



Young India

Swami Narasimhananda

GUNJAN VEDA IS a voracious reader. She cannot think of a day without reading. Her work in the Planning Commission of India requires a lot of travelling. Away from her collection of books and libraries, she is deprived of books to match her reading pace. As a solution she founded *www.indiareads.com*, an online library that delivers books to your doorstep. In her early thirties, Gunjan is the face of young India: energetic, enthusiastic, enterprising, innovative, and in charge.

Young and Responsible

The young have always been labelled as irresponsible, immature, and lacking ideals. Growing years and greying hair have always been linked with maturity and wisdom. Old age may bring experience, but it also slows the brain! This conflict of intelligence and experience was aptly

described by Lyman Bryson: ‘The error of youth is to believe that intelligence is a substitute for experience, while the error of age is to believe that experience is a substitute for intelligence.’¹ From the state of ‘there was nothing I could do and nothing I could say’, as in the lines of the popular song ‘Young and Foolish’ by Arnold B Horwitt, the Indian young have come of age and taken charge.

History shows that great people were always young. Jesus, Shankaracharya, Vivekananda, Einstein, or Alexander—all of them achieved greatness before they turned forty. The Upanishads speak of the young: ‘In the prime of life, good, learned, most expeditious, most strongly built, and most energetic.’² That the young count is known but, what is so special about the Indian youth? They are the pilots of the development story of a nation with a chequered history of more than sixty years of independence. When speaking of Indian youth one can say ‘Young India’, or better still ‘India is Young’, because according to the 2001 Indian census, more than 69 per cent of

Swami Narasimhananda is a monk of the Advaita Ashrama at its branch in Kolkata.

Indians were less than 34 years old.³ India's population has become younger only in the last decade. Demographically speaking, India is the youngest country in the world. Any discussion or development plan for India should take into account this major chunk of its population.

Before understanding the psyche of Indian youth, it will help to understand what being young is like. What is the concept of youth? Who is young? Does it depend solely on age or are there other indicators? Youth is generally categorised as a non-adult phase of life, a phase of growth, and the young are supposed to be still growing, incapable of handling the mature decisions of life by themselves. They are seen as babies sitting in cosy strollers having a peek into the garden of life. However comforting this categorization of the young may be to the old guardians of society, it is too simplistic and inaccurate. Youth is not a rigid concept but a very fluid one. The age of the phases of childhood, adolescence, youth, and adulthood vary from person to person. It also depends on social and cultural backgrounds. While adulthood takes its sweet time to appear in the life of the pampered child of a wealthy parent, it encroaches upon the childhood of the child of the pavement-dweller. One is reminded of Swami Vivekananda's letter: "The Chinese child is quite a philosopher and calmly goes to work at an age when your Indian boy can hardly crawl on all fours. He has learnt the philosophy of necessity too well."⁴ Poverty drove the Chinese child to learn the 'philosophy of necessity'. The Indian youth too has been driven to a faster stepping into adulthood by poverty and changing demographics.

Recent studies affirm that youth is a concept not dependent on biological age alone:

Age is a concept which is assumed to refer to a biological reality. However, the meaning and the experience of age, and of the process of

ageing, is subject to historical and cultural processes. Although each person's life span can be measured 'objectively' by the passing of time, cultural understandings about life stages give the process of growing up, and of ageing, its social meaning. Specific social and political processes provide the frame within which cultural meanings are developed. Both youth and childhood have had and continue to have different meanings depending on young people's social, cultural and political circumstances.⁵

If the Indian youth was immature and not ready for real life, the country would have been in chaos and would have come to a standstill, with more than 70 per cent of its population in such a state. A tourist coming to India gets to see only young faces all the time. From the cab driver at the airport to the staff at the hotel, from tour guides at historical monuments to the antique shopkeeper, it is young faces everywhere. Sometimes the tourist finds it difficult to find old people.

Many business houses in India are headed by women and men under thirty. Some of them were born into great business families like Devita Saraf of Vu Televisions, Lakshmi Venu of Sundaram Clayton, Sindhuja Rajaraman of Seppan, and Alok Kejriwal of Contestszwin. Others have built successful business stories from scratch like Phanindra Sarma of Redbus, Sachin Bansal and Binny Bansal of Flipkart, Suhas Gopinath of Globals, Ashwin Ramesh of DailySEOblog, Rajkumar Koneru of Indiainfo, and Sunil Dutt Jha of iCMG. The list seems endless. Even in government and public sector undertakings, youth is at the helm of affairs. Indian politics too has a good share of young faces, with some of them even finding a place in the parliament.

Indian Youth's Psyche

Therefore, the young in India are in charge. But, what is their psyche? What is their lifestyle? A

recent account of their lifestyle is not very encouraging: ‘Welcome to the lifestyles of the young and the restless where the day never ends, just melts into one another. It starts at 9 a.m. with a hasty toothbrush and continues till well past midnight with a drag of a cigarette. For the average working youngster, this is routine. Add to that the consumption of junk food, smoking, and alcohol—the youth are happily and unabashedly ruining their health, albeit unconsciously. Not surprisingly, lifestyle diseases are on the rise.’⁶ Though this may be the lifestyle of the urban youth, the rural youth has a different story. To toil or to study to ensure a comfortable future, the semi-urban and rural youth has to work hard and travel long distances. Here too ‘the day never ends’, but instead of melting, it seems to drag from one problem to another, from one dream to another—dreams that are uncertain of becoming a reality, but are the only solace in an otherwise drab existence. Some thought leads to the conclusion that Indian youth—urban, semi-urban, and rural—have acquired their psyche from their parents.

Who are the parents of the present-day Indian youth? They were born between the 1950s and 1960s in the infant independent India. New vistas were opening up and people were experimenting with new careers, away from the traditional mindset and established archetypes. This entailed migrations from the rural to the urban, from homeland to new places even outside the country. The joint family system was breaking up and so were the values and customs that went with it. It was to the parents of this era that today’s youth were born. Indian children are seldom sent to grooming schools, and Indian family values and traditions were always handed down by grannies and grandpas. With none of them around and with both the parents working or striving hard to ensure a better life for their offspring, the children were not given indigenous grooming lessons. All

they got was ‘moral values’ from an education system that was and still is, to a great extent, a colonial remnant that apes Western cultures and remains dissociated from the Indian ethos. This has led to a situation where while the Indian youth is conversant with *Mills and Boon*, *Tintin*, *Asterix*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Harry Potter*, it is predominantly clueless about *Kathasaritsagara*, *Hitopadesha*, and *Panchatantra* and does not know much of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata beyond the version made popular by television.

In many senses Indian youth have spent their childhood away from their native place. A significant number of them are not comfortable with their mother-tongue and all they know of their traditional customs, beliefs, and culture is what little they acquired during annual vacation trips to their ‘native-place’, at the end of which they brought some keepsakes, less to cherish than to flaunt them to their friends. However, it is not that Indian youth do not want to know their tradition; they do want, as the huge demand for courses on Indian culture among youth evince. Compared to the youth of other nations Indian youth have a greater leaning towards their social mores. A recent study reveals: ‘The family remains a key institution in the life-world of Indian youth. One could perhaps argue that even in a situation of expanded choice, youth in India, in contrast to the situation ... where conservative mores were regarded as a function of limited opportunity, would freely adopt conservative mores.’⁷ But brought up in a setting where such values were not practised much, knowing the culture could be an intellectual curiosity instead of a priority.

Another development that significantly affects Indian youth’s psyche is the seemingly innumerable options available to them in terms of disciplines of study, careers to pursue, places to settle in, and also a more stable society supporting changes in career later in life. Their parents

have struggled hard to create a better world for them and have unwittingly made them unaware of the value of what they have got. An Indian mother laments:

Our generation were told we'd have to wait patiently for rewards ... whatever those would turn out to be. Work hard for the exams. Slog away, swot, swot, swot. Compete like crazy. Await results! Phew! First class in hand, work some more. Swot some more. Apply for a 'decent' job. Keep your fingers crossed. Land the job. Continue slaving. Wait for promotion. Keep slogging. Spend fifteen years or more in the same job. ... But that's not how it works today. Kids want it all. And they want it *now*. And they don't all want to work that hard, either. It's about having 'chill time', 'personal time', a 'life plan' that includes frequent holidays. Kids want to 'hang'. And they want to 'connect'. Mainly over the net. No personal contact—or very little. No emotional investment. Or very little. Just lots of stimulation and virtual relationships that include virtual gifts.⁸

Society not only gives innumerable choices to the youth but also allows them to choose any number of methods of consumption or enjoyment, making them as permissive as possible. What Swami Ranganathananda said about societies outside India four decades ago is relevant to India today:

Children need loving parents at home. How can your children grow and unfold your possibilities without the love of a father and a mother and a peaceful home? But permissive societies and peaceful homes cannot co-exist. We must choose either the one or the other. In a permissive environment, children suffer psychic and personality privations and distortions, and the same children grow up and continue to deepen that malady of permissiveness, until the society becomes sick, and it decays and dies. ... Sheer pursuit of unchecked individual

pleasure uninspired by any standard of ethical and moral values, lowers the quality of human life and human tastes, step by step, and brings about the ruin of a family, the ruin of a society, the ruin of a whole civilization.⁹

This permissiveness affects the mental and social health of the youth, who lose their ability to adapt to a resource-constrained environment.

Social Impact


Easy accessibility to various choices of life has led to a restless behaviour among youth. With advances in technology bringing means of pleasure close at hand, the youth become restive if they cannot access anything they want. Instant gratification has led to instant frustration. Patience, calm, and composure are soon becoming qualities found only in books. To make matters worse, the social system prepares the youth only for expecting and handling success, but not for handling failure. An increasing number of youth suicides bear testimony to the near absence of tolerance levels.

Nevertheless, all is not bad with the Indian youth. While restlessness has brought about an increase in violence and substance abuse, a considerable number of the young are socially active and influence major social and political changes. Apart from the enormous political participation unseen in other countries, Indian youth have always been key social activists, as witnessed in the protests against the laxity of justice in the insane murder of Jessica Lall and the crusade against the insurmountable evil of corruption. These movements involved the entire nation, and the youth of rural and urban India came together and raised their voice, taking full advantage of print and electronic media. This is representative of the extent of influence the youth can bring on society by using the same technological advances that wrongly used bring about unrest. That said,

the youth needs to have much more involvement in national matters. Patriotism is a dying virtue nowadays. A popular writer puts it this way: 'The young Indian is confused. But not angry. Angry enough, that is. Nobody reacts to atrocities any longer. One Jessica Lall murder investigation does not indicate change. By and large, there is widespread indifference in place of indignation.'¹⁰

Some youth are indeed angry, though they prefer to show their anger in positive ways. The last decade has seen the emergence of various small and big youth leaders and icons in the country. To encourage such leadership qualities various organizations have instituted awards for social involvement and leadership of the youth. The Times of India Lead India Campaign and IBN Young Indian Leader Awards are two such. Some awardees are good examples of the factors of social change the young can effect. Take the case of Chavi Rajawat for instance, who being a 'graduate from Delhi's Lady Shriram College and an MBA from IIMM, Pune, ... has worked with several corporate houses before she decided to join grassroots politics'¹¹ and is 'leaving behind the glamorous corporate world and the city arclights to head back to her village Soda in Rajasthan as its sarpanch' (ibid).

The mind of the Indian youth is fresh and open. All they want is progress, and a comfortable one at that. They have been caught up in the sudden increase of pace of the country's development. While India was overwhelmed with local concerns a decade ago, today media and technology have flooded the popular minds with matters both local and global. Being a majority, Indian youth feel responsible, directly or indirectly, for the lack of even basic amenities for the countless in the country. They want to help, but their anxieties and aspirations are way too many, and the time and resources at hand too few. Only a synergy of thoughtful policies effectively

implemented through youth power can lead to a smooth sailing of the nation, a sailing that includes young people at the stern. Though shifts in social and cultural framework have brought serious aberrations in their psyche, a little effort at attitudinal reorientation will still bring marvellous results, as they have tremendous energy waiting to be channelized. Swami Vivekananda said: 'I have faith in my country, and especially in the youth of my country.'¹² Though the prospects of Indian youth seem promising, it remains to be seen if they can vindicate Swamiji's faith. 

References

1. *1001 Quotes, Illustrations, and Humorous Stories for Preachers, Teachers, and Writers*, ed. Edward K Rowell and Leadership (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 14.
2. *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.8.1.
3. See <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Social_and_cultural/Age_Groups.aspx> accessed 6 October 2011.
4. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 5.7.
5. Johanna Wyn and Rob White, *Rethinking Youth* (London: Sage, 1997), 9-10.
6. *The Times of India*: <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-04-22/man-woman/29459727_1_lifestyle-diseases-noncommunicable-diseases-lifestyle-disorders> accessed 6 October 2011.
7. *Indian Youth in a Transforming World*, ed. Peter Ronald deSouza, Sanjay Kumar, and Sandeep Shastri (New Delhi: Sage, 2009), xxiii.
8. Shobha Dé, *Superstar India: From Incredible to Unstoppable* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008), 203-4.
9. Swami Ranganathananda, *Eternal Values for a Changing Society*, 4 vols (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1995), 3.369.
10. *Superstar India: From Incredible to Unstoppable*, 214.
11. IBNLive: <<http://ibnlive.in.com/youngindian/winners.html>> accessed 7 October 2011.
12. *Complete Works*, 3.320.