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Youth, Social Change and Politics in India Today: An Introduction to the Delhi Studies

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Events in many parts of the world over the last decade – starting with protests in Greece in December 2008, following the death of a young student at the hands of the police, and continuing through the Arab Spring, the movement of Los Indignados in Spain, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, then widespread demonstrations in Brazil and Turkey in 2013, and other protest events – have thrown into sharp relief the significance of young people in contemporary politics. In India, similarly, young people were generally recognised as having played a vital role in the India Against Corruption movement (IAC), associated with Anna Hazare in 2011-12, then in the wave of protests over the Delhi rape case of December 2012, and in the meteoric rise of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in 2013. Observers have noted some commonalities amongst these events: the central, though not exclusive role played by young people; the extensive use in them of social media; that they have mostly been characterised by spontaneity and the absence of hierarchical leadership (though this is not true in the case of IAC); they have been directed

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against existing political systems, entrenched elites and political corruption (most explicitly so in the case of IAC), but without presenting an entirely coherent alternative (as in the case of AAP); and they seem, commonly, to have been motivated by some combination of concerns about unemployment, austerity, the deterioration of public services, inflation or increasing inequality.² It is suggested that they reflect a common experience of precariousness, felt especially amongst young people, and including those with high levels of education who cannot be sure, nonetheless, of building desirable identities and careers, as well as those relying on uncertain informal employment.

It was in the context of these events that, in 2013-14, the Institute of South Asian Studies decided to take up empirical research on young people in India, social change and politics, in partnership with colleagues in Delhi, at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems of Jawaharlal Nehru University, in Bihar (the Asia Development Research Institute), and in Tamil Nadu (the Madras Institute of Development Studies). It has been recognised, of course, that India now has a particularly youthful society – those in the age group of 15-32 years constitute 35 per cent of the urban population and 32 per cent of the rural Indian population – and there is a good deal of hope that the country can benefit from its ‘demographic dividend’. Yet youth have been relatively little researched in India hitherto.³ The role played by youth in the IAC campaign, in the anti-rape demonstrations and then in the rise of AAP was striking to many and seemed to mark a significant break in Indian politics (though perhaps only to those who had forgotten the role of young people in the JP Movement of the 1970s, that shook the rule of Mrs Indira Gandhi). It was then widely thought, in the run-up to the Indian general election of 2014, that the large numbers of first-time young voters would exercise a lot of influence on the outcome. In the event, however, according to the National Election Study, though the turnout amongst these young people was a little higher than the historical average, it appears that:

Of the several factors which contributed to the big win for the Bharatiya Janata Party, the role of youth can neither be understated nor overstated. These elections witnessed much

² These events are considered by Dr John Harriss (2014) in ISAS Special Report No. 18: Youth and ‘Refo-lution’? Protest Politics in India and the Global Context (available at www.isas.nus.edu.sg/publication.aspx)

³ But see the literature review by Rahul Advani (2013), ISAS Working Papers Nos. 173 and 174 (available at www.isas.nus.edu.sg/publication.aspx)

higher participation of first-time voters (18-22 years of age) compared to past elections but these voters do not seem to have voted for the BJP in a big way. In some states, the BJP seemed to have more votes among ‘other young voters’ (23-25 years of age) or among middle-aged voters. But even a marginal shift in the votes of first-time voters in favour of the BJP was enough to help the party register an impressive victory.⁴

These findings seem to reflect the fact that there is much more speculation than knowledge about how the youth of India are responding to the great changes that are taking place in their society. Of course, any attempt to generalise about ‘the youth of India’ is bound to be an exercise in failure, given the extraordinary diversity of the country, in so many different ways. It was for this reason that in our research we set out to map, as far as possible given our modest resources, variations in the experience of young people in education and employment, in different parts of the country, and to try to assess the implications of these different experiences for their ideas, attitudes and practices in regard to their social roles and to political participation, taking account of differences of gender, caste and religion. We decided to work in the National Capital, given the possibility that actions that take place there have a tremendously important demonstration effect on other parts of the country, and in what is generally considered to be an ‘advanced’ state – Tamil Nadu – as well as one that is usually reckoned ‘backward’ – Bihar – thinking that this would be an interesting comparison. One view that was put to us – for instance – was that, given the kind of development that has taken place in Tamil Nadu, and the opening up of large numbers of engineering and other professional colleges across this most highly urbanised of the major Indian states, it has been witnessing considerable social mobility. Surely, it was suggested, Bihar cannot possibly have experienced the same sort of mobility. If this is so, then what are the implications of the difference for the ways in which young people are thinking and acting in regard to society and politics? More generally, across all three research sites, perhaps we would be able to distinguish between groups of youth who are becoming increasingly individualistic in their attitudes and practices, and who may be more or less willing neo-liberal subjects, and others whose orientation is conservative and ‘traditional’. And perhaps others again who are inclined to participate in the performative politics of protest that is represented, at least in part, by AAP. We did not expect to establish broad generalisations, but rather to depict differences and possible

⁴ ‘Higher turnout in youth vote’ by Sanjay Kumar, *The Hindu*, May 28 2014

trends that might be investigated in more depth in further research. The study, which included sample surveys of youth in different ‘locations’ in terms of occupation or the level of the educational institution in which they were studying, backed up with qualitative research with different groups of youth, was designed to be exploratory rather than to test specific hypotheses – as Divya Vaid, Arshad Alam and Surinder Jodhka, from JNU, explain in two studies about the Delhi research.

What conclusions are reached in the two Delhi studies, one reporting on the findings of the survey of 619 young people (aged 18-28 – the generation that has grown up in the period of India’s liberalising economic reforms), and the second on the results of in-depth interviews with 28 of them? We will offer our own reading of the two working papers. First, it seems important to note that the survey included a major share of relatively privileged young people. Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jamia Milia Islamia are amongst the best higher education institutions in the country. They are not comparable with the ‘poorly provisioned north Indian universities’ of Meerut in the studies of youth made by Craig Jeffrey and Stephen Young.⁵ Neither does the sample include many under- or unemployed youth, like those who are engaged in what, following their own usage, Jeffrey refers to as ‘timepass’ – an extended period of ‘waiting’, of being in a kind of limbo, without proper work. The Delhi survey included a sample of young people who have made it into regular employment in the private or public sectors, most of them with little delay after the completion of their education, and without having to rely on ‘influence’, as well as of some who are engaged in informal and contract employment. Probably for this reason neither the survey responses nor the detailed interviews seem very strongly to reflect a sense of precariousness, except amongst those in informal or contract employment who, for instance, expressed regret to the interviewers at having to live far away from their homes and families. Still, it is striking that the ‘ideal job’ for most respondents is a ‘government job’, probably reflecting a concern for the security that such employment offers.

What the Delhi survey does show up quite strongly is the reproduction of inequality. Contrary to the expectations of some that the historic lines of social inequality and difference are being

⁵ See C. Jeffrey (2010) *Timepass: Youth, Class and the Politics of Waiting*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press; and C. Jeffrey and S. Young (2012) ‘Waiting for change: youth, caste and politics in India’, *Economy and Society*, 41 (4): 638-661

shaken up by education, which is supposed to generate social mobility, the survey data rather suggest the reproduction of inequality and difference.⁶ There is some mobility, for sure, but in Delhi as in rural western Uttar Pradesh, according to the ethnographic research of Craig Jeffrey and Roger and Patricia Jeffery,⁷ inequality is reproduced across generations. There is nothing surprising in the observations that more highly educated parents are more likely to fund their children's education, or that their children are more likely to have studied in English medium, or that there should be a clear relationship between the financial position of their families and the extent to which children feel they are able to exercise individual choice. It is not surprising that there should be a nearly linear relationship between parental education and competitive placement in a job. Or on the other hand that it should be those whose parents had little education, who have had relatively little education themselves, not in English-medium, and who are Muslims or who are Scheduled Caste/Tribe (SC/ST), who have been most reliant on 'influence' or the payment of 'something' in securing employment, mostly in the informal sector, and who have had to wait longest to find their jobs after completing their education. The same characteristics (coming from a relatively underprivileged educational background) apparently make it more likely that a person will want to stay in the same job, or to express the view that they have had 'no choice'. They are more likely, too, to be dissatisfied with their salaries – which is what they value most in their employment – and to be dissatisfied with their working conditions, and to think that there is a mismatch between their education and the jobs they are doing. Those from these backgrounds are also more likely than others to attribute success or failure in life to 'the will of god'. The intersection of socio-economic inequality and differences of identity are quite strongly apparent, in the overlaps of being SC/ST, or Muslim, coming from a less privileged background in regard to education and being employed in informal activity. None of this is at all surprising, but it shows up the structural constraints that young people confront. All confront uncertainty, but the life chances of those from more privileged backgrounds in terms of cultural and educational capital are generally much better, and inequality is reproduced between generations.

⁶ The limitations on social mobility in India are demonstrated in research by Anirudh Krishna, as for example in an article on 'Examining the Structure of Opportunity and Social Mobility in India: Who becomes an engineer?'. This shows that 'the rural-urban divide remains deep: the more rural one is, the lower one's chances of getting into any engineering college. Multiple simultaneous handicaps – being poor *and* rural or schedule caste *and* rural – reduce these chances to virtually zero' (*Development and Change*, 45 (1): 1-28)

⁷ C. Jeffrey et al (2008) *Degrees Without Freedom? Education, masculinities and unemployment in north India*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press

There are reflections of these constraints and of their social positions in the ideas and attitudes of young people. In their paper on ‘Youth in Delhi: Perceptions on Aspirations, Politics and the Self’, Arshad Alam, Divya Vaid and Surinder Jodhka refer to differences that they found between students from upper caste and those from scheduled caste backgrounds. For upper caste students ‘education is understood in terms of individual attainment as compared with SC students who understood their educational attainment as a collective effort of their larger family’; there is an important sense in which scheduled caste students appeared to be much more political than their upper caste peers ‘in the sense that they could link their life chances with the larger structural problem of inequality’; and while some of the upper caste students ‘understood democracy to be some sort of welfarism, the scheduled caste students understand democracy more in terms of principles of representation and redistributive justice’. These attitudes resonate with survey findings on responses to questions about reservations for SC/ST. ‘Those from the informal sector (57%) and students (51%) showed considerably more support for reservations for all SC/ST, compared to the private (30%) or public sector employees (30%). These latter two groups were also likely to return a “no” to reservation response, the highest being amongst public sector employees (44%), a sector where reservations have been in place since the 1950s. Muslims (47%) are more likely to support reservations than are Hindus (36%). SC/STs themselves were overwhelmingly in support of reservations for all SC/ST (75%), with fairly high support among the OBCs as well (47%) and the lowest support among the general castes (24%), who were more likely to return a “no” response to reservation (44%). Respondents with higher parental or personal education were more likely to return a higher “no” to reservation response’. There was generally much less support for reservations for OBCs – and, interestingly, SC/STs expressed more support for these reservations than did OBCs themselves. These responses are unsurprising, given the dominance of the view that success in life depends on education and hard work, or generally speaking, on individual ‘merit’. That so many, especially among the general castes, and those in public and private sector employment, should not be supportive of affirmative action is hardly surprising. The emphasis that Narendra Modi and the BJP placed, in the campaign for the general election in 2014, on ‘opportunity’ as opposed to ‘entitlements’, was not misplaced.

Young people from the upper castes and from more privileged educational backgrounds, in many of their responses, reflected individualism and liberal convictions about the importance of individual choice, to a greater extent than was true for others, though the differences between them and scheduled caste young men were not wide. Attitudes towards marriage for instance showed an 'urge toward self-choice in all categories except the informal sector and Muslim males'. Youth in these categories showed greater social conservatism than others, expressing, for instance, more reluctance to accept inter-caste marriage than other young people.

By comparison with young people elsewhere in the country, if we may judge by the preliminary findings from our surveys in Bihar and Tamil Nadu, the youth of Delhi are remarkably active politically. About half of those who were interviewed for the survey who are in private sector employment (49%), and fully half of the students (51%) had participated in a demonstration, and about a quarter of the others had done so (public sector employees 25%; those in informal sector 21%). Fairly large numbers had participated in political meetings or rallies (41% of the students, 36% of both the private sector and the informal sector employees, and even 23% of the public sector workers); and more than a third (36%) of both the students and the private sector employees had participated in strikes (as had 21% of the public sector employee, though only 14% of the informal sector workers). Those with higher levels of education (post-graduate and above), coming from families in which both parents were fairly highly educated, and who had studied in English medium, were – on the whole – more likely to have participated in these activities. These findings do seem to confirm the impressions of observers about the social character of participants in the protest events in Delhi associated with IAC, the rape case and AAP. What might not have been expected is that the survey findings suggest that rather more of the SC/STs have participated in strikes, demonstrations and political meetings than have OBCs or members of the general castes – though this observation is in line with the indications from in-depth interviews about the political sensibilities certainly of the students from these backgrounds.

In Tamil Nadu and Bihar, as in Delhi, the survey findings suggest that those in professional positions or in organised sector employment are more likely than informal sector workers and contract employees to participate in strikes and demonstrations, but it seems that relatively few

have done so by comparison with their peers in the capital city. In other ways, however, even youth in Delhi do not appear to be particularly active. If we consider that participation in associational life is a marker of ‘political participation’ in the widest sense, then Delhi youth do not appear to be very active.⁸ Few of the survey respondents are members of any kind of an association (only 9% were members of a cultural association; 5% were members of a sports club). About half of the youth of Delhi, however (48% of the survey sample), did report being supporters of a particular political party and – generally in line with the results of the 2013 Delhi elections – 16% said they supported AAP, 15% the BJP and 12% Congress. BJP supporters were found especially amongst those in private sector employment (57%), as well as amongst the more highly educated. Congress support was strongest, relatively, amongst informal sector workers. These findings correspond quite closely with what has been reported elsewhere about the support bases of the major parties (at least before the BJP’s landslide victory in the 2014 general election).

Overall, then, the Delhi studies show the enduring significance in young people’s lives of caste and religious differences, of the ways in which these are reflected in the formation of cultural and educational capital, and of the ways in turn, in which these capitals influence employment prospects. These differences are reflected, as well, in differences in values and attitudes, and in patterns of political participation. The generation of what we may call ‘the neo-liberal reform period’ does not appear to be made up of entirely willing neo-liberal subjects (note how many of them, still, would prefer to have a ‘government job’). Concern for family remains strong. And though the youth of Delhi are quite active participants in public political acts, their party political sympathies and political attitudes are not notably different from those of the society as a whole.

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⁸ In this respect youth do not seem very different from the run of the population of Delhi. In an earlier study of political participation in Delhi it was reported that ‘there is not much evidence of vibrant associational activity in Delhi’ (John Harriss [2005] ‘Political Participation, Representation and the Urban Poor: Findings from research in Delhi’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40 (11):1041-1054)