Towards a Youth Agenda in Policy and Practice

Padma Prakash

Young people are ubiquitous in the urban space across the country. An IMF paper [Aiyar and Mody 2012] has pointed to the huge demographic advantage of some of the poorer, heavily populated states in the country. In 1991-2001 the high growth states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Gujarat had a dependency ratio of 8.7, much lower than that of the Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. In the coming decade, however, it is these latter states that will reap the demographic dividend. Finally, it appears, the long promised population advantage is being realised.

Aiyar and Mody also point out that the difference in the growth rates of the two groups of states is only 1.5 percentage points, which, in the coming decade will be bridgeable. Yet that can only happen if India can realise the demographic advantage. That advantage is to be seen in the huge numbers of young workers spilling into the streets, especially in cities and towns. The simple formula is that if these young people become productive members of society, then the double advantage will set in—higher growth will promote lower fertility impacting the dependency ratio in the country as a whole.

In other words, investing in youth is regarded as the sure fire formula for higher growth. Unfortunately this fails to take account of the investment that youth bring to the process. Nor does it recognise the agency of youth, rendering them a passive target population for policy interventions. While this approach may (or may not) impact on growth, it certainly locates youth as agents of a state-led growth programme rather than recognising them as actors and directors in the theatre of development. The challenge is this: Can India come up with an innovative approach that puts the concerns of young people at the centre of policy? Can India show the world that in recognising the agency of youth, especially in the growing cities, a sustainable development is possible?

The Context

The sociology and the geography of youth in India describe the contours of a changing and modernising society. If in the 1950s the residual fervour of a newborn nation translated into idealism and a spirit of nationalism, the 1960s saw a large-scale disillusionment. The changing global geographies saw a nation debating the impact of educated brain drain to western countries, the loss of a country’s social capital, its future leaders and mentors. Cinema of the day portrayed well the plight of the uneducated unemployed youth. Unimaginative employment policies coupled with stagnant industrial growth did little to expand opportunities for the young.

The 1970s’ geopolitical conditions slowed down the outmigration of the qualified and educated. The shrinking opportunities within the country and the failure both to generate adequate growth and ensure distributive justice, prompted the upsurge of people’s movements and the realisation of the revolutionary potential of the young. The state responded to the rise of extreme left movements weakly in policy and brutally in reality.

In 1972 a long drought and the rising food prices prompted a state-wide student agitation in Gujarat that brought down the government and challenged a system. The following year in Bihar the student movement against corruption under Jayaprakash Narayan transformed into a people’s movement that eventually led to the promulgation of the Emergency in 1975 with the suspension of all civil rights. These almost entirely youth actions inspired large sections of the educated to recognise the widening gap between the rich mostly urban India and the poor largely rural ‘Bharat’. Many idealist youth gave up the promise of lucrative jobs to trek to the villages, set up service institutions delivering desperately needed medicare and other services. The Medico Friend Circle, one such youth-led organisation began by medical students has over the years quietly but substantially influenced health care policy. Towards the end of that decade the Assam Movement led by students against ‘undocumented migrants’ was remarkable for its success in asserting regional identity. It eventually challenged and toppled a government becoming itself a political party.

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CHAPTER 1

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Young people are ubiquitous in the urban space the world over, especially so in the developing world. Every third person you meet in an Indian city today is a youth. In about seven years the median age in India will be 29 years, very likely a city-dweller, making it the youngest country in the world. Over the last two census decades, when today’s ‘twenties were growing up, India has firmly inserted itself into the world economy and has been a geopolitical shift with Asia becoming the fulcrum of world economic growth. India’s youth, across class, are increasingly occupying a world space that their parents could never have aspired to.

As a category Indian youth is ill defined. There is no agreement on how and why a particular age group may be defined as youth. But the importance of youth, across definitions cannot be denied. There are 430 million young people in the age group 15 – 34 years. The demographic bulge and how India may reap the demographic dividend are important points of reference and discussion today.

The demographic dividend is all about the large numbers of working population between the ages of 15-59 that will be generating incomes sufficient to share the state’s burden in supporting those that cannot yet do so. With falling mortality due to development, and falling fertility the proportion of workers to non workers rises enabling a rise in per capita income. This is assumed to result in a rise in savings that leads to greater investment in the economy. Indian planners’ golden hope lies in the fact that every Asian country in this phase of demographic change has seen accelerated growth.

Policy makers appear to be viewing the demographic dividend as the springboard that will thrust India into a high growth era [Gol 2013]. It is widely acknowledged that the demographic advantage will accrue differentially across the country. An IMF paper [Aiyar and Mody 2012] has pointed to the huge demographic advantage of some of the poorer, heavily populated states in the country. In 1991-2001 the high growth states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Gujarat had a dependency ratio of 8.7, much lower than that of the Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. In the coming decade, however, it is these latter states that will reap the demographic dividend. Finally, it appears, the long promised population advantage is being realised.

Aiyar and Mody also point out that the difference in the growth rates of the two groups of states is only 1.3 percentage points, which, in the coming decade will be bridgable. Yet that can only happen if India can realise the demographic advantage. That advantage is to be seen in the huge numbers of young workers spilling into the streets, especially in cities and towns. The simple formula is that if these young people become productive members of society, then the double advantage will set in — higher growth will promote lower fertility impacting the dependency ratio in the country as a whole.

In other words, investing in youth is regarded as the sure fire formula for higher growth. Unfortunately this fails to take account of the investment that youth bring to the process. Nor does it recognise the agency of youth, rendering them a passive target population for policy interventions. While this approach may (or may not) impact on growth, it certainly locates youth as agents of a state-led growth programme rather than recognising them as actors and directors in the theatre of development. The challenge is this: Can India come up with an innovative approach that puts the concerns of young people at the centre of policy? Can India show the world that in recognising the agency of youth, especially in the growing cities, a sustainable development is possible?

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The increasing alienation of youth and their disenchantment sent frissons of fear down the establishment’s spine. An ambitious youth policy was published. In 1998, as a follow up of the Youth Policy 1980, a review of the available data base on employment and the policy initiatives thus far was undertaken to “help formulate a comprehensive approach to the problems of youth and to evolve the necessary measures to mitigate youth unemployment.” [Visaria 1998]. The review confirmed a much higher unemployment rate among youth than among older age groups. It also showed that a majority of the urban unemployed were first time job seekers. Since employers sought experienced workers, a large population of the young remained unemployed. Moreover, the rate of rise in the educated did not match the jobs being created. The problem was compounded by the rising population growth and the fall in mortality rates. The scholarly paper concluded somewhat ominously: “The high rates of youth unemployment need serious attention by the policy makers not only to mitigate the frustrations faced by the new entrants into the workforce but also to minimise the likely alienation and widespread evidence of deviant behaviour of the youth throughout the country.” [Visaria 1998].

With the liberalisation of the economy and globalisation India’s youth once again began to emerge from the underground, in large numbers eager to participate in the modernising economy, moving in droves to centres of finance, industry and opportunity, The City. In the dying years of the last century the rise of the ‘new middle class’ in post-liberalisation India, especially the young who found their feet in that time and place, was a phenomenon. Raised as they were in a world without shortages and famine, they redefined the mores and manners of a generation, while they may not be rooted in economic stress, gain strength in the context of inequality. In most developing countries of the world, and especially in India, tremendous change has taken place in the course of a single generation. Hundreds and thousands of young people are on the move within the country, from countryside to cities, from one state to another often as alien as a foreign country with a different language (See Chapter 9). The transition to a city-dweller does not come without a price and there is little by way of support services or informal systems to smoothen the insertion of migrants into an urban environment. This friction often spills over and is capitalised upon by local political parties. Youth are well aware of this and our survey (Chapter 7) shows, can unerringly locate the bias within the city and its places of work.[This is also echoed in other initiatives. See FES 2013]

Conceputalising Youth in Policy

India’s development policy has admittedly, always acknowledged youth. But policy has always been for youth and not about them. Without a youth agenda or a youth constituency, policy makers have resorted to tokenism. On the other hand, it has been argued that since youth comprise a substantial proportion of the population, all policies will anyway benefit them the most. Why must youth be a particular concern? After all, employment and labour policies that promote job creation affect youth the most, inevitably. Similarly programmes to expand education inevitably target the young. So why should there be a particular youth focus? The flaw in this argument lies in the conceptualisation of youth. It matters how and where youth are placed in policy and programmes; for, that determines the direction and control over those programmes. A blinkered approach that leverages youth labour for national gain, without regard to their aspirations or their assets leads to policy distortions. For example, it is not surprising that the largest proportion of youth are employed in the informal sector with poor wages, little or no social security and little right to organise or demand even the basic conditions of work (See Chapter 14). Policies directions have blindly incentivised the creation of such employment without regard to the fact that it is vulnerable youth desperate for jobs who end up in this sector. Similarly, dead-end jobs in the outsourcing empires, in retail marketing and other such global desi workplaces dehumanise youth, inevitably stripping them of their rights. The young become prolific buyers with high, if uncertain, purchasing power, ‘benefitting industry and the economy’. Similarly, job creation has historically been a systemic panacea for youth in revolt. But while the absence of livelihood opportunities may create a substratum for revolt, providing jobs does not automatically quell it. Nor for that matter, does this contribute to sustainable economic growth. An extension of this conceptualisation of youth is the ‘youth at risk’ formulation. Youth are seen to be ‘at risk’ via criminals, addicts, etc and in need of reform or as potential insurgents of one kind or another, Engaging them in ‘socially relevant’ projects, providing them ‘alternatives’ is seen as a way of making them ‘productive’ members of society. While there is no denying the need for social reform and economic assistance, the chances of success of such blinkered, top-down interventions that focus on youth deficits rather than their assets remains moot.

The intrinsic value of policies for youth can be measured by the extent to which the resources that youth bring to the process is acknowledged and if they allow young people to take charge of the way their work and lives are managed. Will youth voices be heard? Will young people be able to influence the nature of programmes? What will they gain? These are not rhetorical questions.

In an earlier decade, the women’s movement too had posed similar questions about the intrinsic as opposed to the instrumental value of policies for women’s development. Without women’s agency, economic policies directed at leveraging women’s productive capacities, fail. Today, as the chapters in the volume show, the situation of women in the work world is abysmal. Masses of them are still in the lowest paid and lowest of occupations, and their participation in the labour force has not just been static, but is showing signs of decline [See Chapters 10 and 11].

A survey of young people who had applied for the UN-HABITAT’s youth-led fund last year discovered how youth see these approaches:

Much of the research on youth—in both ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries focuses on the developmental needs of young people (that is, the process of supporting young people in developing into capable, contributing adults), rather than on focusing on the resources and assets that youth bring into a community development context. ‘Youth’ is often seen as an issue to be addressed, rather than an asset to be included in the process of creating solutions for the issues facing communities. Language such as ‘youth bulge’ or ‘youth at risk’ focus on the deficits of young people. By contrast, the youth who shared their stories of engagement and initiatives through this survey clearly show ‘youth at promise’, actively engaged citizens, making a positive difference in their communities.
The increasing alienation of youth and their disenchantment sent frissons of fear down the establishment’s spine. An ambitious youth policy was published. In 1998, as a follow up of the Youth Policy 1980, a review of the available data base on employment and the policy initiatives thus far was undertaken to “help formulate a comprehensive approach to the problems of youth and to evolve the necessary measures to mitigate youth unemployment.” [Visaria 1998]. The review confirmed a much higher unemployment rate among youth than among older age groups. It also showed that a majority of the urban unemployed were first time job seekers. Since employers sought experienced workers a large population of the young remained unemployed. Moreover, the rate of rise in the educated did not match the rising population growth and the fall in mortality rates. 

Against this must be seen the communal conflagration in Gujarat in 2002 that led to the destruction of the social fabric not only in that state but elsewhere and arguably, introduced a longer pause to the realisation of youth aspirations. Rising communal and other social tensions, while they may not be rooted in economic stress, gain strength in the context of inequality.

In most developing countries of the world, and especially in India, tremendous change has taken place in the course of a single generation. Hundreds and thousands of young people are on the move within the country, from countryside to cities, from one state to another often as alien as a foreign country with a different language [See Chapter 9]. The transition to a city-dweller does not come without a price and there is little by way of support services or informal systems to smoothen the insertion of migrants into an urban environment. This friction often spills over and is capitalised upon by local political parties. Although dead-end jobs in the outsourcing empires, in retail marketing and other such places of work [See Chapter 14], policies directions have blindly incentivised the creation of such employment without regard to the fact that it is vulnerable youth desperate for jobs who end up in this sector. Similarly, dead-end jobs in the informal sector with poor wages, little or no social security and little right to organise or demand even the basic conditions of work [See Chapter 14]. Policies directions have blinds

The high rates of youth unemployment need serious attention by the policy makers not only to mitigate the frustrations faced by the new entrants into the workforce but also to minimise the likely alienation and widespread evidence of deviant behaviour of the youth throughout the country [Visaria 1998]. 

With the liberalisation of the economy and globalisation youth’s once again began to emerge from the underground, in large numbers eager to participate in the modernising economy, moving in droves to centres of finance, industry and opportunity. The City. In the dying years of the last century the rise of the ‘new middle class’ in post-liberalisation India, especially the young who found their feet in that time and place, was a phenomenon.

The rising population growth and the fall in mortality rates. Moreover, the rate of rise in the educated did not match the rising population growth and the fall in mortality rates. The scholarly paper concluded somewhat ominously:

However, the process of liberalisation without adequate social safety nets, and the drift away from a socialist-inspired policy outlook served to widen the socio-economic gap that already existed. The youth drift to the cities saw inevitably, a disproportionate number end up in the poorest of urban habitats, the ubiquitous slums. In this environment of frustrated aspirations, quick fix solutions and the existence of a labyrinthine mafia/criminal networks on the one hand and the total absence of social welfare measures, youth continue to negotiate a most dangerous terrain.

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This is a devastating summation from a section of the population that is not even recognised by policymakers as being capable of seriously understanding development concerns.

Do We Know Enough?

Today, in every sphere — education, work and play — there is a mix of disenchantment, resentment and hope. With growth has not come equity. The cost of urbanisation is beginning to tell in a way that if left unattended could lead to social fragmentation and disharmony. The social fabric has been stretched and stained, and the patterns are altering. The cultural construct, in the hands of youth, is glib, kitschy, but often cacophonous even to the young. But if a meaningless lament ‘why this kolaveri di’ (Why This Murderous Rage, Girl?), a Tamil-English song from a psycho thriller went viral all over Asia, classical art forms are finding new young aficionados who are redefining and reimagining them.

This is the vibrancy of urban India, underlying which, is a simmering anger. We do not know much about this India that the young inhabit. We do not know why the simplest of situations — traffic misdemeanours, cutting queues short-changing — can cause seriously violent outcomes, even death. We do not know why a 17-year-old migrant boy feels angered enough by young physiotherapist, also a rural migrant, to brutally rape and beat her up; nor why a young journalist can be raped in the heart of the city in daylight hours. Neither can we comprehend why these acts and no other earlier, brought out young people in their thousands in protests strong enough for their voices to be heard in parliament. Or how young women can find the courage to participate equally in the labour market? This Report is not only about what the young can deliver but about who they are; what they bring to the economy and society; what they may gain, and how their lives, in this critical period of their growth, are transforming.

Some time back a review of literature on Young People, Participation and Sustainable Development in Urbanising World [Abbe and Trine 2011] lamented that it could access no worthwhile literature on the subject in India and many other developing countries. This, in part, has led to the formation of a Global Urban Youth Research Network specifically focusing on developing the conceptualisation of youth as designers as well as participants of policy change.

As Gale and Fehrey (2005) record, most research on youth has been conducted by older academics. The tendency is for it to be “impressionistic, confined to disciplinary boundaries and lacking insight into the issues that confront youth”. There is a clear case for encouraging and training young people to undertake research on youth and their world with a view to understanding what they may take forward to the development agenda.

This Report is a preliminary attempt to take a closer look at this mass of young people, especially in urban areas knocking on the doors of schools, government and industry and its culture halls and social arenas. The proportion of young in urban areas is likely to rise quicker than ever before.

The chief difficulties in writing the report were that youth data is hard to obtain in any sector. In many cases such data only comes from small surveys or collation of anecdotal occurrences over a period. While this is not a substitute for reliable data, it does offer a glimpse of issues. Most importantly the Report draws attention to this gap in readily available data.

The Report’s core concern is employment and livelihoods. What patterns are emerging in the labour market? What are the opportunities being created? What set of basic skills, training and education are young people bringing to the labour market? In what way are young people benefiting from the country’s growing investment, albeit still insufficient, in education? Are young women participating equally in the labour market? This Report is not only about what the young can deliver but about who they are; what they bring to the economy and society; what they may gain, and how their lives, in this critical period of their growth, are transforming.

The speed and complexity of change has impacted on a number of societal institutions, class, family, community, workplace, political institution, financial structure and government. More than any time before, this generation of youth in India has seen a transformation of its environment. They have scrambled out of communal violence and terror strikes. They have also lived through nearly-catastrophic natural disasters — earthquakes and tsunamis — and manmade ones. How have they grown through all this? How does this impact on their social behaviour and on their interactions with social institutions? What role does religion play in their lives and how do they negotiate modernity? How does this impact on their economic behaviour? What will be the legacy of the ongoing radical transformations, particularly affecting the young, in this first decade of the 21st century?

The introduction to a conference volume on Youth in Transition in Asia summarises the challenges facing the young in Asia [Gale and Fahey 2005]. Young people today are marrying later, having fewer children, but their mobility has meant a gradual erosion of family support leading to a ‘me’ generation. While there is a promise of better jobs and more comfortable lifestyles, the wherewithal to achieve them is still too scarce. More of less this is true for India. The ‘new middle class’ that Fernandes (2006) wrote about has bloated, becoming more diverse and inevitably showing fissures running vertical and horizontal. Class tensions overlap and intersect other social tensions: caste, community and gender. These are most evident in urban India where increasingly the young are visible and vocal.

And yet, there is hope. In the burgeoning city offices of Indian enterprises linked to the global economy they are beginning to emerge not as Haryanvi, Kannadiga, Keralite, Oriya, Bengali, Rajasthani or Bihari but as young workers, forging new bonds. And there perhaps lie the makings of an urban youth policy that might capitalise on the change already underway.

Serious Indian literature on these aspects has been thin. Other than the innumerable youth surveys by mainstream dailies, the more significant research studies have all focused on the political behaviour of youth [e.g., Kumar, 2013]. With a General Election scheduled for early 2014 it is likely that scholarship on these aspects will expand.

The challenges facing the young are being amplified by the effects of rapid urbanisation that has led to a ‘me’ generation. While there is a promise of better jobs and more comfortable lifestyles, the wherewithal to achieve them is still too scarce. More of less this is true for India. The ‘new middle class’ that Fernandes (2006) wrote about has bloated, becoming more diverse and inevitably showing fissures running vertical and horizontal. Class tensions overlap and intersect other social tensions: caste, community and gender. These are most evident in urban India where increasingly the young are visible and vocal.

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State of the Urban Youth, India 2013
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While demographers and economists have worked to draw a picture of youth, what has been largely missing is their social constructs. Today’s youth, especially in our cities, is in transition — not just in the geographical space but also in the economy and society.

The speed and complexity of change has impacted on a number of societal institutions, class, family, community, workplace, political institution, financial structure and government. More than any time before, this generation of youth in India has seen a transformation of its environment. They have scrambled out of communal violence and terror strikes. They have also lived through nearly-cataclysmic natural disasters — earthquakes and tsunamis — and manmade ones. How have they grown through all this? How does this impact on their social behaviour and on their interactions with social institutions? What role does religion play in their lives and how do they negotiate modernity? How does this impact on their economic behaviour? What will be the legacy of the ongoing radical transformations, particularly affecting the young, in this first decade of the 21st century?

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And yet, there is hope. In the burgeoning city offices of the new global economy an entire section of young people who include first generation educated are rubbing shoulders with those who have not so far shared their social space. Under the business place discipline of enterprises linked to the global economy they are beginning to emerge not as Haryanvi, Kannadigas, Keralaite, Oriya, Bengali, Rajasthani or Bihari but as young workers, forging new bonds. And there perhaps lie the makings of an urban youth policy that might capitalise on the change already underway.

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As Gale and Fahey (2005) record, most research on youth has been conducted by older academics. The tendency is for it to be “impressionistic, confined to disciplinary boundaries and lacking insight into the issues that confront youth”. There is a clear case for encouraging and training young people to undertake research on youth and their world with a view to understanding what they may bring to the development agenda.

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The Report’s core concern is employment and livelihoods. What patterns are emerging in the labour market? What are the opportunities being created? What set of basic skills, training and education are young people bringing to the labour market? In what way are young people benefiting from the country’s growing investment, albeit still insufficient, in education? Are young women participating equally in the labour market? This Report is not only about what the young can deliver but about what they are; what they bring to the economy and society; what they may gain, and how their lives, in this critical period of their growth, are transforming.

References


The campaigns launched by young women in 2009 protesting right wing attacks in South India on women going to pubs. Women were urged to send pink underwear to the right wing group that sports chaddi shorts as uniform.