

Age of Optimism: Unraveling Indian Youth Images of the Future*

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Abstract

This paper places the Indian youth images of the future in the global context of the early twenty-first century. This period appears to be 'post-normal' from a Western perspective but not from the perspective of India and other developing countries. The paper presents some significant surveys of Indian youth in recent years and discusses the results of these surveys, including the images and perceptions of the future. It tries to analyse the factors that influence the attitude of optimism, enthusiasm and confidence of the Indian youth towards the future. These factors relate to India's objective situation in the world as well as to the cultural traits deriving from India's long-existing civilization. The paper concludes by reminding that serious challenges exist for creating a bright future, which will have to be addressed by India's leadership as well as by its youth, today and tomorrow.

1. The global 'post-normal' context at the turn of the century

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one finds a mood of despair, uncertainty and insecurity in the West due to the multiple shocks of terrorism, economic recession and climate change. From the smug comfort of affluence, stability, security and the feeling of ideological superiority¹, the West has suddenly been forced to acknowledge that 'things are not normal' anymore. And the future that stares the West in the face is not very bright. The combined impacts of these developments will be visible in the developed nations of the West for many years to come. Since the youth of today will face the brunt of these impacts, a mood of despair and pessimism among the youth of the developed countries is not surprising. Zia

¹ With its acme being Fukuyama's proclamation of the "end of history."

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Sardar has aptly described the characteristics and the unexpected developments of this period in the elegant phrase, “post-normal times.”

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first has been understood and theorized by many scholars in recent years as the period of emergence of the post-industrial, information age. Post-normal times can be understood as a transient phase, before a new ‘normality’ emerges². But it was to be expected that in this emergent age the certainties and expectations of the late twentieth century will change, that there will be new questions and uncertainties about the future. Particularly, given high levels of youth unemployment in the West and the somewhat expected decline in the West’s economic prosperity in the coming years, a climate of pessimism about the future is understandable.

Ironically, however, while a mood of despair is evident in the developed West in these ‘post-normal times’, the prevailing mood in India, China and in other Asian ‘emerging markets’ is confidence and optimism for the future. This is also true of developing countries and emerging markets in Africa and Latin America. The mood of the public (the better-off, educated classes, whose numbers are swelling consistently, if gradually) in these countries – as evident from investor behaviour, consumer and youth surveys, the media and movies - is highly optimistic. After the impact on their societies and their psyches of two centuries of colonial domination³, and after the decades of squalor and scarcity even after independence in the last century, they are now moving to a more ‘normal’ phase in which the global balance of power is more equitable, they are moving to consolidate their gains and their strengths and talents are being recognized. This is the global context of Indian youth images of the future.

2. Indian Youth: attitudes, perceptions and future images

In this section we will look at some important youth surveys and what they tell us about the attitudes, perceptions and images of the future of Indian youth. It is important to understand that there are almost no surveys of Indian youth focused only on the future. So the survey results below relate to youth attitudes and perceptions on various aspects, including the future. It is also very important to understand that India is such a large and diverse country that often the results from different surveys may not match. This is because of differences in educational attainment, rural/urban background, geographical area and the particularly the level of socio-economic development in an area as well as of the respondents. As is often said, for any generalization about India the opposite may also be true! This is an important aspect of India’s diversity and plurality and makes generalizations difficult. Yet, the different surveys reveal certain common traits, trends and results, which will be evident from the observations below. In the next section we will discuss some of the factors that could be hypothesized to explain these commonalities and core values.

² This author has argued, in the context of Sardar’s formulation of ‘post-normal times’, that the seeming normality of twentieth century in the West was an illusion arising out of the ignorance and neglect of environmental and health consequences of unbridled industrial growth. The distorted assumptions of neo-classical economics are largely to blame for this. It is now time to pay back for those excesses. A new normality will emerge only by addressing these distortions and by creating democratic global institutions that can reflect the changed global balance of power of the 21st century (Kapoor, 2011).

³ This is an area that has not yet received adequate attention by the intelligentsia in these countries, although there are a number of fragmented efforts. The Indian diplomat and writer Pawan Varma’s recent book, *Becoming Indian: The Unfinished Revolution of Culture and Identity* (Varma, 2010) deals at some length with this question. I suspect – as I have argued elsewhere that once success and confidence are achieved in the economic realm, cultural rediscovery will follow more vigorously.

The Lokniti-CSDS Study on Youth Attitudes in India⁴

This survey was carried out in 2007 among 5000 youth, age group 14-34 years, from different states of India. Some of the conclusions that emerged from this survey are as follows:

- Youth from small towns have the highest levels of aspirations in life as compared to those from metropolitan cities and villages.
- Youth from towns are more optimistic about their future as compared to those from villages and cities.
- Dalit and Tribal youth have higher aspirations in life as compared to those from Forward Castes and OBCs.
- Poverty is seen as the major concern of national importance among all sections of the youth in India.
- For Indian youth, guarantee of employment should be first priority for the nation followed by provision of quality health care and educational facilities.
- Young men are more fashion conscious as compared to young women.
- Small town youth are more satisfied with the existing educational facilities in comparison to those from villages and big cities.
- Young rural men are more supportive of promotion of greater gender equality by the government as compared to their urban counterparts.
- Young women in cities are least supportive of reservation for women in parliament.
- More than two-third of the Indian youth consider alcohol consumption to be unacceptable.
- Urban youth favour improved friendly relations with Pakistan as compared to rural youth.

The study found that youth in India mirror continuity with change. On significant parameters they think very much like the older generations but in many other critical areas, they have also chosen to tread a different path. Interestingly, the authors of this study argue that “the youth/adulthood distinction does not hold in the Indian context, because far too often in this context the young come to take on (or are not free from) adult responsibilities.”

The study also found that the youth in India mirror many of the goals, aspirations and attitudes of youth across the world, while at the same time in select areas their attitude and choices vary significantly from those of the younger generation the world over. The study considered the results of the survey in seven thematic areas, briefly discussed below.

Trust and Circles of Belonging: The youth demonstrate a moderate level of inter-personal trust in those they interact with. The intensity of trust is significantly higher among those who are a part of their ‘immediate social circle’. Youth reported limited experience of being discriminated against. The experiences of youth vary significantly if the following three variables are taken into account: access to higher education, improved socio-economic status and exposure to urban life.

Family and Social Networks: The study developed an Index of Parental Authority and an Index of Family Values to understand what influences the way youth think and act in their personal and social domains. For instance, 60% of the youth surveyed accepted that the final

⁴ This section is based substantially on the Lokniti-CSDS study on Youth Attitudes in India, initiated in 2007 (deSouza et al, 2009)

decision on marriage should be taken by parents. This would be unthinkable in most western societies. A synthesis of tradition and modernity is evident here. The nature of the social structure and the dynamics of social relationships strongly influence their family values in particular and their social values in general. “Youth prefer to remain within the cultural codes of their family and social networks. The family remains a key institution in the life-world of Indian youth.”

Leisure and Lifestyle: The leisure habits of the young are intrinsically linked to their socio-economic status, educational levels and place of stay. Television is a crucial source of entertainment and an important leisure activity for most youth. Internet use is largely limited to the cities and almost exclusively among those who have had the benefit of higher education (this was the case in 2007, but in the last six years this situation has been changing with the rapid penetration of mobile phones and increasing use of the internet). Wearing fashionable clothes is important for a large segment of the youth, reflecting an important aspiration.

Politics and Democracy: Interestingly, the study found that the youth in India buck the global trend of declining interest in politics. There is a reasonably high level of participation in all forms of politics-direct, indirect, formal or non-formal-as well among the youth. Their trust in democracy is also significantly high. Educational levels and media exposure appear to clearly influence their reflections on democracy and politics.

Governance and Development: The youth identified unemployment and poverty as the two major challenges that people faced. Other issues of national importance identified were the problem of HIV/AIDS, maternal health, reducing child mortality rates and ensuring greater gender equality. Women seem to lay a greater emphasis on this issue than men.

Nation and the World: There does not seem to be too high a level of awareness among the youth about the changes taking place in the contemporary world. By and large, only the educated youth and those who live in cities know about globalization and tend to support it. The number of those who see it as advantages from among the lower socio economic group was about the same as those who saw it as disadvantageous, and those who saw it as disadvantageous dropped with higher income. The youth showed a high level of awareness about India’s friends and foes. While many were aware of the United States they differed in their views on how India’s relations with it should develop. There was interesting variance on how India should engage with the world.

Anxieties and Aspirations: “Indian youth have both very high levels of anxiety and high levels of aspiration. Further, on the specific question of how they saw their future and their children’s future more than two-thirds saw the future as bright in both instances.” The anxieties and aspirations are linked to three variables: socio-economic status, educational level and whether the youth live in urban or rural areas. Youth in small towns appear to have the highest level of aspiration even compared to metropolitan areas. Youth in small, emerging towns and cities seem to be at the threshold of the real change, with a high level of expectations.

The study concluded that “Overall, the study clearly indicates that the youth in India are on the cusp of change and represent an authentic multiplicity of aspirations, ‘world views’ and interest truly mirroring the rich tapestry of diversity that India is.”

The Hindustan Times (HT) Youth Surveys 2011, 2012 and 2013

The 'feel good' feeling for their tomorrow is evident in today's youth. Successive surveys (HT-MaRS Youth Survey 2011 and 2012; HT-C Fore Survey, 2013) of the educated young reveal that the young are optimistic about their future despite lack of adequate and appropriate jobs and a not-so-competent political leadership. In 2011, 74% of the 10000 urban youngsters surveyed across 15 cities said they were 'happy' though in 2012 this dropped to 62% (of the 7021 youngsters surveyed), perhaps due to a sluggish economy and jobless growth. An evident concern among youth is securing their individual future through appropriate employment. In 2013, 99% of the 1063 young surveyed across 11 major cities and adjoining rural areas were, for instance, extremely disappointed about the employment scene in India. Half of them said there was a mismatch between their skills and the nature of job they were offered/doing, 18% said there were inadequate opportunities and a substantial 31% said they would rather try and get a job abroad.

In the 2011 HT-MaRS youth survey, carried out among 10,000 youth from 18 state capitals and major towns, when asked about their future, 43 per cent said they were worried a little about their future, 42 per cent were worried a lot and 15 per cent were not worried at all. In the 2012 HT-MaRS youth survey, the corresponding figures were 44, 39.5 and 16.5 respectively. Interestingly, the strong family orientation came through clearly in these surveys. 42% of the 7021 urban youth questioned in 2012 said that parents make them happy, 32% said friends make them happy and only 5.3 % said that a boyfriend or girlfriend makes them happy!

In terms of the youth perception of India in the global context, a substantial per cent of the youth have a positive image. In the 2013 survey, when asked how they see India in the next ten years, the biggest chunk of the young – 39% - said that India will play a key role in world affairs. Another 30% felt that India's role will remain the same as it is now.

In the 2012 HT-MaRS survey, the biggest global challenges identified by youth were terrorism (30%) and global warming (24%). The biggest national challenges they identified are corruption (29%), global warming (19%) and cross-border terror (18.5%).

The young do not really have a hands-off attitude when it comes to politics but have their own way of getting involved or protesting against bad governance. With elections scheduled for mid-2014, two-thirds of the youth in 2013 were clear in wanting to vote, though a little over a quarter of them said their vote will not 'make a difference' while the majority said that their vote 'does make a difference.' But when asked how the current political system will improve, 36% felt this will happen through increased civil society participation.

In terms of work preferences, a quarter of them wanted to work in the corporate sector while 35% prefer either the civil services (elite government jobs) or other government jobs. 5% favoured politics as a career. This may look like a small percentage, but one in twenty young people expressing a desire for a career in politics actually means a strong activist interest and belief in being in the driver's seat for change in the future!

With regard to political leadership, the 2013 survey revealed that only a little over a third (37%) said the current political leadership is competent. The rest saw it as hopeless (24%), corrupt (21%) and 'a product of the system (18%).' In terms of their views on social networking through social media, a majority of 51% felt that it gives voice to democracy and helps mobilize masses.

The Kairos Future Group survey, 2007⁵

A survey carried out by Kairos Future Group of Sweden found that Indian youth are strikingly more optimistic about their own future and also about the future of society. The survey covered 17 countries, including Italy, Russia, China and France. In India, it looked at the middle class, those who had access to the Internet, even if not at home. People between 19 and 29 were asked how satisfied they were with parameters like their job, life, family and government. The general picture in other countries is that young people tend to be personal optimists but societal pessimists.

The authors of the study believe that Indians' optimism has a lot to do with their economy, just as Japan's pessimism has a lot to do with the state of business there. Young Japanese compare their lives with those of their parents and conclude that it's now tougher to get a job, make money. In France, with high unemployment rates, the reasons are similar, but it might also be a cultural influence, as the general French culture is quite critical, while Indians are more happy.

Bennet Manuel, an executive at an outsourcing firm in Bangalore said young Indians also had it easier than their counterparts in the Western nations because of doting parents. Unlike in the U.S., Indian parents pay for graduation, so most youth start work with a clean chit, with no student loans to pay. "It is easier to be happy when you don't have to worry about debt." Manuel, who acknowledged the standard of life in a European or North American country is much higher than in India, argued that it's still easier to stay in India because of the amenities. "I have someone to cook and keep my house clean. Why would I want to start doing all that by myself?"

Young Indian achievers and innovators inspire youth for the future

A number of well-educated young Indians are excelling in many fields, from academics, entrepreneurship and technology to art, cinema and sports. These achievers are inspiring a number of other young people among the huge pool of youth in India. The box below is the story of a modern Indian youth innovator, Pranav Mistry. Young people like Mistry, who hails from a small town in India, inspire not only young Indians but also young people globally.

Pranav Mistry: A Technology Innovator and Youth Icon from India

Pranav Mistry is the inventor of SixthSense, a wearable 'gestural interface' comprising a neck-worn pendant that contains both a data projector and camera, connected to a mobile computing device in the user's pocket. It augments the physical world around us with digital information and lets us use natural hand gestures to interact with that information. The projector projects visual information enabling surfaces, walls and physical objects around us to be used as interfaces; while the camera recognizes and tracks users' hand gestures that act as interaction instructions. For example you could navigate a map displayed on a nearby surface, projected live information on the newspaper you are reading or click pictures, project the time or your email on a nearby surface like your hand using hand gestures.

⁵ The findings from this survey reported here are as per a report in Forbes journal (David, 2007)

Pranav Mistry is from Palanpur, a small town of northern Gujarat, and graduated as Masters of Design from IIT Bombay and Masters of Media Arts and Sciences from MIT Media Lab. He recently joined Samsung Electronics as Director of Research. "Exposure to fields like Design to Technology and from Art to Psychology gave me a quite nice/interesting viewpoint to the world. I love to see technology from design perspective and vice versa." Among some of his other work, Pranav has invented Mouseless – an invisible computer mouse; SPARSH – a novel way to copy-paste data between digital devices; Quickies – intelligent sticky notes that can be searched, located and can send reminders and messages; Blinkbot - a gaze and blink controlled robot; a pen that can draw in 3D; and a public map that can act as Google of physical world.

Mistry has been called one of ten, best inventors in the world right now by Chris Anderson. Mistry has been listed as one of the 15 Asian Scientists to Watch by Asian Scientist Magazine on 15 May 2011. GQ India listed Pranav as one of the most powerful Digital Indians. He was listed as one of the 37 Indians of Tomorrow by India Today. Recently, Pranav Mistry was honoured as Young Global Leader 2013 by the World Economic Forum.

Sources:

<http://www.pranavmistry.com/>

<http://www.pranavmistry.com/projects/sixthsense/>

<http://www.media.mit.edu/research/groups/1461/sixthsense>

http://www.ted.com/speakers/pranav_mistry.html

3. Unraveling images of the future

What factors influence young Indians images of the future and explain the optimism, enthusiasm and confidence that the youth seem to have in their own abilities vis-à-vis the future? The optimism of the youth is very palpable, even though it may be argued that youth do not really hold the reins of power. According to Chetan Bhagat, a popular, young writer, some of whose novels on youth and education themes has been turned into successful films exploring the lives and concerns of youth in India, "There is a lot of talk about India being a young nation and about youth power. However youth power is the biggest myth going around India right now. Of course the youth has spending power - we can buy enough SIM cards, sneakers and fizzy drinks to keep many MNCs in business. But we do not have the power to change things? Can the youth get a new college set up? Can the youth ask the government to provide tax incentives to MNCs to relocate jobs to smaller towns? No way. We are wooed, used, but seldom heard". Bhagat makes a relevant point, especially so in a country with a prime minister over 80 years old and a tradition of very senior leaders in critical positions of power. Nevertheless, it is notable that youth have the confidence and the optimism that they will make a difference in a bright future, tomorrow if not today.

These factors derive both from India's objective situation in the world today and from the cultural traits and characteristics shaped by the Indian civilization.

One, Indian economy has been growing at an average rate of around 7% in the last two decades. Even though India was a very poor country in the early 90s, this pace of growth has meant increasing opportunities and the increasing visibility and realization of the opportunities for economic and social advancement. Even the economic recession of 2008 and the five plus per cent plus of growth in the last two years is a temporary hiccup in this remarkable period of growth. This boom period has naturally influenced the optimism of the youth, a majority many of whom were either born after 1991, or were toddlers and small

children at that time, when the period of economic liberalization was initiated after four decades of a closed economy.

Two, Indian culture and civilization have existed for a few thousand years and during this period have developed philosophical systems, ideas, cultural traits and traditions that have lent it a continuity and resilience that may perhaps be unmatched. India has been invaded by many external forces but has always been able to absorb and assimilate from these influences without altering its fundamental character. The impact of the British during the colonial period and the recent and current impacts of globalization can be seen in this light. In fact, the numerous external invasions and influences have given rise to a syncretic and multi-cultural society that presents itself as a model to the world for the future (Smith, 2003). Guy Sorman discusses the three waves in the past through which India has influenced the West, and suggests that a fourth wave is likely. “Westerners look romantically to India for the mysticism that has run dry in a disenchanted West. But if the fourth wave comes, I believe it will bring neither divinity nor spirituality but toleration, that is the acceptance of the other and the recognition that there is a truth other than one’s own” (Sorman, 2001, p.200).

These strengths are further amplified by the soft power of India’s culture through elements such as yoga, the Indian film industry – ‘Bollywood’, Indian classical music and dances, Indian food, and so on. These cultural traits are also finding expression in newer avenues such as crafts, textile design and fashion. These cultural strengths influence the confidence that is reflected in Indian youth images of the future.

Some of the core values of Indian society and culture that continue to prevail and that seem, quite evidently, to influence the youth of India include the acceptance of diversity and plurality, spirit of tolerance and adjustment, democracy, freedom, the importance of the family, emphasis on education, hard work, entrepreneurship and innovation (referred to in India by the indigenous term ‘jugaad’).⁶

Three, along with these developments, there is more and more expectation and acceptance of India playing a more important global role. Not everyone is convinced that India will be a super power of the future, but many scholars are now arguing that India will be an important power to contend with in the coming decades (Virmani, 2005 and 2010; Avery, 2012, for instance). This optimism for the future is reflected, again, in the Indian youth perceptions of the future.

Four, in the next few decades, India is going to be one of the ‘youngest’ countries in the world, with a median age of early to mid 20s for the next few decades. In comparison, China, Europe and the US, all will have median age of the population in late 30s or early forties. This ‘demographic dividend’ has a serious positive consequence for India’s economic growth (Bloom, 2011) and implies that the services of young, skilled Indians will be available to many other countries in the world. Skilled and educated young Indians realize this and this confidence and optimism is reflected in their images of the future.

Five, the above trends and factors are amplified further by the innate intelligence and the entrepreneurial spirit of Indians. A number of books in recent years have been documenting the stories of entrepreneurship (business and social entrepreneurship) and Indians on the move. For instance, Bansal (2008) narrates the stories of young entrepreneurs from IIM, Ahmedabad; Girdharadas (2011) narrates the intimate stories of how young Indians are

⁶ A number of recent books have discussed the notions of innovation and jugaad in the Indian and the global context. See, for instance, Govindrajana and Trimble (2012); Radjou et al (2012); Nilekani (2008).

breaking the shackles of the past to create a new life for themselves. The newspapers and journals in India are full of the stories of business and social entrepreneurs who have been working assiduously to create wealth or to bring about social transformation.

Six, the various surveys of Indian youth consistently show the continuing importance of the family in their lives. Eckersley's point here about the importance of the family and other social groups to the life of youth is very relevant. According to Martin Seligman, an American psychologist, one necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self, and the larger that entity, the more meaning you can derive. "To the extent that it is now difficult for young people to take seriously their relationship to God, to care about their relationship to the country, or to be part of a large and abiding family, meaning in life will be very difficult to find. The self, to put it another way, is a very poor site for meaning." (Seligman, 1990, quoted in Eckersley, 1997). The family supports Indian youth in many ways, not the least being financial support for higher education or other purposes at various stages in life. This contributes to a cohesive society with harmonious and optimistic visions of the future.

Lastly, the breakdown of the family and religious networks, the emphasis on material consumption and the thrust on extreme individualism in the West has contributed to a crisis of meaning and spiritual emptiness among youth in many developed countries⁷. To some extent, the same problems are now rearing their head in India and other developing countries through the influences of globalization and of American culture that promotes extreme individualism. However, the fact that these problems are tempered in India by its family, communitarian and religious and spiritual traditions means that Indian youth are 'protected' from these influences that often drive youth towards meaninglessness. These strengths are able, perhaps sub-consciously, to influence the perceptions and attitudes of the youth about their life and about the future.

4. Conclusion

The survey results and the factors influencing some of the common traits and images of the future revealed by these surveys are not meant to brush aside the serious challenges that India and its youth face in creating a bright future. The challenges are many and serious. Whether it is the challenge of dealing with global warming and climate change, of ensuring the sustainable use of its natural resources while providing for its 1.5 billion population expected by 2050, or the challenge of dealing with terror, of reforming education and of reducing economic and social inequalities, all these and other problems demand bold action by India's leaders and the political system. Part of the answer to these problems will depend upon the skills, intelligence, confidence and maturity of today's and tomorrow's youth. The ability of Indian youth to survive and thrive in tough and complex situations, to negotiate through

⁷ While discussing youth in North America and Europe, Eckersley (1997) writes, quoting Cannon (n.d.) that the optimism and confidence they project can be deceptive. David Cannon, who surveyed more than 1100 young, mainly higher-educated North Americans and Europeans, notes (especially about the former) that they give "an illusion of durability-that they can handle more than they actually can. Inside the confident shell is a world of fear and uncertainty that no-one sees except for strangers, in the form of counsellors... When Generation X loses it, they can lose it big. Happy, confident high flyers can turn into deeply depressed and confused individuals in an instant."

difficult circumstances, will be very much needed. Despite the problems that we see, the signs are not ominous!

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