Youth in Neo-Liberal India: Caste and Religious Politics

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Abstract: *This article focuses on the generation who came of age the late 1990 and early 2000s- a period of relatively high economic growth, when television entered a majority of Indian homes and cell phone becomes ubiquitous. These young people have grown up more connected to the world beyond their village, their caste, and their co-religionist than any previous generations. They are experiencing major political-social and economic changes that include the extension of reservation to the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), emergence of lower castes parties, expansion of formal education and the shifts towards the pro market policies which is producing new sociality. These structural changes and rapid transformations have led to a breakdown of established norms. This research interrogates how educated unemployed young men, coming from different socio –economic backgrounds, engage with politics in their everyday life.*

Keywords: *Caste, Religion, Youth Politics, Neo-Liberalism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Who are youth? Scholars are divided on this line that youth is a homogenous or heterogeneous category. For instance, as a category, government of India defines youth in between age of 15-29[1] while United Nations Organisation (UNO) defines youth who are in age of 13-26.[2] According to census data of India 2011[3], population of Indian Youth is 28 percent of the total population while Uttar Pradesh shares 28 percent of its total population and 17 percent of Indian youth population. Definitions of youth are contextual. At sociological point of view, youthness is a period of transition from childhood to full adulthood that achieves status of full membership in society (Eisenstadt 1972). In this period, individual is no longer a child but ready to undertake many responsibilities of an adult and fulfil the adult roles. Deborah Durham captures this by considering youth as a social shifter (Durham 2004). The notion of a shifter highlights the changing position of youth, both in relationship to others and in space. This age group of people is to be prime agent of change and have become very familiar with new technologies, cultural activities, consuming global goods, and connecting their tradition and society with globalized modern world. This article explores how youth engage with religion and politics with changing socio-political relation and new pro market policies which is marked off with uncertainty?

Youth must examine not only by their experiences and their reactions and an agency within a larger society but also the political and pragmatic processes through which certain people can make claims to be youth or try to designate others as youth (Hansen et al 2008). That's the reason; youth are engaging in issue based politics with diverse and different spectacular voices in global south and global north as well (Sloman 2016). Youth politics becomes important for global south countries such as India because it has various cultural and social communities. These different cultural and social communities have different socio-political aspirations: e.g. aspirations of emancipation from discrimination and repression of caste and religion, aspirations of taking part in public spheres in form of politics with support of caste, tradition, culture and religion, aspiration of economic upliftment in the sense of progress not only development (Mains, 2007).

India has become one of the youngest countries or nation in the world have large youth population, and has a long history of youth politics. Youth were enthusiastically participating in freedom movement. They never drop their interest from politics after India's independence but they shunned from politics matters. Their interest changed and

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[1] Government of India (2014). *National Youth Policy 2014.* Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. New Delhi: Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports .

[2] http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/youth-definition/

[3] http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population_enumeration.html

they became client of Indian state and started demanding facilities from it. Because of that time Indian state was very weak and was unable to fulfil all's desire so it became fail to deal youth's problem. With spreading unrest among youth section, youth anger burst over government time to time. Large section of disappointed youth started joining Naxal movement after 1967. Therefore, it found enormous support among the educated youth. These young men belong to petty bourgeoisie class. Many of the young Naxalites were medical and engineering graduates. University became hotbeds of radical ideology. During emergency time, repression of Naxalism by government also attracted a large number of youth to rebellious action against government oppression (Dixit, 2010: 26). With the onset of recession of Indian economy, which signalled the coming the general crisis of the capitalist path of development, the problem of employment and careers loomed large of these sections of student community for the first time (Ray, 1988). This sense of disillusionment and fiery idealism of youth directed them to Naxal ideology (Dixit, 2010:26). But government intellectuals are admitting that youth and students are holding arms to realise their dream of helping create a just and equitable society (Hindustan Times, March 28, 2010). However, poverty, unemployment etc. are also the reason highlighted by rebels for joining the movement but none of them were influenced by Naxal ideology to enter in guerrilla warfare (The Hindu, September 19, 2015). Youth joined the movement because of their attraction towards the 'Army Like' green uniform, guns, Maoist influence among villagers and other activities of cultural outfits of Naxaites or Maoists (The Hindu, September 19, 2015).

Other side youth mobilized for 'total revolution' against corruption and transformation of Indian Society and raise a huge movement under the aegis of JP (Jai Prakash Narayan) movement in 1974 in Bihar which spread in all over country. Again youth politics seemed in Mandal movement when 27 percent reservation gave to OBCs in government jobs. These all youth protests emerged in the uncertainty about youth's future. This uncertainty came some time from capitalist model of development, corruption and some time from government interference in upliftment of particular weak sections of society. Instead of these big movement youth actively participate in politics through small political issues such as rioting, community meetings, religious program etc. They engage in political activities during election periods in form of canvassing to contesting candidates.

2. POLITICS OF CASTE AND UNEMPLOYMENT

In contemporary, youth politics has become very crucial, because India has stood on the verge of demographic dividend in the world. It has huge working population in comparison to other countries either developed or developing. But the major paradox with this working population is that, it is not getting proper employment in both formal and informal sectors (Jeffrey 2010; Corbridge & Harrish 2001; Hansen 1996a, 1996b; Durham 2004; Mains 2007) which produce certain anxieties amongst youth. Unemployment enhances youth's intervention in political and social activities in India and global south as well (Jeffrey et al 2005, 2008, 2010; Bayart 2013). Whereas, the major concern in established democracies or global North is that youth's involvement is declining in formal politics (Sloman 2016). But Indian Young are 'reinventing political activism' through the unemployment, globalization, caste and religion in India by making it vernacular (Michellutti 2008). Among these economical and social forces which influence political life in India, religion and caste are most important. It is directly connected with people's daily life. These both entities become important when youth fail to get proper job or wait long time for it. Unemployment is consistently increasing since implementing economic reforms which are shrinking government jobs in public sector and pressurized government to open its economy for world market (Jeffrey 2010; Mains 2007). But this structural adjustment policy promotes privatization and creates lots of job in service and informal sectors (Mains 2007). But the dilemmas are, educated middle class and castes youth are not interested to work in low paid private sector and stay for long time in education in search of government services. They prefer government services because it gives social prestige and helps in making relation to important individuals (Mains 2007). Government service helps to produce social and cultural relation which helps in making political connections (Jeffrey 2010; Kumar 2014) because politics has become a medium of enhancing socio-economic status in global south.

In the 1990s, UP experienced the changes that transformed national politics – the rise of the Hindutva ideology, Mandal and the Dalit upsurge (Pai 2014: 16). In these movements youth have played important role. While other side distributional consequences of green revolution invariably increased disparities between sections of rural

society (Hasan 1989: 13) with growing nexus between changes in the agrarian economy, the rise of a new rich peasant class and electoral politics (Pai 1993: 75). With liberalization, rise of large middle class, and urbanization, issues such as corruption, governance, and the need for welfare have been raised by civil movements, in which political parties and the electorate have to contend with. While between in these issues, identity politics had abated in these years that again emerged after 2000 in Uttar Pradesh. The reason was agricultural mechanization and economic reforms, which was weakening patron–client relations with losing influence of higher caste in politics, society and economy (Kumar 2016, Singh 2016, Jeffery 2005, 2010). A new section of society was emerging in political scenario without any proper identity. With the relative weakening of identity politics by the early 2000s, it is widely believed that political stability with a competition between the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) on a development oriented agenda had come to UP. But the importance of other issues such as religion, language, caste had not denied but attention was focused on the changes taking place over time in the economy and electoral politics (Pai 1993: 75; 2014; 16). These situations were occurring in western UP.

While eastern UP feels such experiences very slowly. Caste sentiments are very high in the rurality of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and youth interact in the public according their social and cultural norms. They presume that some castes are superior and some are inferior. Such prejudices still exist because higher castes retain their dominance in education, economy, politics and social setup. While on the other hand, Dalit and low castes youth are still remain down trodden in social, economical and political hierarchy (Aggarwal et. al. 2015). But due to economic reforms and reservation in political institutions, landscapes of Indian ruralities are changing. Now Dalit and low castes are not depending on higher castes like erstwhile (Kumar, 2016). But still they are being unable to break the caste barrier, dominance and influence of higher castes because they are facing myriad problems e.g. lack of quality education, low political activism and political support and poor economic conditions etc. which prevent Dalit and low castes to encounter caste differentiations and force to keep in status quoistic conditions. But Dalit and low castes youth are being political as soon as the effect of economic reforms seem. Dalit youth are enrolling in higher education. Education gives them a manner to put their voices before officials. They are engaging in political activities and writing complains letters to government officials against corruption and discrimination (Jeffrey 2008; Jeffrey and Dyson 2014). Youth across caste and class are engaging at local level politics like Panchayat or district level politics. They protest and demonstrate in front of government offices. Such political activism shows low caste youth are trying to come out from the trap of dominants.

After Mandal Commission caste transforms youth politics dramatically because new caste groups have entered in political array and cultivated new political strategy for material benefits that help to gain access of state power and achieve in social dignity and respect (Gupta, 2000; Jaffrelot, 2003). This emerging new sociality infuse caste bitterness more among higher castes because they are unable to find proper desired jobs and also losing control and privileges in society (Price et al, 2010). Higher castes youth believe that government is facilitating Dalit, backward caste youth to get skill and services. While higher castes youth are being fail to get jobs due to lack of skill and ability in both government and private sectors. Competitive higher castes student says that low castes and OBCs are challenging higher castes candidates in government jobs. Generally OBCs are getting more numbers in competitive exams. The merit of OBCs is going more than unreserved category. So, the time has to come reconsider the reservation policy and exclude some OBCs and scheduled castes from reservation list. Other side, OBCs and low castes youth are blaming higher caste to misinform people on this matter. The number of low castes and OBCs are huge, therefore competition is being tough among OBCs and low castes, while higher castes have very low number but they catch maximum post of government services. Now OBCs and low castes have started entering in education sectors and government jobs. It is being possible due to economic reforms which are reducing OBCs and Dalit castes dependency from higher castes. But the economic condition is not much better to which low castes youth families are not able to wait long time for government jobs. Therefore, low castes youth force to join low payment jobs in private sectors. One another reasons behind it because one side government services are shrinking and other side governments are not recruiting candidates timely. Instead of public service commission, any government recruitment takes 4-5 years in being complete. Youth who belong to poor families cannot survive more than 2 or 3 years after completing graduate or post graduate. Consequently, youth are being a victim of boredom and frustration.

3.　YOUTH, NEO-RELIGIOSITY AND CREATION OF 'OTHER' IN NEO LIBERAL TIME

This frustration and boredom leads youth towards the belief of religion. Youth, who are unemployed for long time and not involved in process of making money, largely participate in religious activities and programmes and easily engage with religious and communal organizations (Hansen 1996b). They attend religious programme e.g. Mata ka Jagaran, or Kanwadiya Yatra and reciting religious Mantras (Hanuman Chalīsa, Bajarang Bāad etc. (Kumar 2016). Some youth says that *'If they recite such Mantra, they get peace full day and it also helps to concentrate in their work'*. News channels, religious TV channels e.g. Astha TV, Sanskar, God TV, Peace TV etc. and radio programme and also Social sites are spreading new religiosities among youth (Kumar 2016).

On the other hand political parties and religious organizations instil these thought among youth that *'modernisation (or westernization) is nothing but deteriorating Indian culture and traditions'*. Indian culture and traditions, whereas, are more superior in comparison to 'Others'. Hindutva oriented organisations blamed on Muslims that they are not Indian because they admire to Pakistan and other Muslim countries. Such thinking has spread among youth. They believe that Madarsas and Mosque are militarised. Muslim indulges in anti national activities and prime obstructer in the progress of this country because they are increasing population and poverty. They obsessed with sex and have 2-3 wives. Such creations of 'Otherness' had started emerging from 1980s. It still exists among rural and urban youth. This otherness reach on peak when Hindutva led (Bhartiya Janta Party) BJP comes in power. For instance it can understand by a slogan '*bhagwa dhwaj har Hindu ki shaan, bolo mitro Jai Shree Ram* (Ochre flag is pride of every Hindu, speak friends Jai Shree Ram'. Youth who closely attached with religious sentiments either employed or unemployed are backbone of such political parties and religious cultural organisations. That's the reason when BJP came in power in 2014, the membership of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak are consistently increasing. One young said '*at least one Hindu organisation is working for the upliftment of Hindu culture and tradition'*. That's the reason when Muslim and Hindu festival comes simultaneously e.g. Navratra and Muharram etc. communal tension is to be on peak with new religious effects. In this communal tension and new religious programmes youth take active role and feel a masculine sense when they come together in form of *'one community'* in any festivals or programme like Durgapooja, Ganesh Chaturthi or Dussahara etc. (Hansen 1996b). This communal community consciousness produces rival religiosity among youth. Now Kanwadiya and Mata Ka Jagaran are getting much space in urban and rural areas as well. Youth ask governmental aid to facilitate these emerging new religious programmes on the basis of others aid such as 'Hazz' pilgrim etc. if government refuse to give aids then a canard spread that government are anti Hindu are fostering only Muslims for vote. Then they go to communal organisations or political parties which help them with making these programmes or religious activities for political use. Such programmes and activities are to be full of political activities. Now, youth are actively participating in religious activities albeit in new ways.

Religiosity is surging all over the world in new forms not only in India in neo liberal time and youth are participating in it enthusiastically. In the study of Guinea–Conarky, youth are forgetting their religious traditions and culture in neo liberal time (Berliner, 2005). Today youth's memory is not working as a cultural transmission. Now traditions are travelling in form of habit not as a necessity of survival like erstwhile. In neo liberal time religiosities are resurging through information based technological facilities (Kumar, 2016). But in India schools and teachers are playing very important role in carrying religious-cultural traditions and social norms. It feels minorities' down trodden sections of the society exclusion and discrimination from 'others' and help in creating identities according caste and religion (Thapan, 2009). The role of political parties increases when they involve influencing youth with their cultural and religious organisations (Hansen, 1996b). They also produce a sense of 'Otherness' among youth. In India, unemployed youth easily attracted with these organisations. Shiv Sena and Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh (RSS) try to mould low caste unemployed Hindu youth on the basis of tradition, culture and religion (Hansen, 1996a). On the other hand, right wing political parties also mobilizing youth in India after implementing economic reforms. BJP and RSS were insisting that this globalisation will throw India in the hand of west and neo liberal policies deteriorate Indian culture and make India westernised (Hansen, 1996a).

The last decade of twentieth century was very crucial for Indian society, culture, politics and its middle class. Many changes came in form of structural changes in Indian economy, demolition of Babari Mosque, emerging new middle class and OBCs and SCs politics etc. The effect of these changes seems present time. Communal tensions are

spreading in rural areas due to mechanisation of agriculture (Kumar 2016; Singh 2016). Now depending castes are connecting with cities and interacting with political and religious activities of urban areas (Singh 2016). Therefore, communal tensions are spreading in rural areas and lead communal polarisation which is generally based on the line of religion, caste and culture. Unemployed low caste youth (18-36) largely engage in communal violence. Because religious and cultural Organisations e.g. RSS emboldens its agenda in rural areas and in this agenda Dalit unemployed youth become prey of communal violence in comparison to higher castes youth (Singh 2016). But this communal tension and religiosities are not only spreading by Sangha Parivar agenda. Due to neo liberal policies a technological progress has come in Indian rurality which have been changing the nature of ruralities in India. Many religious TV channels are running in rural areas e.g. Astha, Sanskar, God TV and Peace TV. These channels are running lots of religious programmes which mould old peoples according religion. Other side youth are being very familiar with mobile phones, internet and social media. They connect with their caste and communities and share (circulate) many caste and religious related contents to each other on social sites. These technical progresses detach youth from village society (Kumar, 2016) and they engage new form of religious gatherings which are to be full of political discussion with religious conversation. Kanwad Yatra also emerges in this form of political religiosity in the time of liberalization in which youth actively partakes (Goswamy, 2013). Many other religious programmes are being organise e.g. Mata ka Jagaran, Ramleela, Janmāshtami or some saints preach like Asha Ram Bapu, Shri Shri Ravishankar etc.in urban areas (Goswamy, 2013; Hansen, 1996a). Youth are trying to make a political space by these new emerging religious events/programmes that help them to make an impressive leader in their localities.

4. CONCLUSION

My analysis of the young people in regard with unemployment and related issues necessitates a rethink of the implications of neo liberalism on work politics and religiosity. Cultural values are associated with manual and mental work that play a crucial role in occupational choices e.g. many jobs are creating in neo liberal time with adopting pro market policies but higher castes are not engaging in all kind of work. In spite of engaging in manual work they remain unemployed and enter in politics and making money by doing others work in daily life or take some small contracts with the help of officials who belong to their castes or society. For example, upper castes Brahmin culturally negate manual work. Other side educated unemployed young men are e not preferred to take up any available job but look around for one which would raise or maintain their status and prestige in their societies and most importantly government jobs are highly valued across caste and class in the absence of the expansion of industrial economy. Most of the youth are deepened in identity crisis in the time of job insecurity. To cope with this insecurity, they engage with religion in different ways. Some treated religion as a form of spirituality. These youth claims that they are different from their parents who are more superstitious and ritualistic. Some youth recognises religion as a marker of identity in the global discourse, particularly in relation with west. Further, Hinduism has been developing congregational tendencies that have given space to the upward mobile Dalit and OBC caste groups to express their religious sentiments and claim Hindu middle class identity and engaged in activities that provide a space to show their masculinities and criminalities. My study also suggests that events such as the Kanwad Yatra, Bhagwat Katha and Durga Puja are being used by the RSS and other right wing Hindu organisations to indoctrinate young men. These young unemployed men played a key role in social and political change and challenge the existing inequalities by fighting against everyday caste discrimination in which low caste young men demonstrate that they are a product of their circumstances and also an able actor of bringing change in the time of neo liberalism.

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