

Theorizing Contemporary Youth Dynamics in India: Insights and Debates

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Abstract: The paper addresses the complexities involved in defining youth, examining the works of various scholars and reports in youth studies to identify connections between youth studies and sociology. Then, the paper shows that collaborating with the category of youth and the discipline of sociology helps to draw on the behaviour of youth to produce insights into social life in general. The paper begins by examining the concept of youth within the social sciences and highlights its importance in deepening the understanding of sociology. It further analyses the relevance of youth as a sociological concept, exploring how the idea of youth varies across different cultures. Over time, the boundaries of the youth category have expanded and contracted to include a broader range of age groups. Additionally, the contextualisation of youth studies is discussed in the paper. Youth studies in social sciences have contextualised and shifted their focus over time. Additionally, the paper discusses the youth issues in rural studies. The study of youth within rural contexts focuses on identifying settings and opportunities where transformation and emerging social aspirations can be clearly observed. For Indian youth, education continues to serve as a key avenue for fulfilling these aspirations.

Keywords: sociology, complexities, contextualization, Additionally.

Introduction

The paper addresses the complexities involved in defining youth, examining the works of various scholars and reports in youth studies to identify connections between youth studies and sociology. Then, the paper shows that collaborating with the category of youth and the discipline of sociology helps to draw on the behaviour of youth to produce insights into social life in general. The paper begins by examining the concept of youth within the social sciences and highlights its importance in deepening the understanding of sociology. It further analyses the relevance of youth as a sociological concept, exploring how the idea of youth varies across different cultures. Over time, the boundaries of the youth category have expanded and contracted to include a broader range of age groups. Additionally, the contextualisation of youth studies is discussed in the paper. Youth studies in social sciences have contextualised and shifted their focus over time. Additionally, the paper discusses the youth issues in rural studies. The study of youth within rural contexts focuses on identifying settings and opportunities where transformation and emerging social aspirations can be clearly observed. For Indian youth, education continues to serve as a key avenue for fulfilling these aspirations.

Understanding the Concept of Youth

The study of youth within the social sciences carries a historical dimension. Throughout different periods of human history, factors such as social transformation, economic restructuring, the rise of modern political institutions, and increased life expectancy have compelled researchers to examine youth-related issues. This paper seeks to deepen sociological understanding through the lens of the youth category. Peter K. Manning and Marcello Truzzi (1972, p. 1) highlight youth as a crucial category for deepening sociological insight. They emphasize the fundamental importance of youth studies within sociology, noting the inherent connection between the idea of youth and the discipline as a whole. They argue that "by studying youth, we can isolate concepts, principles, and data that reflect the larger aim of sociology: to understand society in a careful, disciplined, and systematic way. By pairing youth and sociology, then, we can draw on the behavior of youth to produce insights into social life in general" (Manning & Truzzi, 1972, p. 1).

Further, Jorgen Baek Simonsen (2005, p. 7), in his study on youth in the middle east, argues that social scientists and historians have defined youth as a social construction and a period between two significant stages of human life that are childhood and adulthood. There is no universally agreed-upon definition of youth, though it generally includes individuals between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Over time, this range has expanded both upward and downward to encompass

broader age groups. As a result of its fluid and dynamic nature, the concept of youth has been a recurring subject of discussion and debate in academic circles. According to Theodore Roszak (1972, p. 40), with the passing of time in the last few decades, the youth category has expanded downward to include school- going children and upward to include university-going students of thirty years. Some believe that this process of extension has to lead to the creation of a counterculture that holds a particular set of roles, beliefs, choices, different views of the future, particular behaviour and way of expressing things or desires.

Youthfulness has consistently been valued and admired across all societies. In many modern industrial contexts, individuals increasingly seek to prolong their sense of youth beyond the traditional upper limit of the thirties, extending it into their forties and even fifties. This shifting understanding of the term “youth” has gradually diluted its original analytical meaning. Youth remains a transient phase, as its boundaries are fluid-once past a certain age, an individual no longer belongs to the category of youth. (Jodhka 2018, p. 1). He further argues that unlike other categories such as caste, gender remain with the individual throughout their life. As per the World Youth Report (2003, p. 5), "youth, as a concept, varies from culture to culture and from one society to another". Youth as a transition period from childhood to youth involves some systematic rite of passage. It requires community action, and therefore it also has symbolic significance. Just with participation in rites, an individual gets a new status by recognition of society. Rituals marking the transition from childhood to youth continue to exist in complex societies, though their boundaries are less distinct than those observed in pre-industrial settings. Jodhka (2018) notes that ritual and culture persist even within technologically driven and urbanized contexts. Such rituals also appear in legal frameworks, including defined ages for marriage, contesting elections, or obtaining a license. Furthermore, Jodhka (2018, p. 2) observes that each era attaches specific meanings to different age groups. In traditional Indian society, rooted in a conventional economic system, being older was considered advantageous and carried social value and authority over the young. Further, as per the World Youth Report (2003, p. 5), "the boundaries defining the transition from childhood to youth and from youth to adulthood are shifting, and the crossover into each new stage is now manifested in different ways than before". According to Manning & Truzzi (1972), youth is a category that is given to one stratum of society by another to define social roles, norms, attributes, and meanings for those it is denoted. Adults in most of societies hold the privilege of giving labels to young irrespective of its nature. Therefore, the youth category comes into existence when defined by the generation of elders. Manning & Truzzi (1972, p. 12) further argue that multiple factors determine the youth category, such as society's social formation, division of labour, values, norms, roles, and expectations. The different attributes and features of youth, such as freedom, and the transition from youth to adulthood, vary across societies. While elaborating on attaching the characteristics to youth Manning argues: "When and how the period occurs, and what psycho-social attributes are said to attach to youth, are closely associated with the link between the family and family roles and the requirements made of adults and adult roles" (Manning & Truzzi, 1972, p. 12).

Over time, youth studies within the social sciences have evolved and adapted to changing contexts. Simonsen (2005, p. 7) notes that the 21st century in Europe has witnessed the growth of multiculturalism. The focus on youth has varied across periods-with the 1950s dominated by the image of the “angry young man” in European literature and theatre, and the 1960s concerned with youth gangs formed as a result of parental absence due to work. In contrast, contemporary research in Europe centers on the challenges faced by the children of migrant parents, especially in relation to established social norms. In today’s context, the primary concern involves integrating and supporting youth whose roots lie outside European society. Building trust across diverse communities has become increasingly essential worldwide, including in Europe. According to the World Youth Report (2003, p. 8), approximately 120 million young people migrate between countries each year. World Programme of Action of Youth of the year 2000 and beyond have considered in their objective to highlight the social dimension of life and the importance of community. A systematic study on youth has been done initially by Eisenstadt, attempting to outline the critical issues of youth. Analysis of it has been insufficient, so a detailed discussion on youth is required. The following section elaborates on the concept of youth in Rural Studies.

Rural Youth: Emerging Issues and Perspectives

The significance of the youth category in rural studies lies in its ability to highlight spaces of transformation and emerging social aspirations. Examining youth provides critical insights into the factors and motivations that drive social change and ambition. While certain traditional taboos-such as inter-caste dining-have begun to ease, strict prohibitions against inter-caste marriage largely persist. Nonetheless, instances of inter-caste marriages do occur, particularly among educated youth who challenge these rigid norms, even as they continue to face social repercussions for doing so. The work of Kathleen Gough (1967) in the Tanjore District shows that the youth in communist groups of Anti Dravidas adopts the policy of anti-religious and anti- Brahman propaganda. In rural Indian society, there is a change in religious cooperation and the unequal relation of interdependence among the youth of lower castes. Further, Kathleen Gough highlights that youth from lower caste groups can assert themselves because younger leaders get an opportunity in the organised communist party in the Tanjore district. Similarly, youth from across the sections now have more opportunities to express themselves and raise their voice.

Youth from backward and lower castes are increasingly disengaging from their traditional caste-based occupations. Many perceive these roles as degrading and reject the long-standing master-servant relationships associated with them. Their aspirations and choices are now shaped more by modern education, exposure to urban lifestyles, and the influence of global culture. These young individuals are becoming more aware of social inequalities and are determined to assert their rights within the unequal political and social structures of rural life. Furthermore, rising population pressures and declining agricultural incomes have compelled rural youth to seek employment beyond agriculture. This shift has contributed to the growth of the non-farm economy and has deepened the interconnection between rural and urban spaces. Cohn highlights in his work the behaviour of youth from lower caste Camar towards the upper caste Thakur that "younger Camars are less prone to give outward signs of respect to Thakurs, and the younger Thakurs seem to expect such signs less" (Cohn, 1967, p. 74). Youth are moving away from traditional norms, values, and authority. Further, Dr. Cohn shows that modern secular education plays a significant role in Camars efforts to improve their position. Camars in Madhopur often describe their low position to a lack of education. But a Camar teacher does not get the same respect as of a higher caste teacher. But still, an educated Camar get better position among upper castes than an uneducated Camar. "Education is an individual achievement, but even educated Camars cannot escape an awareness that mobility for them, too, must be a group phenomenon" (Cohn, 1967, p. 74). Education has been recognized as a key channel for transmitting urban culture, behaviors, and lifestyles to rural areas. The distinction between educated and uneducated individuals is reflected in various consumption practices, including clothing choices, urban etiquette, speech styles, and body language. Rural transformation has accelerated as younger generations have assumed control, with youth showing less attachment to tradition and greater awareness of the opportunities provided by urban legal systems. The increasing population in villages, reduced land holdings and falling income in agriculture have forced people to move out of agriculture. People have moved from agriculture to non-farm activities. A few reasons for migration from rural to urban are landless laborers, rising food prices, reduced land, inadequate employment, etc. Along with these factors, the course of change in rural areas also depends upon the interplay of external change-producing factors. People in rural India are adopting an urban way of life and have started to consume urban material goods, so rural is becoming part of urban. A study by Alan R. Beals (1967) shows that there is a possibility in the future, as " more remote villages are drawn increasingly under the influence of urban factors of change, they too may begin to follow a course of change resembling the one followed by Namhalli in the past" (Beals, 1967, p. 100). These changes at different levels affect youth differently and shape their aspirations.

According to Vivek Kaul, government data indicates that around 84 million people-nearly one-fourth of India's rural workforce-need to shift out of agriculture for the sector to remain economically sustainable. In other countries, such transitions have typically been supported by the construction and industrial sectors, which absorb the surplus agricultural labor. However, in India, the major challenge lies in the predominantly unskilled or semi-skilled nature of the agricultural workforce. This issue is particularly pressing as the country experiences a demographic dividend, with large numbers of people entering the workforce each month. Compounding the problem, underperforming public schools have resulted in a

generation of young workers lacking adequate skills and preparedness for non-agricultural employment. Even after infrastructure improvement, "only 4.69 per cent of India's working population is formally skilled, much lower than the numbers in developed countries like Germany (76%), Japan (80%) and South Korea (96%)" (Jodhka, 2018, p. 7). Inadequate education remains a key factor constraining the potential of India's workforce. Government expenditure on education-both at the state and central levels-has declined from 3.2% of GDP in 2011–2012 to approximately 2.7% in 2017–2018. This reduction in investment has significant social implications. Empirical evidence suggests that prolonged unemployment among youth often correlates with increased involvement in violent or disruptive activities. Many young individuals pursue education with the expectation of securing stable government employment; however, in the prevailing context of limited job opportunities, they are frequently compelled to return to agricultural work. This dissonance between aspiration and reality is particularly pronounced among rural youth influenced by urban lifestyles and modern aspirations. Their unmet expectations and rising frustrations often find expression through aggression, protest, and other forms of social unrest. The change in the economic structure of rural India has also disturbed the existing traditional social and political equilibrium. Stagnation and crisis in agriculture are forcing the youth from agricultural communities to move out of agriculture. Moreover, urban aspirations significantly influence the decision-making and life choices of rural youth. For many middle-class families, investment in education is a strategic endeavor, guided by an understanding of its potential socioeconomic returns. However, youth from agrarian and lower-caste backgrounds often find themselves at a disadvantage compared to their urban, upper-caste counterparts. Limited access to quality education and resources hampers their ability to compete for admission to government-funded educational institutions. Consequently, they are also less successful in obtaining government employment-positions that continue to be regarded as the most desirable due to their association with stability, social prestige, and long-term security. Thus, along with the socio-economic and political structures of rural Indian society, there is a need to analyse the different varieties of social life. In this aspect, youth is an important category that needs more attention from the academic world. This initiative from the academic world can prove beneficial for policy-making.

Conclusion

Youth is inherently a transient phase, characterized by its fluid and permeable boundaries-beyond a certain age, an individual no longer belongs to this category (Jodhka, 2018, p. 1). Manning and Truzzi (1972) conceptualize youth as a social category ascribed by one segment of society to another, delineating specific roles, norms, attributes, and meanings. In most societies, adults hold the authority to define and label the youth, irrespective of the nature or implications of such classifications. Thus, the very notion of "youth" emerges through the interpretive frameworks established by the older generation.

Manning and Truzzi (1972, p. 12) further contend that the definition of youth is shaped by multiple factors, including a society's social structure, division of labour, prevailing values, norms, and role expectations. Attributes commonly associated with youth-such as autonomy, freedom, and the transition to adulthood-differ significantly across cultural and social contexts. Over time, youth studies within the social sciences have evolved, adapting their focus to changing societal dynamics. Consequently, the category of youth continues to hold analytical significance in sociology, offering valuable insights into emerging patterns of education, mobility, and social transformation, particularly within the Indian context.

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