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## Inside the mind of young India

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Do we know what young India is thinking? The English media give us their take based on surveys that they do, which, as has been pointed out often in this column, represent less than 5% of the country's youth. Often, it's hard to even figure out what segment of youth such surveys represent, because the write-up is most economical about facts like which income group or social strata the study was done amongst, merely stating "xx number of respondents aged xyz, from the following cities and towns".

The internet surveys give us a window into the minds and worlds of the internet-enabled youth; but this sample universe leaves out large chunks of those who form part of our much-promised demographic dividend. That's why it was so wonderful to see a book, *Indian youth in a transforming world: Attitudes and perceptions*. Jointly published by CSDS and Sage Publications, it is the report of a high-quality survey of 5,000 people, aged 14 to 34, drawn from all states excluding the north-east, Uttarakhand, Goa and Himachal Pradesh, and representing all socio-economic classes.

The sampling methodology and the survey instrument have been explained in detail, and the fieldwork relatively recent, done in mid-2007. Not meaning to be xenophobic, it was still a bit sad to note that such a study got done because Konrad Adenauer Stiftung initiated and commissioned — and presumably funded — it.

It is true that in India, we generally have trouble finding adequate funding for regular studies of this kind which tell us more about ourselves. If the quantum of data were proportionate to the quantum of our usage of the term demographic dividend, we should have had several more and larger youth studies in the public domain. One is not referring to countrywide studies done for private companies that measure cola consumption or media habits or advertising preferences of young India; but of public domain insights on how young people think and feel about issues like those that this book captures — 'family and social networks', engagement with 'politics and democracy', views relating to 'governance and development', and their view of the world and globalisation, their hopes, dreams and concerns and so on.

To set the big-picture context, according to the Census of India, 2001, we have almost 20% of our population in the age group of 15 to 24 — that's what actually ought to be considered the core youth target group — and around 27% in the age group of 15 to 29. They are 69% rural and 31% urban, yet what rural youth are thinking about is a big blind spot for many of us, because it never finds mention in any media survey; only 14% have finished school, and the number is just 9% for women. Even in urban India, only 25% of urban youth have finished school, and that actually represents around 8% of all-India youth. So, let's mute the applause for the big bold move with wide ranging benefits of the MHRD initiative to abolish the Standard X exam.

Despite low levels of education and income for the most part, according to the survey report, optimism runs very high. About 84% of the 15 to 34-year-olds in India — referred to in the report, and henceforth in this article, as the youth — are optimistic about the future, and only 3% are pessimistic, the remaining 13% are uncertain. We always talk about aspiring young India and, indeed, 53% have high or very high aspirations as compared to 28% who have low or very low aspirations. Does it hold for the weaker sections of society too? It most certainly does.

About 30% of upper class youth have low or very low aspirations, while only 24 and 26% respectively of the Dalits and tribals have low or very low aspirations. However aspiration levels do rise with socio-economic status, but even on this count, at the lowest strata, 43% have high or very high aspirations and outnumber those who have low or very low aspirations. Just imagine the power of hope and desire that we are sitting on, if only we could channelise it properly!

With aspiration comes anxiety of course, and 68% of the youth have high anxiety about their future, 50% very high anxiety. If my generation paid the price of the socialist ideology, then this generation is bearing the cross of the free market, survival of the fittest, keep up with the Joneses society that we are becoming.

What do they see as the big problem that this country has to deal with? It is poverty and unemployment (27% votes each), while only 4% chose illiteracy and lack of education, 3% terrorism and 6% corruption. In fact, if we were to add population growth to unemployment and poverty, then 67% of young people are saying, "I'm optimistic but please give me opportunity and improve my quality of living".

Poverty is seen to be the No. 1 problem ahead of unemployment by those in the lowest socio-economic strata and the illiterate, but unemployment is what everyone is deeply concerned about across the board — irrespective of education levels or socio-economic status.

When asked 'what should be the first priority of the government', guarantee of employment wins by a very wide margin over provision of educational facilities or betterment of health services. May be it is time to debate the value of jobless growth in the economy, and the notion that growing self-employment is out of choice.

And what kind of social issues will gen-next grapple with? Ensuring environmental sustainability comes in a distant third after 'strengthening defence'. Gender equality will be a strident call, especially from the women, and more so from the less educated women. Related to that, presumably, will be shaky marriages, though belief in family still reigns supreme.

A big thank you to the editors and publishers of the volume for putting this important study the public domain, and let's make a new year wish that we will have internally-generated funding to do more of this kind of work that will help us both in business strategy and in public policy, to understand ourselves better, and shape the future better.

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