by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the University of Maryland, document a striking increase in enrolment ratios in the age group of 18-22. This survey of about 42,000 households was conducted in 33 states and Union Territories in 2004-05 and then again in 2011-12, and it allows us to examine recent changes in Indian society. These surveys show that while only 25 per cent of youths aged 18 were studying in 2004-05, this proportion rose sharply to 40 per cent by 2011-12. It is well recognised that primary school enrolment is near universal now. However, the increase in enrolment at the tertiary level over the past decade is particularly striking.

Unfortunately, in spite of this rise in enrolment and vast government programmes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, obtaining quality education remains a challenge at all levels. At the primary level, ASER surveys of about 3,00,000 children as well as smaller IHDSs show that basic skills like the ability to read a simple paragraph have not improved and even show a marginal decline over time. This has led to a crisis of confidence in government schools. In 2004-05, about 28 per cent of children aged 6-14 were in private schools; by 2012 this had grown to 33 per cent. At the college level, faculty shortages have placed a tremendous strain on established university systems, and have led to the growth of private colleges of dubious quality.

Rising parental and youth aspirations, reflected in increased enrolment and the growth of private schooling, often collide with very slow growth in employment opportunities in the formal sector. Only 28 per cent of men aged 20-29 and with a college degree had a salaried job in 2005, which had slowly grown to 33 per cent by 2012. While this change reflects the fruits of the economic growth of the past decade, it still implies that two-thirds of the young men with college degrees are unable to find a regular salaried job. This paradox of rising aspirations and limited opportunities in the economic arena is matched in the social arena by the paradox of rising globalisation and conservative social mores. We see a growing assimilation with global culture through television and social media, but this seems to have little impact on social norms.

Exposure to television and digital media grew by leaps and bounds between 2005 and 2012. Households with a television have gone up from 48 per cent in 2005 to 62 per cent in 2012. Computer literacy has also grown, with 19 per cent of 18 to 22-year-olds having at least rudimentary computer skills in 2012, compared to 8 per cent in 2005. Nearly 18 per cent of the youth have some access to the internet, either on a computer or on a mobile phone. Growth in rudimentary English skills facilitates this integration with global culture. The proportion of 18 to 22-year-olds who can speak some English has

grown from 28 per cent to 45 per cent. Those who can speak fluent English have gone up from 5 per cent to 10 per cent.

However, the integration with global digital culture has done little to change a deep-seated social conservatism. In spite of rapidly rising participation in higher education and a slower rise in age at marriage, 41 per cent of youth aged 18-22 were married in the year 2012. Moreover, arranged marriages continue to dominate — nearly 94 per cent of the married women in their 20s surveyed by the IHDS claimed to have had parental involvement in the choice of a husband. This socially embedded mindset is reflected in many different domains. For example, even in 2012, 22 per cent of the youth aged 18-22 lived in households where at least someone practiced untouchability; a further 7 per cent lived in households where it would not be acceptable to have a Dalit come into the kitchen or share utensils.

These paradoxes bring the youth movement of 2014 closer to the Nav Nirman movement of the early-1970s than the leftist youth movements of the 1960s. The Nav Nirman Andolan of 1974 was led by middle-class students from Gujarat, whose demand for corruption free governance brought down the Congress state government and was the training ground for Narendra Modi. Many lessons from this movement were incorporated in the BJP's election strategy of 2014. In retrospect, it is not surprising that the contrast between rapidly rising aspirations and slow growth in opportunities in the economic sector and continued conservatism in the social arena created fertile ground for a manifesto that emphasised economic opportunities along with social conservatism.

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