
UNDERSTANDING YOUTH IN A GLOBALISED INDIA

A Consultation Organized by Akshara
Centre, Mumbai



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OVERVIEW OF THE CONSULTATION

As India becomes one of the youngest countries in the world with an average age of 29 years, there is an urgent need to enhance the interventions of civil society bodies working with young people in order to be calibrated to the rapidly changing context. In response to this, Akshara Centre, Mumbai, organized a day-long consultation to bring together knowledgeable and experienced people from women's organisations, small and big CBOs and NGOs, livelihood programmes, educational institutions and networks to discuss their understanding of today's youth, their voices, challenges, dilemmas and attitudes.

The specific objective of the Consultation was:

“to deepen civil society's understanding of issues faced by youth in a globalized world and to share and build strategies of interventions with youth”

The Consultation, while looking at youth as an integrated group, specifically focused on urban, under-privileged youth. In her welcome address, Dr. Nandita Gandhi, Co-director, Akshara Centre, drew attention to the open and non-vertical nature of the Consultation in which all could share their expertise and insights. She asserted that despite having the distinction as one of the youngest countries in the world, India would also qualify for being one of the most negligent and indifferent. Hardly any energy and time has been devoted in understanding the aspirations, confusions and issues of the youth vis-a-vis generational changes, especially in the present context. A few visible efforts are the policies and schemes directed at providing services and skill-development for youth. On the other hand, there is conspicuous instrumentalisation of youth. As an effect of these complex forces, there seems to be a void in youth-led activities and campaigns. This gives rise to the uneasy premonition that something is amiss. There are a sprinkling of youth campaigns such as those witnessed in JNU and Hyderabad University. Another marked presence in youth domain is the youth wings of political parties. However, these entities leave much room for wanting. For example, Dr. Nandita shared, how a recent Shiv Sena rally on 'youth and education' she witnessed had only a sparse gathering of young men and hardly any young women or girls. It is critical for those working with youth to periodically revise their understanding about youth and their issues in tandem with the changing contexts. This understanding can subsequently feed into the strategies of working with youth.

The Consultation was structured into five themes:

- **Identities, Choices and Freedom**
- **Education, Skill and Employment**
- **Influence of Culture and Lifestyle**
- **Family and Social Networks**
- **Citizenship and Participation**

A facilitator opened deliberation on each theme laying down the theoretical scope and her or his perspective. The discussion was then opened for other participants. The Consultation particularly examined the changes post 1991 which marked the beginning of neoliberalisation in the country. This document presents theme-wise discussions of the Consultation.

IDENTITY, CHOICES AND FREEDOM

The self is the microcosm of the society. Thus, intervention for a particular section of the society demands an understanding of its selves. The first theme of the consultation explored the selfhood of youth. Ms. Ashraf Patel opened the discussion by emphasising that youthhood is an identity-seeking period characterized by a search for the self. This is usually not given importance in the social spaces occupied by the youth. She also highlighted the multi-layered identities occupied by youth, explained by theories such as Transition Theory and Theory of Subcultures. Youth is often caught in the flux between these identities, especially the given (ascribed) and the chosen (achieved) identities. Adding to these layers is the aspect of sexuality, and the various conflicting opinions and the influence of social media. Freedom as a concept is often presumed in simple terms. The complexity comes in play when 'freedom' is associated with 'choices'. Ms. Patel quoted a 2009 Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) study that showed that young people would like to bring up their children, the way they were brought up by their parents. Moreover, 75% felt that parental authority should be strong and finally, 60% said that they would let their parents choose their spouse. This data underlies the need to talk to youth who, despite their intensive use of social media, are living in their own cultural island with no cross-border interactions.

Highlights from the Discussion

Identity Formation and Assertion

Many of the participants who worked closely with the youth asserted that college is a space as well as a time when youth articulate and understand their identities. The involvement of parents tapers down and the role of teachers increases. Youth start seeing themselves as autonomous individuals in the public space. They are also more acutely exposed to the existence of realities of caste, class and gender and are required to deal with them. Reservations and differential privileges are more visible. The youths also engage in group formation based on experiences and articulation of these identities. For example, those from Marathi medium schools stick in their lingual peer groups due to their fear of English language. Thus, youth often join groups as they need to belong somewhere and have a support system. During this enormous struggle to negotiate their identities on their own, youth often seek validation from older persons such as professors and parents. However, teachers are on the whole a conservative force. Often their attempts are not dealt with sensitively and squashed down, and both groups ending up seeing the other as enemy.

Choices

Marriage overlaps with the period of youth and as such was a recurrent sub-theme of discussion. It was reiterated that marriage is seen as a sign of adulthood. On one hand, it was asserted that most youths preferred their parents choosing their life partners. Lack of knowledge, aversion to taking responsibility and commitment phobia were purported as reasons for this preference. On the other hand, it was articulated that youth are viewing the institution of marriage critically. Rather than alienate the younger generation, the system of marriage needs to reflect on itself and incorporate the former's views.

Impact of Economic Structures

The impact of economic structures on youth was considered. With more informalization and fragmenting of the economy and the resultant insecurity, youth does not see its future beyond a particular year. Opportunities, which do exist, are only for the elite. Therefore, achieved status becomes a difficult factor of control and, thus, the youth tend to cling to ascribed status. Consultation participants also shared their lived experiences of how a reactionary culture had emerged in the 90s. With the emergence of liberalization and the opening of the economy, Indian youth were exposed to Western values through imports and American shows and movies. A fear of 'losing own identity' arose which also coincided with television soaps such as Ramayana and Mahabharata affecting the ideational mobility of the youth.

Fragmentation and Intersectionality

The fact, that today's youth is fragmented across multiple identities, stood uncontested through the Consultation. Some of the participants shared their evaluation of how this fragmentation has evolved. A few decades ago youth would get uniformly united for a singular cause—the Mathura rape case uprising civil action was stated as an example. Currently, as the participants viewed, the causes and the organising for causes have become scattered. Instead of different people uniting for a cause by bringing in their different voices, currently, the issues are affirmed according to identities. This fragmentation has also overflowed to migrant Indian elites who identify themselves not as Indians but Hindu Indians, Dalit Indians and so on. Those in power are capitalising on this fragmentation. This historical evolvement was contested with the assertion that fragmentation has always been present, albeit not as conspicuously. The early Feminist movement, for example, excluded lesbians and Dalits. The suffragette movement ignored black feminists. Intersectionality acquires prominence here by recognising exclusion. A feminist cannot claim to be one unless s/he supports transwomen and queer feminism. The current political climate is undermining such intersectionalities by promoting the upsurge of 'Indianness.'

Creating an Inclusive Youth Identity

Following from the above sub-theme, the need to create an inclusive youth identity was commonly echoed in the Consultation. The existence of youth movements was questioned. Unlike other movements such as feminist movements, youth movements do not have a coherent ideological base. However, noting the interest of young people in different movements, an intergenerational dialogue must be considered. This dialogue should be non-hierarchical and non-paternalistic.

Creation of Space for Youth Expression

A need to create a space for self-expression for youths was reiterated. The contextual nature of this need was emphasised through examples of violent suppression of Rohith Vemula movement. Social and traditional norms suffocate the space for youth to open up and discuss their identities, more so in the case of gender-related or sexual identities. While there are counteracting forces pulling youth to polarised identities, it is to be reflected on whether an alternative movement allowing youth to discover themselves can be created. This movement could be safe spaces where youth can explore their identities at their own space. In the current urban context, the social media is providing some space, whether safe or unsafe, for youth to express and exchange their ideas. Underprivileged youths are often deprived of this space. A counter view in response was that youth from underprivileged backgrounds do not have time to think about identities or self expression as

they have financial and familial responsibilities from a very young age. Financial sustainability takes precedence over everything else. Such spaces, even when created, are not calibrated according to their needs. It is the need of those working with youth that the youth should be talking about and understanding these issues. This discussion explored the interconnectedness of youth's identity and their ability to choose as well as their freedom to exercise these choices. Ms. Ashraf Patel concluded by emphasising the need to create a cross-generational dialogue with due care given to who is included in this dialogue and how.

EDUCATION, SKILL AND EMPLOYMENT

Education shapes the very foundation of an individual whereas skills help her or him to deal with life situations as well as gain employment to ensure financial stability. This session explored the various aspects and issues surrounding education, skill and employment of youths. Mr. Nitin Paranjape, Director, Abhivyakti, lifted the curtain on this discussion by highlighting the difference between physical and actual access to education. He shared observations from Abhivyakti's action research programme on girls' education to stress this point. Despite having challenges such as work at home and in fields and dropping out of schools, the research participants showed a marked interest in understanding the research concepts during workshops and shared their aspirations of bettering themselves and their lives. He also emphasised on the demoting of personhood in favour of marks and curriculum in the educational process. The self-study mode which allows independent exploration and learning is highly ignored in the current system. He focused on the importance of mentors in building knowledge and perspective among youth. Building more networks of mentors is thus necessary. Technology is another tool to be tapped more for bridging the knowledge and learning gap. The feasibility of small e-courses to fulfil this purpose has to be explored. An example in this context is Mass Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which provide learning opportunities to millions of people across the world. Mr. Paranjape wrapped up his remarks by stressing the need for parents to be supportive and not control their wards' learning choices.

Highlights from the Discussion

The Educational System

The Consultation participants found various lacunae in the current educational system. They stressed that it promoted conforming to social norms and manufacturing students into products fitting into market value. While skill-based education is being promoted, there is no clarity on what is meant by 'skills.' On the contrary, education should focus on learning and personality development.

Specific categories such as girls and disabled still faced accessibility issues. Despite reservations in educational institutes and employment, educational opportunities do not translate into reality for youth with disabilities. Under privileged girls often have to negotiate with their families to be allowed to enter higher education, the trade-off of which is a conformation to social norms of 'good girl' behaviour or marrying as per the family's wishes. Youths are being exposed to different kinds of information but there is hardly any critical reflection on this information. There should be 'open spaces' for discussions.

Participants noted that skill formation and skill upgradation is rooted in patriarchy and caste divisions. Women are hardly seen in the skilled informal sectors such as carpentry. Traditional knowledge and life skills are losing out in the universalised curriculums. For example, malnutrition was non-existent earlier as indigenous knowledge systems and grains were used. Thus, the handed-down knowledge has disappeared pointing to a huge gap between traditional skills and formal education.

Need and Efficacy of Certification and Formal Systems

There were contrasting opinions among the participants on the need for certification in educational system. Some challenged it on the grounds that certification promoted marketisation of people, marginalised certain skills and did not give credit to life experiences. Certification frameworks also do not ensure actual qualification as students study for the sake of certificates rather than learning. Certificates and degrees have become a status symbol marginalising those coming from informal systems. Not all skills such as care, support and certain life skills can be certified. People who fix mobiles are not certified yet they do them and earn from it. Moreover, even with certificates, students are not knowledgeable without a sense of basics. Certain post-graduation degrees are at times quite deficit. It should also be noted that some vocational skill institutes are not accessible to many students. Lastly, apprenticeship should be recognised in its dual forms—formal and informal.

In contrast to these stands, it was argued that though there is cause for a lot of disillusionment, one cannot avoid the formal system. Questions are not encouraged in classrooms or the society and emphasis is given to rote learning. However, it helps in gaining employment and income. Despite the lacunae, a formal system of education and certification is needed. In absence of such institutional frameworks, the process of learning, which is slow and difficult, will collapse. Thus, instead of critiquing the system, it should be improved.

Ideas for Closing the Gaps

Participants shared that experiential learning as well as life and informal skills need to be a part of learning. Skill development programmes should also factor in aspects of access, mobility, social justice and legal aid. Gap year programmes should be adopted on a wide scale to improve accessibility and inclusiveness. Community-based learning should be encouraged to inculcate the various values and skills learnt from communities. The culture of questioning and critical thinking should be promoted whereas the emphasis on rote-learning should be weaned. Capitalising on recognition of education as a right since 2009, NGOs should take up advocacy and monitoring to ensure maximum educational access.

INFLUENCE OF CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE

Culture and lifestyle largely defines and is defined by the youth—this session explored this theme. Mr. Meet Tara started the discussion by unpacking the notion of 'culture'. Culture is often interchangeably used with religion and nationalism and found to be dominant with hetero-normative values diffused by social institutions such as schools, families, legal system and media. Culture often creates ideals and binaries. For example, there are common definitions of 'cultured boys' and 'cultured girls.' Culture also encourages silence and creates resistance, dissent and discussion. Mr. Tara also underlined the omnipotent presence of capitalism in culture. Consumerism has influenced political and personal ideologies—people have subscribed to idea of 'development packet' and associate consumption with self-esteem and identity. Mr. Tara screened an eBay advertisement that advocated the idea 'products do not judge, unlike people.' He analysed the phenomenon as a part of 'corporate culture' that used social messages for advertisement. Citing the example of Anubhuti's work, he emphasised the need to look at a counter culture for youth.

Highlights from the Discussion

Media and Corporate Culture

Media has a pronounced effect on culture, especially youth, due to prolonged exposure. Prompted by the showcased video, participants discussed the advertisement industry at length. It was asserted that many tabooed topics such as menstruation and sexuality have found fresh voice through modern ads. However, they also underline the need to keep consuming and have influenced the youth to become materialistic. Through this 'readymade' culture the creative and laborious instincts of the youth are being blunted. Products are marketed as the solution to social problems which in reality they are not. Further, this culture invisibilizes the fact that spaces to talk about social problems are shrinking. The youths are now directed to have consumerist aspirations and pressurized into fitting into consumerist images. Corporates have liberalised their spaces by affirming queer rights but still continue to flout labour rights.

Neoliberalism

The participants shared that globalisation and neoliberalism provided the space to foreground issues which were earlier taboo or marginalised. For instance, the HIV AIDS funding opened up a lot of discussions on various understandings of sexual rights. Contrary to this stand, some participants also shared that neoliberalism has appropriated spaces which were earlier open for people for sharing and talking. Neoliberalism has normalised oppressive structures and thus progressive messages promoted by capitalists seem suspicious.

Creating a Counterculture

Participants emphasised a need to enhance the capability of young children to question and critique the multiple messages they receive through media. Adults and mentors will have to create conversation and critical analysis of these messages. While the impact of consumerist culture, especially on the youth, is understood, efforts should be made to create counter cultures. Young people are taking initiatives in this direction but lack leadership skills. Youth agencies should create spaces as organisers or facilitators to encourage such initiatives.

FAMILY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Family is one of the most important spaces where the youth form and negotiate their identities. This session explored the dynamics between youth and their families and related social networks. Ms. Snehal Velkar from Akshara opened the discussion by sharing her observations of working with youth. She emphasised that even though the youth negotiate with and question their parents on several aspects such as mobility, they lack the means to challenge their families and communities on conventional value systems. Sexuality and marriage are examples of such values, and forced marriages and honour killings exemplify failed family negotiations vis-a-vis these values. Youth agencies should unite and lobby strongly before the state so that it is possible to discuss upon alternative forms of structure that are required to create such spaces. Youth-based agencies should create various alternative structures such as working women's hostels, half-stay homes, student's hostels and free and safe community gathering spaces for girls so that the youth can explore themselves.

Highlights from the Discussion

Perturbing the Family Structure

The participants raised many problematques between youths and the family structure. As they are a generation apart from their parents, the youth tend to always have different ideas, viewpoints and behaviour patterns. Moreover, non-conformity and exposure to ideas of the wider world, which includes association with organisations, give rise to critical thinking among the youth. They begin questioning social norms and start negotiating in their families which render them as 'social misfits.' Sometimes, when negotiation with families and communities fail, the youth seek alternatives outside their family. Those working with youth support the latter in gaining empowerment but are unable in helping them gain the agency to actualise this empowerment. Moreover, the Indian society lacks collectives such as communes which provide an alternative space and support for people. The only option for the youth is to live with the fact of being 'social misfits.'

A contrasting perspective also emerged in the discussion. Some participants shared that instead of envisioning a generalised dichotomy of 'us versus them' between the youth and their families, the youth need to be understood with all their nuances. Family can also be a space for reimagining and redefining power and living in an egalitarian way, and there are some young people attempting to do the same. Despite the conflicts in the family structure, youth cannot do away with it because there are no other institutions in the society which will provide them with such support.

Exploring New Strategies

The participants stressed the need for a stronger focus on engaging parents in various workshops and encouraging meaningful parent-child communication. Previous work has shown that most workshops are attended by mothers and the community as a whole is not engaged. These gaps should be filled so as to create a more receptive ecosystem for youths. To tackle with cases where families and communities totally fail, more organizations, providing the same nurture and attention deserved by children, should come up. Lastly, youth agencies should create a platform, negotiate relevant issues, bring up agendas and propose them in front of state agencies.

CITIZENSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

The final theme of the Consultation explored the role of youth in the larger society. Mr. Manak Matiyani, YP Foundation, flagged off this session with the video 'Azadi' which depicted a quirky take on the JNU protests that had created a media storm in recent times. Mr. Matiyani illustrated through several examples how various youth groups were emphasising differential citizenship rights and challenging the 'tyranny of monoculture' using innovative forms of protest. However, this has also infused a sense of 'my idealism versus your idealism' among the youth. The Chennai floods saw the youth helping out people but there was no action against the government to introduce sustainable solutions to prevent floods in the city. He mentioned about a Canadian film 'The World Before Her' which shows about Durga Vahini Camps and the Femina Miss India Contest. He talked about how people should not have problems with the 'tyranny of monocultures' which he related to the present student movements. He stressed that citizenship and participation in democracy should not be reduced to jingoistic nationalism and the narrow definition of national service needs to be questioned. Young people's work needs to be made more political. He gave the example of 'Pinjra Tod,' a student's group that was challenged not only the hostel management but also political parties which objected to their protests.

Highlights from the Discussion

Youth and Power Structures

Participants pointed to the fact that power regimes have always instrumentalised youth by attempting to promoting their ideologies. For example, yoga and Swacch Bharat activities are promoted in National Service Scheme (NSS). However, forcing these ideologies on the youth and classifying hard-line stands which differ from these ideologies as 'anti-establishment' amount to state repression. The Consultation participants highlighted the fear among the youth in the current power regime. Academicians in the panel pointed out that, unlike students from renowned institutions who are able to make noteworthy protests and opposition in a climate of political repression, those in small colleges are quite stressed and isolated and have no support systems to fight against the establishment. Participants also reflected upon the category of totally apolitical youth who do not desire to be involved in any matters—it is more difficult to work with this category.

CONCLUSION: EVOLVING STRATEGIES

The concluding discussion saw participants discussing new strategies of working with youth as well as the initiatives of their organisations.

Ideas for Enabling Youth Participation

Ms. Ashraf Patel shared the concept of 'fifth space' in the concluding discussion. There are four spaces—family, education and livelihood, leisure and entertainment and friends. All of these spaces are hierarchal wherein decisions are not taken by young people. Another distinct space which can be called the 'fifth' space also exists wherein young people step out of the other four spaces and explore their identities. There is autonomy and the ability to connect to the society in this space as well as personal transformation. Political

activism is another space that beckons youth to the streets and educates and transforms them greatly. It is important to have a transformative space for youth. Universities and organizations could contribute in building such spaces and support systems. The need for creating digital safety modules for youth was also brought up.

Current Initiatives

The concluding discussion also saw participants discussing initiatives of their organisations. Mr. Nitin Paranjape shared about the documentary viewing culture practised at Abhivyakti. He also talked about the 'Smile' programme, an initiative between Abhivyakti and Anubhav Samaj, and an innovative biennial conference known as 'Learning Societies UnConference.' Ms. Rajakumari from Pukar shared the organisation's community-based action research model which has given birth to programmatic interventions. Mr. Sachin Nachanekar from YUVA talked about the organisation's work in the community to nurture youth leaders. Ms. Sakhi Nitin Anita shared about Akshara's 'Empowering Dreams' programme that supports young women to fulfil their educational and career dreams as well as equips them with life skills to challenge social norms and push patriarchal boundaries. Mr. Meet Tara shared about 'Zehen,' an intersectional feminist group for young people to share in a safe and non-judgmental space.\

In her concluding remarks, Dr. Gandhi emphasised that being confined to unconventional or non-conformist is going to be increasingly problematic for youth. This underlines the importance of creating spaces for young people that nurture and can lead to productive actions in their lives.

ANNEXURES

A. Schedule of Sessions

Session	Duration
Introduction and Overview to the Meeting	11:00 - 11:10
Discussion on Theme 1 'Identities, Choices and Freedom'	11:10 - 12:25
Discussion on Theme 2 'Education, Skill and Employment'	12:25 - 12:55
Discussion on Theme 3 'Influence of Culture and Lifestyle'	14:35 - 15:35
Discussion on Theme 4 'Family and Social Networks'	15:35 - 16:10
Discussion on Theme 5 'Citizenship and Participation'	16:15 - 16:50
Strategies and Concluding of the Meeting	16:55 - 17:55

B. List of Participants

	Name	Organisation
Facilitators		
A	Dr. Nandita Gandhi	Akshara
B	Ashraf Patel	Pravah
C	Nitin Paranjape	Abhivyakti Media for Development
D	Meet Tara	SNDT University
E	Snehal Velkar	Akshara
F	Manak Matiyani	YP Foundation
Participants		
1	Srabonti Ghosh	Aangan Trust
2	Nitin Paranjape	Abhivyakti
3	Anshla Benny	Akshara
4	Dr. Nandita Gandhi	Akshara
5	Kimaya Vartak	Akshara
6	Poornima Mandape	Akshara
7	Roshani Kadam	Akshara

	Name	Organisation
8	Sakhi Nitin Anita	Akshara
9	Snehal Velkar	Akshara
10	Amrita Das	Anubhuti
11	Tilottama	Anubhuti
12	Dr. Chayanika Shah	FORUM
13	Prof. Vaijayanta	Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work
14	Prof. Ronald Yesudhas	Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work
15	Benazir Lobo	Misereor (DPS) India
16	Smita	Point of View
17	Ashraf Patel	Pravah
18	Dr. Anita Patil-Deshmukh	Pukar
19	Jayashree Belawade	Pukar
20	Rajkumari Nimbole	Pukar
21	Rohan Chavan	Pukar
22	Tanvi	Pukar
23	Meet Tara	SNDT University
24	Aishwarya Gopinath (Student)	Tata Institute of Social Sciences
25	Prof. Lata Narayan	Tata Institute of Social Sciences
26	Manak Matiyani	YP Foundation
27	Sachin Nachanekar	YUVA
28	Vrijendra	Retired Lecturer