

# Youth, Consumption, and Social Change in India Today

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## ABSTRACT

The category of the youth is problematised by the contemporary dispensation, i.e. the neoliberal era and its diverse manifestations—one among which is, the escalated consumption patterns. The forms this consumption pattern assumes are quite new and complicated. It lures through an explosion of technological options for appropriation of various and shifting ideas of the 'self'. The 'self' of an individual is a vector of these technological and communication consumptions—computers, mobile phones, gaming consoles. The self is also up for repeated scrutiny as well 'upgradation' by the individual himself/herself as well as by the society at large which provides these modes and means of consumption. This then manifests itself in terms of identity crises as the individual is unable to develop a sense of coherent identity. This paper seeks to understand the relationship of the Indian youth to consumption, mediated by the social changes that saturate its existence.

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## 1. Introduction

The idea of youth has always been at crossroads with the more pronounced and more circulated ideas of childhood and adulthood. It has nonetheless always been under the microscope and of central concern to adults and the state. A range of fears and anxieties has constantly shaped the 'youth question' and influenced 'what is to be done about young people'. What is not always understood are the processes and influences that construct and reconstruct the youth question overtime. The ideas of construction and reconstruction take on different dimensions depending on the contexts and on the temporality of that context. The context and temporal aspects are of all the more significance when we look at today's shifting, fluid and shrinking world. In this case, what plays a very important role is the idea of consumption. This idea is not a historical in the least but has emerged more prominently in today's world guided by an avalanche of various forms of mass media—advertisement, music, television, radio, cinema, and of course, the social media—as well as the different and varied locations of encounter with these mass media, namely the souks, shopping arcades, new-age educational institutions etc. These locations alongside mass media do generate some amount of tension within the established syntax of the society as things begin to stir up and then lead to changes in different aspects of society, namely, the family structure and its values, the educational structure and its forms of institutionalization of cultural and social norms etc. Consumption is not just about the act of consuming a certain material object but even immaterial elements like communication and technology which then reflect its repercussions in the activities of production and reproduction of the changing values and norms within a society. This then takes up forms of social changes namely, disillusionment with the established status-quo, unhappiness with one's since-known identity, a burst of uneasiness with the socio-economic and political scenario prevailing in one's social context etc.

## 2. The Choice of the Topic

I am a citizen of a highly globalised, market-saturated, consumption-driven world generally, and particularly of the 21st century India. And I am the youth. The changes that affect me are different from the changes that had affected my grandparents and parents. The idea of youth in their times was situated in the colonial and the newly independent ethos respectively. 'Youth' as a category and as a stage which one goes through and the one in which certain significant as well as impulsive decisions are made had different meaning(s) for them. I will not ignore the fact that the youth in their generations also had many lures and many crises, many aspirations and many struggles, it nonetheless presents itself in a rather more complex and a more reified manner to my generation. The category of youth is problematised by the contemporary dispensation, i.e. the neoliberal era and its diverse manifestations—one among which is, escalated consumption patterns. The forms which again, then this consumption pattern takes is quite new and complicated. It lures through an explosion of technological options for appropriation of various and shifting ideas of the 'self'. The 'self' of an individual is a vector of these technological and communication consumptions—computers, mobile phones, gaming consoles. The self is also up for repeated scrutiny as well 'upgradation' by the individual himself/herself as well as by the society at large which provides these modes and means of consumption. This then manifests itself in terms of identity crises as the individual is unable to develop a sense of coherent identity. Therefore the youth is confronted with a crisis between identity and role confusion as Erik Erikson states in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). This crisis is what Erikson calls psycho-social moratorium.

## 3. Literature Review

As highlighted at the beginning, consumption has been widely discussed by scholars in recent years, examining it beyond a simple economic perspective. In her book *China's new consumers*, E Croll introduces her discussion reflecting on the indivisible connection between the material and social aspects of goods. Arjun Appadurai draws on Marcel Mauss'

ideas to argue that things are unanimated and only acquire significance, life, through human exchange. Value is not inherited in goods, but added through exchange, representing the sacrifice that one makes to obtain another item that will fulfill his or her needs and desires. Goods embody a certain meaning that is determined by a system of cultural values and these values influence consumers' choice. J Baudrillard argues that an individual consumes a precise thing because he/she belongs to a specific social group with its own social values that mark the act of consumption and this individual is part of this specific group because he consumes this particular good, accepting the group's cultural standards.

Thus, consumption emerges as a way to take part in social relations and a form of expression, a code by which the society communicates. This idea of consumption as a language is also present in Pierre Bourdieu's study on taste. According to him, every social group has its particular sense of taste and its members develop a sense of affinity by consuming similar goods. Therefore, taste, and the consumption behaviours associated to it, constitute a symbol of social expression, a communication system that denotes both individual expression and affiliation or, using M Liechty's words, a social currency that utter people's desires to interact with others. Mills ethnography on rural migrant women in Bangkok shows how these female workers consume fashion and make-up to integrate themselves into the city's scenario. Through clothes and beauty products consumption they not only seek to be accepted as a part of the metropolitan society, but also to leave behind their rural backwardness and embrace the taste of urban modernity, constructing a new identity in pursuit of their desires and aspirations. Sanjay Srivastava also conducts a similar study on Delhi's slums with respect to the differing consumption patterns among men and women. In these slums, he finds that, young women in their early twenties dabble in a variety of odd jobs especially to do with selling cosmetic products in the city. By doing so these women not only are contributing to the gross income of the family but also are capable of buying similar desirable products for themselves. This creates a sense of identity among these women, a sense of self-worth. The men on the other hand are lackadaisical and not very proactive. They desire as well for a better lifestyle but to achieve that lifestyle they do not put in commensurate effort.

The axes of gender, class, religion, caste and ethnicity are of crucial significance in shaping the youth and the choices it makes from the available gamut of alternatives. P Nilan and C Freixa observe that the way youth participate in global consumption practices, be it music, fashion, media or food, are influenced by their income, religion, gender, status or ethnicity.

My focus in the second half of the paper will be on how consumption is gendered in its activity as well as its meaning. Not only do lifetime patterns of consumption differ between men and women but so too do the meanings of the products we consume and the act of consuming, itself. RW Connell in his book 'Masculinities' contends that, as the capitalist economy is based on the gendered division of labour, therefore, accumulation of wealth is itself a gendered process. Although women are treated as the primary consumers in contemporary culture, that has only been the case since the Industrial

Revolution. Within the post-industrial, capitalist production/consumption dichotomy, the masculine role is that of producer and the feminine role is that of consumer. This dichotomy maps onto the traditional gendered division of labour: men work in the public sphere and women work in the private sphere, consuming goods for the maintenance of the household. Gender, and the sexualized marking of gender identities, is a focus of modern day advertisers. We attract the desired other through consuming the right products, and teens are a major focus of this cultural narrative. Women/girls, and increasingly men/boys, are expected to consume their way into attractiveness. Flipping through the average women's magazine, a reader finds that the bulk of its pages are comprised of advertisements for products aimed at "improving" women, that is, making them more attractive and, thereby, more "successful" heterosexualized creatures. Wendy Luttrell, in her work with urban adolescent mothers, demonstrated how the girls in her study used the consumption of beauty-related products, particularly fake nails, as markers of feminine identities. These identities were strongly influenced by their images of middle- and upper-class femininity and the desire to display a personal identity aligned with those values. Thus, for teens, consumption can be used to mark a gendered identity while simultaneously marking a social class identity.

#### 4. The Quest

To define youth has been a challenge to many sociologists and psychologists. Usually, the central defining characteristic of youth is age. It denotes a biological category in this sense. Of late this has been altered as researchers have attempted socio-cultural definitions of youth which then assumes a lot more complexity, both temporal and contextual.

Indeed, since the late 1990s, there has been some recognition of the idea that the visions and ideals informing the young in India possess a crucial significance in the contemporary context of liberalization and globalization. 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.

Although the experience of youth varies widely, and may not exist at all for some, the concept of youth is important in enabling us to understand some of the complexities of social change and the intersections between institutions and personal biography. In this, consumption acts as a trigger to redefine and reconstruct the youth, thereby forming newer constellations. This is the case more so in developing countries, India being a case in point.

The youth stage is usually described as a period of identity construction on the path to adulthood. Youth constitute the future generation, the new, tomorrow's hope and it is often associated with the idea of modernity, progress and a new life. In fact, the idea of youth as a defined stage of life arises from the emergence of the modern society and economic development, which freed youngsters from the responsibilities of the adult world. With the economic growth experienced by the West after World War II, youth became an active member of the consumer society and started being considered as market segment with its own consumption patterns and culture

In India, the youth had never been a central focus of the government except for in the employment sector. National politics has kept the youth on the margins as far as taking up central roles and responsibilities in politics is concerned. To a large extent, in politics at least, the thrust has been on the adult Indian—aged between 40 and 80 years. This has changed slowly and subsequently since the 1990s—with the introduction of the liberalization-privatization and globalization policy. This policy opened up the Indian markets to the world with reference to free flow of trade and exchange of economic and cultural goods and services. The first and the most deeply affected sector by this policy was the entertainment sector. Not to say that the dynamics of entertainment were unchanged till then but then there was a definite overhauling of this sector alongside the technological and telecommunications sector. With this development the labour market in India was affected as technological knowledge became the new capital and was much in demand. The urban youth in India caught onto this change swiftly and soon the neo-liberal dispensation gauged that the youth could be its target to market the new and the glossy products. These products ranged from material objects like the expensive international brands making inroads into the local markets in India as well as the products could be ideas which are sold through advertisements, namely, taglines of certain brands--“cause you're worth it” or “I am what I am” which propel an act on the part of the youth and this manifests itself in the youth being anxious and unhappy with oneself. The youth is both the victim as well as symbol of consumption in this new world bombarded with media images, social networking. But this is not to say that all this is bad or negative for the youth because in today's world and in India especially there is a lack of alternatives as far as the leadership is concerned. The youth has no one personality to look upto as everyone is busy trying to be what one is not. Here it would be useful to also bring in the most crucial dimension or an element of any society—culture.

Culture can be defined as the distinct patterns of life of a social group, the shared meanings, values and ideas that shape the behaviour of the members of a group. Along with the concept of youth as a distinctive social category, comes the term youth culture, which revolves around the two dominant dimensions of youth: self-representation and group affiliation, and which has in consumption one of the main mediums for expressing these aspiration. Fashion, music, leisure activities, technological gadgets...these all allow young people to create their place between childhood and the adult world and to empower group relations. Going back to the idea of consumption as a language presented above, we could say that goods constitute a language through which youth communicate, claiming both individuality and group membership, what is referred to as “individuals acting in terms of a shared identity”. Wearing a certain brand of jeans or trainers, sharing the same fashion taste as your peers, the same consumption patterns, avoids exclusion and engage the individual with his or her group. RSardiello talks about music as a marker of social identity, explaining how teenagers acquire group membership through rock music, using it and its associated rituals and symbols (such as concerts or merchandising) to define their own community. These commodities not only play a role for self-definition but also allow the individual to consciously separate himself from the crowd, from social conventions and

authorities. Please note that here I am not stating that consumption constitutes the only way to construct social identities among youth, especially for the youth in India but one is aware of its role to fully understand the theories on youth as a global consumer segment. In India, the roles of family and kinship networks have changed over time. Their grip on the life of the urban youth and to a lesser but a considerable degree has loosened.

There is immense amount of distraction due to the internet, leisure activity alternatives have been reduced to shopping at the malls and playing video games and watching television rather than enjoying a healthy family time or family get-togethers have been replaced by cyber, virtual social networking. This has led to a sedentary life among the urban youth especially. The rural youth in India has none of these options as the life in rural India is still marred by poverty and the aspiration to be someone else is controlled because the elders have a greater say in the activities of the youth there. But the most interesting bit about the rural population in India is that there is no defined stage known as the 'youth'. The category of the 'youth' is very blurred as the responsibilities are immediate with bearings on the future as well as larger. For the urban youth, parents have seized to be just parents and are now 'facebook friends'. The family dynamics has changed in urban India as the pressures of a better lifestyle are mounting and the inspirational drives have been shifted from leading a simple living high thinking life to one dictated by high living and simple thinking. For most of the youth in India the choices have been multiplied due to new age technology and media which never cease to provide a plethora of alternatives but all these alternatives provide ephemeral short-lived pleasures. In cities like Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, and Calcutta, a young person can never escape this colonization of the public as well as the private sphere by technology and media which though a potent combination for the market forces, creates a vicious cycle for the vulnerable sections of the youth. The youth nonetheless is also a target of a different kind of consumerism, new religious forces in the society. These vary from new-age yoga gurus to spiritual 'babas', catering particularly to the desirable 'spiritual' awakening among the upper-class and middle-class, but though the membership is largely sought by middle-aged individuals of these classes, nonetheless the youth belonging to these classes especially the working-class youth participate in these activities with much enthusiasm.

Much research about youth, identity and consumption has been focused on the concept of the 'global teen'. Theorists believe that their desire to connect with the group and establish their own social identity, setting themselves apart from adults and children, will link them to other youngsters elsewhere in the world. This approach has been used by multinationals to market their product, approaching these new global consumers adopting a common strategy and the same marketing language. For example, Coca-Cola launched in the early 1990s a campaign in India based on the message 'Share my Coke' using a 'one-feel good idiom' to connect Indian youth with the global market. The theory of globalising consumer markets was first developed by T Levitt, who claims that the development of telecommunications and transportation have led to a new commercial framework populated with global standardised

products where consumers' needs and desires become alike. The idea was not that every person would be likely to buy the same product everywhere, but that segments would tend to be similar across markets: businessmen purchasing the same gadgets, young women wearing look-alike make-up, kids watching the same movies and teenagers drinking identical fizzy beverages.

The youth in India is especially interesting because of its constant dialogue and confrontation with tradition and modernity. But what happens when the tradition modernises? What happens to the most vulnerable section of that tradition, in this case, the youth? What happens, especially, when the youth is not a monolith but is problematised along the lines of caste, class, religion, and gender? How do the market forces of a part-tradition part-modern capitalist society create a simulation for the layered category of the youth which then encounters lures of a new, more acceptable idea of the self if it follows the diktats of this neo-liberal market? What happens when those sections of the society which belong to the inferior marginalised stratum of the society are left out or find no takers for representing them in this new economic dispensation and an inflicted consumerist market? What social changes do these sections bring out as opposed to the upper and middle class youth? All these questions are central to defining, analysing and studying the Indian youth.

Amongst these youth are also those sections or subcultures that are not passive or inert. They mostly belong to the poorer and educationally backward sections. Society treats them as residual and no rights and privileges are awarded to them as much as they are awarded to the upper class youth and the middle class youth. These sections are angry with the established fabric and the entire rubric of the society. These youth, especially the educationally marginalised youth have to look for an avenue of change from the social, educational and economic conditions of their existence. They then protest and rebel against the status-quo of the society, as Musgrove argues in his essay. This can be seen not as much now as it could be seen in the 1960s and '70s with the rise of naxalism in the hinterlands. Even today the recruits or the newer cadres in naxalism are composed of those sections of the youth who are distressed. The whole idea of the manufacturing of consumerism and a kind of immense fetishism for objects by the media-driven market and the market-driven media is repeatedly questioned by these sections of the youth. Social change comes about only when the youth is given enough space to exercise informed decision-making power and the youth in return must begin to set itself to genuine accountability. But for all this, the torch bearer, even though, with a narrower range of sustained responsibility is an adult person, someone who is dependable and can provide encouragement and instill hope and confidence. Social change is a crucial phenomenon which precludes all these factors. To want to bring about social change one has to very determined and certain of one's identity especially when identity formation is at the mercy of the media and a vicious cycle of consumerism. In India, recently, a new trend has emerged in the media, which is of keen interest to sociologists in particular. This trend is to find out the Indian Youth Icon, who is an epitome of every desirable potential needed to be that one person who is instrumental in orienting the disarrayed and the confused youth of the 21st century.

Mostly the nominees for this contest of the Indian Youth Icon have been from the political realm, besides there are nominees also from sports and the cinema industry as well. But the winner of this contest can never establish a connection with the depressed, disoriented youth, thereby leaving the youth in a state of hopelessness and ennui.

Gender is one of the important axes along which the act of consumption is largely felt. Since my focus is Indian youth, it is important therefore to deal with the category of gender and its dynamics among the Indian youth. Gender as one understands it, according to Judith Butler, is performativity. In India it is this act of performativity that is targeted by the advertising industry and the neo-liberal, globalised market. The import of products which are not just tangible, palpable objects but carry with them a manipulative power, a sense of subtle coercion of the mind—one of the ways in which Steven Lukes defines power—a mystification, a simulation of the real as Jean Baudrillard would argue or a kind of an Ideological State Apparatus—according to Louis Althusser—which is injected in the minds of the young men and women that they believe the advertisements to be a mirror of the real. These ads convey these women mostly and of late even men that they by way of using the products marketed through ads can transcend their everyday quotidian life to achieve the spectacular, the successful and most importantly, the most desirable. These ideas then create a false consciousness, a false truth in the minds of young women who attribute their successes and failures in life to these products. Consumption of these products alongside the consumption and indoctrination of these ideas leads to men and women being in a state of a crisis, an acute sort of identity crisis. Sociology of the Indian youth therefore becomes the need of the hour as it helps the observer, the student to come to terms with the changing and manufactured truths and identities which are appropriated the youth, especially the urban women and men. The rural women are not completely untouched by this avalanche of ads and the fancy products that are advertised therein. We see a trend of penetration and percolation of an increasingly westernised, modernised and a manufactured lifestyle among both the urban and the rural youth, though less intense in the case of the latter.

Globalization and its forces have adapted to the local culture as well as the folk culture in a way to change elements of these cultures such that the market never loses out in the game. George Ritzer calls this change in the local and folk cultures 'glocalization'. Thereby we have youths coming and joining hordes at the fusion dandiya nights, the Punjabi music going international and the youth lapping up to these changes. The consumption of this kind also alters the rubric of the society thereby influencing the youth considerably. Therefore consumption and consumerism have emerged as thriving industries with the nexus of market, money and media. This three cornered constellation has domino effects on the stable and hitherto existing culture of the society which is replaced by another culture which becomes the hegemonic culture of a society. This process can be alluded to the Hegelian notion of 'dialectics'. Consumption then uses youth as its victim and its symbol.

The social networking hyper-real worlds, which have mushroomed in the 21st century, on the web also invite the

people, especially the youth—who are, as per researches and surveys, the largest segment using the web—to participate and enjoy a different kind of consumption, i.e., vicarious consumption. This is what, Baudrillard calls, 'simulacra'—simulation of reality. The youth 'in the age of mechanical reproduction', as Walter Benjamin, argues are not as much fascinated by the real as by a copy of the real or something similar to the real, due to which the auratic quality or the aura, the authenticity of the real is lost. T Adorno in 'The Culture Industry' makes a similar point where the music, the lifestyle, religion, everything is dictated by current, immediate fashion, i.e., that which is in vogue. Thus, culture is manufactured and this blows up into an industry which is driven by the sole market ethic of profit-making.

The emerging MNC (Multi-national Companies) culture should also be analysed, as the youth in India as is the case elsewhere, is attracted to the idea of quick big money. Here the role of MNCs becomes crucial as they promise the youth not just a job which ensures a sense of stability but also the money on offer as salary is a lucre for the youth which is tempted by the expensive brands, restaurants, discotheques, shopping malls etc. all these ensure a comfortable cushy life to the youth. Therefore, the youth instead of questioning the basis of their identity which rests on the lofty ideals of moneyed life adorned with brands and newest fads fall prey to the market time and again.

## 5. Conclusion

The youth in India, as discussed above is facing crises at multiple levels. One, that like any other youth in any part of the world, it has to go through what in Victor Turner's terminology would be the liminal phase where it is neither a child nor an adult, which then problematises the category of identity. Two, it has to bear in mind its moorings to tradition as well the lures of modernity that are challenging its already problematised notion of identity. Here, I do not in any way suggest that tradition and modernity are the two extremes of the Indian civilization but

there remains a certain tacit tension between tradition and modernity in a society like India's because the hold of caste panchayats in villages on one hand and the spectacle of the great potentials of the modernity at offer—especially the recognition of the individual as an active, thinking agent—pushes and pulls the youth (the victim of the diktats of the caste panchayat as well as the target of marketised media of modernity) in opposite directions, thereby suppressing as well provoking various reactions and behavioural changes. These are most evident through the youth's participation in deviant actions like drug abuse, violence, crime etc. on one hand and on the other hand, dissatisfaction and a sense of rootlessness in a society where the politics, economy and the cultural fabric are in a state of tatters. In other words, there appears a disjunction, as Robert Merton would argue, between culturally defined goals and the socially approved means available to individuals or groups. This he terms as the breeding ground of anomie or normlessness. Thus the social change that the youth awaits can only be wielded once the youth realises its true potential which lies between the arguments of put forth by Erik Erikson in his work on youth, wherein, Erikson introduces the concept of psycho-social moratorium and F Musgrove's contention that an impetus to social change comes about only when the youth realises that sitting back would not yield anything fruitful. The impetus to change is self-generated when distress reaches a saturation point and thus the youth has to take matters in its own hands. The recent cases of Egypt, Tunisia, among many are to be understood in this light if a true and genuine sociological analysis of the youth and social change are to be understood. The Indian youth too, has to question the structures which have so far neglected the potential and the power of the youth, that being the vicious nexus between politics-bureaucracy-media-market. These four present the biggest challenge to the youth in contemporary India.

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