Parul Bansal

Youth in Contemporary India

Images of Identity and Social Change

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To

My Parents, who made me who I am

and

Nitin, who believed I could be more!

To develop a sense of identity and fidelity in youth is a joint task of the consistency of individual life history and the ethical potency of the historical process. . . . . Diversity and fidelity are polarized: they make each other significant and keep each other alive. Fidelity without a sense of diversity can become an obsession and a bore; diversity without a sense of fidelity, an empty relativism.

Erik H. Erikson
Identity: Youth and Crisis

Foreword

This book is a research text about youth in India. It explores their choices, roles, commitments, values, goals, motivations, emotions, desires and fantasies. It attempts to formulate and represent their life stories by delving in their inner worlds.

My Personal Journey

The idea of this book was born out of a coalescing of disparate perceptions, emotions and memories amassed over my lifetime (albeit not too long) that emerged in the form of an acute consciousness in my youth (somewhat protracted and still ongoing. . .). Struggles with myself were sustained in this stage by a permissive family environment and stimulating educational context. After having lived much of my life in an unselfconscious manner, feeling quite comfortable in my own skin, the moment of making a career decision at the end of college posed a challenge to my selfhood. Faced with a decisive choice for the future, I stood transfixed to the ground. There was ambivalence towards following a popular path which neither offered passion nor surprise, but at the same time I felt fright about being 'too out of place'. This was the time when I began to realise that growing up in a middle-class family had afforded me freedoms and opportunities but at the same time had a structuring effect on my aspirations and imagination. While I was too sensitive to follow a modish trend which didn't appeal to me personally, I was also not rebellious enough to break the mould. In the years that followed the decision that I took then of pursuing higher education which kept me in a sort of 'protracted youth', I have often returned back to that crisis experience to understand: Why was there a crisis in the first place? What did that crisis precipitate for me? What all led me to make the choice that I made then and the ones that I made

before that event and in the subsequent years? Why do certain options remain psychologically unavailable to me? Many semi-deliberate strenuous moments of introspection (in individual and collective spaces) led me to revisit my past, come to memories of growing up, probe the influences of parental figures and family culture and compare them with the countervailing and/or reinforcing influences from extrafamilial influences. This was a bid to identify signs of certain evolving themes of feeling and mental life and also anticipate the future likelihood of continuing/changing 'how one has been and what one is doing'. This form of self-knowledge has been often experienced by me as quite tragicomic. For while it helped me make an interesting (at least to my own self) story of my life lived so far, which can be told and retold with some variations (depending upon the mood, viewpoint and audience setting), it also made me recognise my place in the world. It tells me at least for the foreseeable future 'where I belong', 'where I can belong' and 'where I don't belong'.

As one characteristically begins to become aware of the deep effects upon one's personality of one's family, society and culture, one is motivated to look at others to see how their lives are shaping up. As I looked around, observed and talked with my contemporaries, I was struck with the aspirational value of corporate world amidst parents and children alike. Having made the choice of pursuing social sciences over the professional fields of science and commerce in school itself and later deciding to make a living through academics, I often felt anomalous in the peer culture beset by frenetic competition for admission to the engineering and management institutes, especially the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management, the lure of multi-lakh salaries, the glamour of jet-setting and globe-trotting lifestyle and ambitions of expedient vertical mobility. As a young lecturer in a Delhi University college, I have been questioned by successive batches of students younger to me by only a couple of years—'So. . .what do you want to do in life?'—and when I would respond that I would like to teach and research and basically have time for my own self and family, many of them would appear baffled, and few would even feel amused at what appeared to them as an 'uncool' choice of life. Over the years, I found that for a majority of students, their own aspirations are of meeting their 'tryst with destiny' with the corporate world in the diverse fields of management, law, media, advertising, marketing etc. and they are driven by the dream of making mega bucks. Thus, a part of my research trail was derived by a need to have a closer look at the lives of such young people whose primary concerns appeared to be ensuring high academic performance, securing admissions in the best of professional institutes and getting plush jobs —to understand their struggles and motivations. Such youth has been termed as the corporate youth in the research because of their interests in the business world of private profit. On the other end, I have been intrigued by young people who have been making credible appeal to social change and are sociopolitically active and been inquisitive about finding out what 'activated' them and what got 'activated' in them? In my mind, they appeared as idealised images that were rebelling against the pervasive middle-class apathetic

attitude to dehumanising social reality that surrounds us. They have been questioning and moving beyond the self-centred vision of elite living. Coming from a middle-class background with its conflicts of convention and liberalism, ambitions and ideals and wants and limitations, my own non-participation (or non-possibility of participation) in the fantasised rebellion must have created its own dynamic. This heterogeneous group of participants is referred to as humanist youth in the research because of their involvement in the cause of welfare of humanity.

About the Book

Youth, identity and social change are interrelated phenomena. The self-definitional process of identity formation utilises the resource of strong identifications made in one's personal past and relies on new possibilities of workable roles (vocation, relationships) offered in young adulthood. Societal changes affect the process of identity formation. Identity confusion is exacerbated and embraces a much larger population of young people in a historical period of rapid change when traditional values and roles break down, adult support for youth's search for an identity lacks and the guidelines of acceptable and desirable behaviour during youth phase become blurred and contradictory. Just as social change affects the lives of youth, the young also drive social change. Societies need the energy, imagination and dynamism of youth to create new forms of social order either based on repudiation of old world view or renewal of traditional values.

This book is intended to provide few illustrations of nature of social change taking place in present-day urban Indian society through in-depth study of identity process in youth and their psychosocial contexts. Family is seen as the social group where the impact of social change can be understood in great depth. In a collectivist culture like India, family is considered as the central institution of socialisation and a psychological locus in the lives of a vast majority of people. Research provides evidence that in collectivist cultural groups, individuals are more compliant and other directed. There is high commitment to family values and subordination of individual needs to family needs. An attempt is made here to examine how intergenerational relationships within Indian urban middle-class families are structured in contemporary times of social change. Are Indian families changing in response to exposure to market forces, globalising influences and increased pressures for achievement and competition? Are they allowing for greater expression of assertiveness and self-direction amongst children? What is the nature of feminine self of mother and masculine authority of father with which youth are identifying as well as seeking freedom from? Through a narrative study of lives, an effort has been made to trace the multivariate expressions of individuality vis-à-vis parental traditions amongst the Indian youth. The search is to find how the psychological tendencies of autonomy and relatedness are finding their balance within their life space. Such an investigation allows for verification of claims that cultures across the world are increasingly converging in outlook under the forces of globalisation and social change.

A simultaneous focus of this book is to understand whether youth are engineering social change through an exploration of the kinds of social values and roles, goals and aspirations and dreams and desires that they have. The young position themselves in various discourses offering resistance or conformity to the dominant social establishment. In this work, an endeavour has been made to examine how different sections of urban youth relate and engage with the liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation (LPG) model of growth based on ever increasing cycles of production and consumption. What are the educational-vocational-ideological choices they are making? What social ideals and meanings are they reproducing? What are the kinds of stresses, tensions and splits they experience?

Study of identity in times of continuous and rapid social change also puts to question the definition and understanding of the term 'identity'. One is compelled to ask what are the more appropriate metaphors to describe the experience of identity—sameness or transformation, continuity or disjuncture, coherence or diversity, essential core or performance? In the present work, attempt has been made to work with an as-well-as approach rather than either-or approach. While engaging with the many-sided, fluid and contingent nature of identity process, what self-elements cohere and what endures in the lives of people is also reflected upon. Erik H. Erikson, whose seminal work on identity straddles the conceptual fence between the intrapsychic and the contextual, states that identity in youth is experienced as 'I am what I care to do, be and become – even in changing roles' (1950). He elucidates that even an actor is convincing in many roles only if and when there is in him an actor's core identity and craftsmanship (1974). Robert Jay Lifton, a psychohistorical thinker, also emphasises change and flux rather than stability. However, he separates himself from those observers, postmodern or otherwise, who equate this plurality with disappearance of self. Rather, he sees self as an integrative experiential reality, an agency and guide of our ethical action. He seeks to make the claim that the self strives to be both fluid and grounded, however tenuous that combination (1993).

Acknowledgements

After having crafted this book, a process which fructified painstakingly yet excitingly, as I look back to acknowledge all those who have been co-travellers, supporters and guides, I am overwhelmed with memories, impressions and emotions. So many people have contributed to my thought process, facilitated my expressions and articulations, made me into who I am and shaped the work as it eventually turned out to be.

I, first and foremost, wish to acknowledge that the seed of this work was planted and nurtured by the writings of thinkers like Erik H. Erikson and D. W. Winnicott. Speaking through their work, they have become luminous presences and enabling teachers for me. Their musings on self and identity have made me sensitive to the delicate relation between insight in work and insight into the self.

With a deep sense of gratitude, I wish to recognise and thank all the research participants who made the research work (on which this book is based) possible. By sharing their lives and including me in their life worlds, by helping me build network of contacts and by making relevant suggestions and recommendations about the directions the work can take—they involved themselves with the research process validating it as a meaningful activity for all of us. By listening to their stories, I learnt much about different shades of life, till now unknown, and could critically engage with our theories and their relation with 'living'. Without doubt, I grew immensely, both emotionally and intellectually, through my association with each one of them.

Turning to my teachers, I would like to thank my first 'real' teacher of psychology, Dr. Rachana Johri, who has effectively introduced generations of students including me to the realm of 'psychosocial' thinking in psychology. Over my years of association with her, I found in her an evolving teacher and supportive colleague who preserves in herself the tensions of keeping alive theoretical and methodological pluralism in the discipline. A very special teacher, Dr. Honey Oberoi Vahali or Honey Ma'am, as she is affectionately referred to by all her students, has been a constant source of knowledge, inspiration and emotional comfort for me. For me, she embodies the values of excellence, commitment to work, honesty, a sense of balance and humanism, and these are the qualities that I strive to bring to my work

and being. With fond regard, I remember my teacher Dr. Ashok Nagpal, a person of remarkably creative mind and astute clinical sensitivities. It is to an internalised image of him that I gratefully attribute my emerging capacity to work through flux and chaos which experiential inquiries like this bring with them. His impassioned search for truth and deep understanding into life processes is an exciting endeavour which holds my curiosity and engages my playful spirit. I am especially grateful to Prof. Mishra for his mentoring and guidance. He has always encouraged and helped me challenge my boundaries. I look forward to a continuing mutually fulfilling work companionship with my teachers and guides.

With the deepest gratitude, I recognise the unbounded support, love and care of my parents and sister without which this work would not have been possible. My parents created a highly conducive physical and psychological ambiance for me that enabled me to be devoted to the work. Always felt as non-demanding, both of you have patiently and graciously borne my failures in attending to your needs. My mother's hopeful spirit of persistence towards a goal and my father's sensitive psychological mindedness have been immensely formative influences on me. Nitin, my husband, has been instrumental in prodding, pushing and encouraging me to write this book. Thank you is a small word for the great strength I derive out of the feeling that you share my dreams. My second set of parents, my in-laws, has been most supportive of my efforts. Along with them, my two dear friends, Rakhi and Indu, helped me see through some of the most difficult phases of this work. Friends, big thanks to both of you for I could always partake in your positive spirits. The collective belief of my family and friends in me and my capabilities are my internal sources of strength and hope. Besides, I always felt the blessings of my grandparents around me keeping my morale high. Bade Papa, you have been an inspiration behind my academic endeavours. I hope I am able to do all of you proud.

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Part I
Foundations

Introduction

What Are the Aims of the Book?

India is witnessing what the demographers call a 'youth bulge'. The youth bulge consists of large number of adolescents and young adults who are born when fertility is high followed by declining number of children born after fertility declines. Some scholars have described youth bulge as a situation in which 20% or more of the population is in the age group 15–24 years. In the case of India, approximately 19.1% of the total population falls in this age bracket. The median age of Indian population is 26.2 years. Such an age structure of population has made Indian youth target of special attention. There is increasing requirement to understand the special identity needs of adolescents and young adults in liberalising and globalising India and to comprehend the assets and liabilities of having such a large young population. Media regularly covers varied aspects of lives of the young, be it the salary packages that the IIM graduates get, their attitudes on issues of personal and political relevance, the leisure time activities they pursue and so on. From these depictions comes alive a phenomenon of youth which is multifaceted; they are seen as sources of hope as well as signs of moral decay, heralded as involved in the spirit of the era and also defiled for being alienated and confused. *So then questions like – What is urban youth? What are the preoccupations and concerns of this generation growing in liberalising–globalising India? How are they living their lives and participating in the social reality around them?—are raised everywhere.*

Adolescence and its extension into youth is a developmental phase between childhood and adulthood. It is a stage in which young persons are likely to be simultaneously confronted with multiple and diverse tasks, all of which are instrumental to the 'way of life' that they develop as they mature as adults. The young grapple with developmental tasks such as coping with pubertal changes in the body and the resulting strong sexual drive; choosing a vocation that is consistent with one's favoured capacities on one hand and with available opportunities on the other; finding a meaning in life by choosing from a variety of ideologies, beliefs and values to which one has been exposed; and developing a personal style of love and

care amenable to a particular mode of intimacy and parenthood. Negotiations with these facets of growth move a young individual towards a differentiated and integrated sense of individuality experienced as identity. In an affirmative sense, identity is felt as having a sense of direction and an inner assuredness of recognition of those who are important. Identity formation is a self-definitional process which involves an assimilation of native temperament, trained capacities and significant identifications into a configuration that provides a semblance of internal coherence and meaningful relatedness to the outside world. *This book is concerned with understanding the psychological dynamics of conformity, rebellion, individuation, initiative, relatedness, directionality and ideological values which pervade youthhood and has attempted to describe them as emerging out of the interplay between universal processes of human development and the Indian cultural milieu, specifically the Indian family. By virtue of having a psychosocial perspective, the work explores how the interlinked growth contexts of family, education and work in neoliberal high-tech global economy shape and organise the experiential reality and developmental potential of young men and women in contemporary India.*

In the process of growth, one of the key issues young persons have to confront and resolve in some fashion deals with their strivings towards increased autonomy and a rearrangement of their previous relationship of dependence upon parental figures. In the context of a collectivist culture like India where family is the primary unit of socialisation, the text is interested in addressing the following questions: Are the young in India moving towards more individuated and autonomous positions vis-à-vis the parental authority? How much do they feel themselves to be defined by 'internalised parent'? Are Indian families providing opportunities for making new beginnings to this generation or are they insisting on continuation of culture, lifestyle and choices of the previous generation? Is the youth able to take chances with oneself and explore possibilities within themselves? How their life trajectories may be similar/different from their parents?

The need for a coherent worldview intensifies during youth and is usually met through the solidarity of fellow mates in domains of inspired activity. The youth try out various role possibilities and worldviews available in one's historical times to etch out a vision of future inclusive of the remnants of one's past. They want a sense of purpose, meaning and orderliness in their existence. As a work endeavouring to be a study of youth in its historical context, the book also reflects on the ideological elements that lend coherence to the diverse youth identities in India. Through an exploration of their orientations towards competition, materialism, dissent, democracy, social responsibility and power, it attempts to respond to the popular perception that Indian youth are conformist, alienated from social realities and living for immediate returns on traditional goals of status and power to the exclusion of the pursuit of knowledge and creativity. The questions raised in this work are: Is the neo-liberal capitalist ideology characterising the business world being internalised by the young people? How are the concepts of money, drive for achievement, competitive individualism and consumption woven into their emerging selfhood? Are there young men and women who are involved in serious, constructive appraisal of values, attitudes and current realities? What are

the images of intervention in the social world found in their thought frameworks and work activities? What are the key concepts/principles/intellectual and ideological perspectives that animate their debates, conversations and imagination regarding social change?

In its essence, this book attempts to explore how the sense of individuality in contemporary Indian youth is seeking its own balance of relationality with parental figures and cohesion with social order? *At one level, it endeavours to understand whether and how a sense of psychological individuation is being negotiated by the young Indians from within familial embeddedness*. The text tries to refresh the cultural understandings of psychic potentials by presenting young India's expressions of individuality. *At another level, it tries to comprehend the nature and process of engagement of youth with different definitions, goals and values of social system through which they come to evolve their own self-definitions and relationship with the neo-liberal sociopolitical order—challenging, resistive, conforming and ingratiating*. It attempts to understand how are social realities such as competition, individualism, materialism and democracy intrapsychically represented. *At a broader level, the work reflects on the nature of intergenerational continuity and change due to social change in Indian society*. In this endeavour, the theoretical and methodological precepts of psychoanalysis have been the bedrock. Psychoanalytic thinking underscores the inherent affectivity of social life. It provides an axis between ebb and flow of psychical life and society. The Eriksonian framework is particularly instructive in this regard as it keeps alive the mutuality of psyche and culture, that is, how within a given sociocultural order particular psychological tendencies develop and which later influence the culture's institutions and social forms. An individual's identity conflicts and crisis are reflective of the delicate interplay between the 'old' and 'new' elements in the social world. His/her solutions to such crises are then the driver of social change.

What Is the Methodological Approach of the Book?

This book is based on a qualitative research inquiry about the lives of young men and women in urban middle class India today. *Methodologically, the research work was a psychoanalytically informed, process-oriented, context-sensitive work using in-depth, exploratory interview method.* Research is a form of human curiosity. It is an invitation to revisit phenomenon of interest, renew observations and impressions about it, re-examine perspectives, reinterpret the emergent meanings and re-present them in imaginative ways. Research is, thus, an exciting journey to refresh our visions and articulations of diverse aspects of the world. As a qualitative inquiry, the research process here involved striving to feel and understand the life of participants by empathically entering their subjective worlds as they begin to narrate their experiences in the interview space. The researcher engaged with the memories, experiential segments and significant incidents in the participant's life so as to discern some patterns and create a narrative. Using the psychoanalytic method of

listening, the researcher was attentive to the feeling states of the participants as well as of one's own. This is integral to discerning the meaning of the communication. Disciplined exploration of one's own feelings, reactions and emotional states by the researcher during the interaction gave clues about the emotional world of the participants. The interest in a research like the present one is not in finding the 'historical' or factual truth. Spence (1982) holds that historical truth is impossible to access after the fact, as it is subject to numerous revisions and interpretations. What is important is how the self reconstructs a particular happening, a metaphorical elaboration of what was 'fact'. It is the way the self constructs meaning or organises associations to create narratives that is of significance here. This narrative of the self is the 'narrative truth' which provides access to subjective realities of participants. It is the act of telling which turns inarticulate experience into a more tangible sense of reality. As Sartre says in *Nausea*, 'Nothing happens while you live… But everything starts to change when you tell about a life' (1965, pp. 56–57). Such phenomenological, research reworks notions of generalisability, validity and reliability. Generalisability is often established at the level of abstract explanations for a class of participants rather than necessarily at the level of concrete behaviours. Also, the attempt in such works is to appreciate and retain the typicality and uniqueness of life, at the same time, gathering observations and lived processes which are shared amongst participants. The meaning of validity goes beyond the traditional meaning of correlation of results with an independent criterion. Instead, it hinges on what do objects, events and behaviours mean to people engaged in and with them. Such research in understanding contextual behaviour tries to establish interpretive validity. Reliability does not mean replicability. Rather, it means internal logic and adequacy of explanatory formulations.

What is the relevance of this book?

This inquiry has contemporary relevance in trying to understand the psychological condition of urban middle class Indian youth and the directions they are taking in their lives that have an impact on the nation. The thinking and behavioural patterns of large middle classes shaped by being at the frontiers of the project of modernisation have a trickle-down effect on the masses below them. Most susceptible to the pressure of social change, the identity conflicts and resolutions of members of this class are indicative of direction of social change in India.

Such a work also provides insights into the process of internalisation of cultural aspects by the growing individual through the mediating environments of family, peers, education and work. How the personal and social become intertwined? It tries to bridge psychological development and cultural–historical change—the reciprocal relationship between social, technological and cultural changes and human development. It is through such inquiries that we can perhaps move towards a better understanding of the psychology of cultural change.

The depth of psychological work of this nature is rather sparse in the Indian context. The rich and depth-oriented narratives of sections of Indian youths' lives offer multilayered understanding of challenges and conflicts endemic to their developmental stage and psychic condition. It, thus, has the potential of making theoretical and methodological contributions to the specialties of developmental, clinical and cultural psychology as well as to educational policy for youth.

In the field of qualitative research in psychology, there is a great lack of research texts which can exemplify the application of psychoanalytic theory and technique in research contexts. Its psychoanalytically informed methodology hopes to provide a novel understanding of how the psychoanalytic technique of listening and interpreting can be used beyond the clinical encounter.

The work is unique in the sense of looking at two divergent groups of young people who are engaged in different kinds of vocational and ideological pursuits. Examining the lives of young men and women who constitute the ideological polarity characterising the current historical moment in the liberalising–globalising India allows us to generate possible understandings of how engagement with different kinds of definitions and visions of social change affect the evolving self-process of youth. Such inquiry chips away the monolithic notion of new-age youth as conformist. It may also enable us to reflect on the relation between socio-historic times and youth dynamics.

How Is This Book Organised?

The book has four sections. The first part lays down the foundation of the research text. It has the introduction and an overview of the conceptual and methodological precepts underlying the text. The overview, firstly, endeavours to provide definitional understanding of the stage of youth. Then, it tries to sketch phenomenological realities of the inner world of young persons. It traces the multiple possibilities of identity (student, soldier, rebel, delinquent, patient) with which the young experiment. The third subpart brings forth the definitional aspects of identity that underlie the conceptualisation of research text. It examines the theoretical formulations of thinkers whose writings and ideas form the bedrock of this work. The research has consulted frameworks of Erik H. Erikson, Robert J. Lifton, Adam Phillips, Margaret Mahler, Donald W. Winnicott, Heinz Kohut and Ruthellen Josselson. The conceptual underpinning is that, especially in youth, the self-delineating process is marked by contingency, multiplicity and polyvocality. Relatively freer to take chances with themselves and their environment, paths of the young are strewn with twists and turns, experiments and possibilities. Their search for meaning and authenticity may lead them to unexpected forays, unknown explorations and untried jobs. Need for cohesiveness of self, however, does not preclude the tendencies towards multiplicity of involvements with varied kinds of people, ideas and activities. Rather, it strives for a balancing act between responsive shape-shifting, on the one hand, and efforts to consolidate and cohere, on the

other. An adept self-process can maintain a certain equilibrium that allows for flexible adaptation. The fourth subpart explains the dynamics of autonomy and relationality as critical to identity formation. In the fifth section, a psychoanalytic statement on self–other relationship is presented which serve as useful guide in our search for forms and spaces of individualised self-expression in Indian youth's lives, both self-created and culturally given. This sets the stage for review of culturally contextualised formulations of Sudhir Kakar and Allan Roland on Indian identity in the sixth section. Relevant research works on themes of development of ideological concepts in stage of youth and process of identity formation amongst women have been presented in the next two segments. They have been found to be useful in providing methodological directions as well as descriptions of human subjective experience. In the next two subparts, a framework of research methodology has been formulated. This book has argued in favour of the qualitative research paradigm that opens new vistas to explore the unique human subjective experience shaped by its historically specific culture, which is lost in the positivist paradigm amidst distantiated numbers and statistical figures. Making a case for narratives and life stories as insightful data sources of human and cultural behaviour, a note on the methodological process of research inquiry is presented. It fleshes out the psychoanalytic method of listening and interpreting. The context, aims and presentation of data are discussed thereafter.

Part II and III present the life stories of the participants. *Part II* consists of eight life stories of the corporate youth followed by a discussion of a few relevant identity-related themes. In *Part III*, eight life stories of the humanist youth are presented, the shared themes of which are discussed in the end.

Part IV concludes with few insights and reflections on experiential reality and developmental potential of youth in India. It also comments on psychosocial contexts of urban middle class young Indians that mould and organise their developmental experiences in contemporary times.

Identity in Youth: Conceptual and Methodological Underpinnings

An IIM graduate is offered the highest pay package of Rs.18 lakhs per annum by a U.S.-based M.N.C. He tells a reporter, 'Coming from a modest small town background, this is truly a dream come true for me and my family'.

The candidates contesting university elections manhandle the election officer and peer down smilingly from their posters that have been smeared on the flyovers all over the city. The elections witness a poor turnout of voters.

Thousands of aspirants queue up at the venue of audition for the talent hunt, few having given their exams a miss, trying to give themselves a chance to make a mark in the glamour world. 'I want to be the next Shahrukh Khan', declares an aspirant.

A theatre group of young persons present an eye-opening play on the political situation in a northeastern state. They struggle for 'justice' for the people in the state.

A young woman drifts from job to job, from one failed relationship to another, and is given to smoking and drinking and spending her life in a somewhat dissociated state. A general sense of confusion and purposelessness pervades her being.

A corporate employee gives up the lucrative job to work with underprivileged children, a vocation after his heart. 'Corporate culture alienated me from the true purpose of my life. I had to come back to this for myself'.

Two 18-year-old boys were held by police for hacking the websites and email passwords. They confessed to be doing it because they were 'bored of life and needed some thrill and excitement'.

The snippets above introduce us to the kaleidoscope of youth. Young men and women are most vigorously driven to respond to the diversity of roles, activities and values offered by societies in a bid to explore and create/take their place in the world. They are differentiated with regard to their experiences, their perspectives and their hopes for the future. They may respond to their social landscapes with enthusiasm, passion, idealism, indignation, protest, silence or apathy. They also evoke a rich variety of intense reactions from the others in the social order. On one hand, the youth are represented as reckless, irresponsible and uncommitted; on the other hand, as dedicated, deferential and conformist. Youth is lauded as a symbol of hope for the future while scorned as a threat to the existing society. While pushed to the margins of political power within established order, they attract serious attention as a site of commodification and a profitable market.

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I

Definitional Aspects of Youth

Youth is one of the most interesting and keenly observed phenomena the world over. Many sociologists (Keniston 1971; Doughlas 1970; Moller 1968) have noted that prolongation of education due to the requirements of economic life in modern age has opened up opportunities for an extension of psychological development, which in turn is creating a new stage of life called youth. This is not to suggest that youth is in an absolute sense a new developmental stage and unique to the modern era. But what is 'new' is that this extended stage of life is being entered not by tiny minorities of young men and women but by large number of people.

Youth[1] as a biographical life stage is located between adolescence and adulthood. It is conceptualised as beginning with the end of secondary education, usually age 18 in American society, and ending in mid- to late 20s for most people as the experimentation of the period is succeeded by more enduring life choices (Arnett 1998). *It is distinct demographically and subjectively from adolescence (roughly from ages 10–17) and adulthood (beginning roughly since 30). Demographically speaking, it is a phase characterised by exceptionally high level of change and diversity*. For example, 20s are the years of frequent changes and transitions in occupation, educational status and personal relationships (Rindfuss 1991). The majority of adolescents do not believe that they have reached adulthood, and majority of people over 30 and older believe they have, but most people in their 20s see themselves as somewhere in between adolescence and adulthood: the majority answer 'in some respects yes and in some respects no' when asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood (Arnett 1997, 2001).

The definitional aspects of youth cannot, however, be easily settled with reference to age group and concepts of adolescence and adulthood. *Firstly*, the meaning of adulthood is under siege. More and more people at later stages of their lives want to feel, behave and appear as young (Cote and Allahar 1994). Increasingly, adult lifestyles have come to be characterised as pseudo-youth subcultures. Virtues of maturity and rationality compete with excitement and hedonism in the lives of contemporary adults. The musical tastes of parents and children are often the same. Their peership extends further to sometimes children bringing their parents up because in the altered historical conditions, parents can no longer serve as complete role models for their children. Hence, they are often more hesitant in their guidance to their children. Being a student is no longer unambiguously associated with a certain age as necessities of professional sphere impel adults

[1] This phase was originally termed youth by Keniston (1971). The more recent term for this phase of development is called emerging adulthood (Arnett and Taber 1994).

to return to school and act as students. In the knowledge society, skills and expertise become obsolete so rapidly that adult experience weighs light in front of youths' updated knowledge and proficiencies. In contemporary knowledge societies, the mantra is to be a 'learner' always.

Secondly, the transition to adulthood is becoming more individualised and diversified. In the traditional societies of the past and present, the constant developmental emphasis for adolescent persons is to learn and become competent to share the burden of family maintenance as soon as possible. The various rites of passage and ceremonies of initiation in primitive tribes and in ancient civilizations guarantee that everyone grows up, transition to adulthood is clearly marked and there is no backsliding to childish ways. However, in those societies, cultures and nations that are affected by urbanisation and industrialization, there are age-free criteria of professional skills, political power and economic status which means the young are no longer confident of 'inheriting' power in their adulthood. Rising industrial productivity allows teenagers to remain outside the labour force, and there is little productive role or community participation that they are involved in. There is a weakening and sometimes a breakdown of traditional institutions like family and kinship units thus making them progressively less capable of determining individuals' orientations and behaviours by their history and tradition. In a complex world, influences outside the family such as peers and mass media inundate the reality of the young with various images.

Thirdly, the ideology of cultural individualism reinforces the norm of individual independence and notions of lifelong self-exploration. The spread of individualistic culture amongst youth has led to more young people claiming the right to define their own lifestyles and legitimising their ideas, plans and actions on the basis of their own needs, motives and interests. Hence, a 'graduation farewell' is no longer a guarantee for a sizeable section of young to go over from the world of explorative learning to the world of committed work. The work trajectories of many young people are fractured with phases of 'returning to school' or 'taking time off' interspersed between periods of paid work. In the domain of personal relationships, the institution of marriage is witnessing many changes with late marriages gaining currency, cohabitation emerging as a viable alternative and sexuality being given expression within the context of any form of intimate relationship. In the contemporary historical era, the possibilities of lifestyles and action potentials are flexible, diverse and numerous. No longer is it essential, viable or possible for a person to settle on a lifestyle that will be satisfactory for the rest of one's life or to find a community in which one could live for the remainder of one's life.

Thus, there is a prolongation, diversification and individualization of the transition patterns to adulthood. For a young person, the self-definitional attempts to delineate his or her place in the society, to choose from competing options of 'way of life' and to develop a life plan to lend order and meaning to one's existence are becoming individualistic and fluid because of the waning of the power of the imagery of cultural groups like family.

II

Youth and Its Relation to Social-Historical Times

The young stand between alternate ways of life. Their growth processes take various forms. There are few who choose to experiment freely with a variety of roles and others who cling tightly to a certain organising theme in response to multiplicity of choices. Many young persons are gifted enough and have adequate training to land on new roles offered by the dominant consolidation of the historical era. Such youth can accept the ideological outlook implicit in the roles offered by society and therefore need not go through the often painful process of examining and choosing alternative ideologies. There are others who feel estranged since they are eager for but are unable to find access to the dominant techniques of society. They may turn against the society with a vengeance that can be exploited by the propagandists of ideological systems which promise a new world order at the price of total and cruel repudiation of an old one (Erikson 1968, p. 309). Few creative young persons feel too out of place in the prevailing ideological trend and strive to disestablish a sector of this world's outworn fundamentals and make a place for a new one. They suffer, court misery, sickness and failure to see and say, to dream and plan, to design and construct in new ways. Thus, the measuring yards for youth should not be only inner balance, consistency and proficiency but must also encompass confusion, dare devilry, extremism and fragmentation. *Youth, thereby, represent multiple possibilities from delinquency to creative deviancy, rebellion to conformity, alienation to vigorous involvement in the spirit of the era.*

Deviants and rebels have always evoked ambivalent fascination in the public with their transgression of the social mores. In India, the Naxal Movement[2] has been a landmark struggle in the history of left wing extremism. The Naxalites found ardent support amongst the educated elite. The 1970s was undoubtedly a time of idealism amongst intellectual youth of that time. Ajoy Bose (2009), a Delhi-based political columnist and author, recalled in *Mail Today* his own journey of getting drawn to the political philosophy of engineering drastic social change through violence to his withdrawal from the armed struggle following the realisation that 'violence was a horrendous brutish thing in reality'. He shared that there was "the romance and thrill of the revolutionary path as opposed to the tedium of

[2] The Naxal Movement traces its origin to 1967 in a village called Naxalbari in West Bengal in India from where a rebellion emerged amongst the peasants who retaliated against their oppression and started forcefully capturing their lands from the feudal lords. Within a short span, it acquired great visibility and support from cross sections of communist revolutionaries in different states. The dominant faction of Naxalites believed in 'annihilation of the class enemy' and adopted 'allegiance to the armed struggle and non participation in the elections' as their cardinal principles to secure justice to poorest of peasants and tribals. Since its inception, the Naxal Movement has witnessed internal divisions along the ideological basis and forms of struggle, but its presence is still strong amongst few of the poorest districts of the country.

studying Shelly and Keats in the English honours course I increasingly detested. But I still believe the most important factor that drew me away from the comfort and security of mainstream was a burning sense of injustice and an impatience with conventional democratic politics to redress many facets of socio- economic exploitation. Simultaneously, there was this urge to bring about meaningful social transformation. On a gigantic scale, that seemed impossible to achieve through electoral acrobatics or NGO tinkering. For us comrades at St. Stephen's it was also important to distinguish ourselves from the armchair revolutionaries who remained content in spreading their message in university coffee houses".

A large majority of youth is, however, politically acquiescent, who makes use of the socially sanctioned moratorium to play along with apprenticeships and adventures that are in line with the society's values. They are the beneficiaries and guardians of tradition and practitioners and inventors of technology of one's cultural milieu. The success stories of Indian techies in America's Silicon Valley are a case in point. It is estimated that there are about one million Indians in the technology capital of the world. They are not only serving as skilled employees but are also climbing the ladder to reach leadership positions as CEOs. Their entrepreneurial potentials are also receiving a fillip in the conducive technology-business environment of the Silicon Valley. Closer home, the software revolution has spread across the country which is contributing immensely to the wealth as well as the reputation of the nation in the global world. *The energies of the vast majority of youth are absorbed in the efforts to acquire the skills and attitudes to negotiate the opportunity structure within modern economy for which they receive encouragement and appreciation from their parents and teachers.*

A growing minority of young men and women are using the available spaces within the system to respond to the needs for innovation and development in the society as well as to their social concern and stirrings to 'bring a change', 'take a challenge', 'be different'. On the 60th anniversary of India's Independence in 2007, a leading national newspaper group, *Times of India*, started a Lead India campaign to find new-generation leaders for the country. It threw a challenge that if India Inc. can produce so many strong, highly motivated and transformational leaders, why can't Indian politics? Satyam Darmora, 27, and Aseem Puri, 28, were just two of the many young candidates who decided to use this opportunity to realise their visions of social change. Satyam, born and brought up in a small village in Uttarakhand, took the IIT-IIM route to a cushy corporate job with a leading multinational bank. But he had not forgotten his roots and believed that his empathy with the disadvantaged was his USP. Coming from a background with minimal employment opportunities and poor infrastructure, he strongly felt the need to create a platform which would provide opportunities, create employment in rural areas and develop self-sustaining source of livelihood for them. His agenda in the campaign was to set up vocational training centres and to launch microfinance schemes as an empowerment tool for women. Aseem was a brand manager of a leading FMCG managing a global team across 15 countries. He nominated himself because he felt hollow everytime he faced rural India's stark reality. In Bihar