

BEYOND DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND: SOME ASPECTS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF YOUTH IN INDIA*

N. Jayaram

Abstract

Taking note of the debate on ‘demographic dividend’ in the literature on economic development, this paper argues that demographic trends are more than a matter of numbers. It delineates ‘youth’ as a sociological category and emphasises the importance of studying the same. The youth in the 15-34 age-group population in India increased from 174.26 million (31.79%) in 1970 to 354.15 million (34.43%) in 2000 and is projected to peak at 487.86 million in 2030. This demographic fact has implications for the labour market. The country’s labour force, which was 472 million in 2006, is expected to be around 526 million in 2011 and 653 million in 2031. In order to benefit from the increase in labour force, the youth have to be made employable in the changing economy through enhancing their capabilities, and controlling educated unemployment. In this context the paper discusses some of the conceptual and substantive issues in the sociology of youth.

The wine of youth does not always clear with advancing years; sometimes it grows turbid.
– Carl Gustav Jung

Introduction

In the current literature on economic development we frequently come across the concept of ‘demographic dividend’, which is also termed

‘demographic bonus’, ‘demographic gift’, or ‘demographic window’. Empirically, this concept refers to the rise in the rate of economic growth due to increase in the share of working-age people in a population. The working-age (15–59 years) population, as of now, largely consists of youth (15–34 years). Given the nature of the age-structure transition in China and India, the two most populous countries in the world, this dividend is expected to largely accrue to these two countries. There is no gainsaying that population is more than mere numbers; it is the quality of the youth that will determine the extent to which India can garner the demographic dividend. Viewed thus, youth as a population category warrants urgent sociological attention in India. This paper¹ discusses some of the substantive and conceptual issues in the sociology of youth in India. As a prelude to this discussion, it analyses the demographic trends in the country and their socio-economic implications.

Demographic Trends and their Socio-economic Implications²

According to the Census of India, while the proportion of population in the 0-14 age group declined from 41 per cent in 1961 to 35.3 per cent in 2001 (that is, by 5.7 percentage points), the proportion of population in the age group 15–59 increased from 53.3 per cent to 56.9 per cent (that is, by 3.6 percentage points) during the same period. The proportion of those above 60 years of age also increased from 5.6 per cent to 7.4 per cent (that is, by 1.8 percentage points) (see Tables 1 and 2, and Figure 1). In terms of absolute numbers, the increase in the 15–34 age-group population is even more dramatic: from 174.26 million (31.79%) in 1970 to 354.15 million (34.43%) in 2000. The youth segment of the population is projected to peak at 487.86 million in 2030 (see Table 3). Excepting China, no other country will have such massive youth population.

This demographic fact has important implications for the labour market. Based on the projections prepared by the Registrar General, Government of India in 2002, Table 4 presents data on the net increase in labour force from 2006 to 2031. It is observed that the country’s labour force, which was 472 million in 2006, is expected to be around 526 million in 2011 and 653 million in 2031. It is noteworthy that the “growth rate of labour force will continue to be higher than population growth rate till 2021. The net increase in labour force between 2006 and 2011 would be 53.7 million persons or 11 million

N. Jayaram, Dean, School of Social Sciences, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Deonar, Mumbai – 400088. Email: njayaram2@rediffmail.com

Table 1 - Age Distribution (in Percentage) of Population in India: 2005–2050

Age Group	Year									
	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	2050
Total Population	(1134403)	(1220182)	(1302535)	(1379198)	(1447499)	(1505748)	(1554182)	(1596719)	(1631920)	(1658270)
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
0-4	11.2	10.4	9.6	8.8	8.0	7.3	6.7	6.5	6.2	5.9
5-9	11.0	10.2	9.6	8.9	8.3	7.6	7.0	6.5	6.3	6.1
10-14	10.8	10.1	9.5	9.0	8.5	7.9	7.4	6.8	6.3	6.2
15-19	10.1	10.0	9.4	8.9	8.5	8.1	7.7	7.1	6.6	6.2
20-24	9.2	9.3	9.3	8.9	8.5	8.2	7.8	7.4	7.0	6.5
25-29	8.3	8.5	8.6	8.7	8.4	8.1	7.9	7.6	7.2	6.8
30-34	7.3	7.6	7.8	8.0	8.2	8.0	7.8	7.6	7.4	7.1
35-39	6.5	6.7	7.0	7.3	7.5	7.8	7.7	7.5	7.4	7.2
40-44	5.7	5.9	6.1	6.5	6.8	7.1	7.5	7.4	7.3	7.2
45-49	5.0	5.2	5.4	5.6	6.0	6.4	6.8	7.2	7.1	7.1
50-54	4.3	4.5	4.7	4.9	5.2	5.7	6.1	6.5	6.9	6.9
55-59	3.1	3.8	4.0	4.2	4.5	4.8	5.3	5.7	6.1	6.6
60-64	2.5	2.6	3.2	3.5	3.8	4.0	4.4	4.9	5.3	5.8
65-69	2.0	2.0	2.2	2.7	3.0	3.3	3.6	3.9	4.4	4.8
70-74	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.7	2.2	2.5	2.7	3.0	3.4	3.8
75-79	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.9	1.7	1.9	2.1	2.4	2.7
80-84	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	1.1	1.3	1.5	1.7
85-89	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.9
90-94	0.05	0.07	0.08	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4
95-99	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.09
100+	0.001	0.002	0.003	0.004	0.004	0.006	0.007	0.009	0.01	0.01

Source: Data up to 2000 are from United Nations Population Division (2004) and from 2010 through 2050 from United Nations Population Division (2006)

**Table 2
Age Structure Transition in India: 1961–2050**

Year	Population by Broad Age Groups		
	0-14	15-59	60+
1961	41.0	53.3	5.6
1971	42.0	52.0	6.0
1981	39.5	53.9	6.5
1991	37.2	55.4	6.8
2001	35.3	56.9	7.4
2007	31.2	60.7	8.1
2025	24.5	63.5	12.0
2050	18.3	61.6	20.7

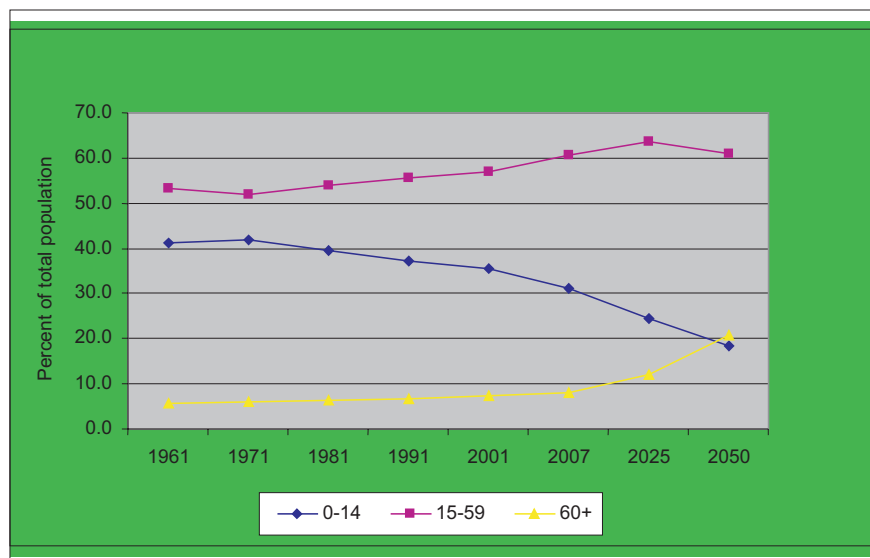
Source: Data up to 2001 are from various census reports, and from 2007 through 2050 are from United Nations Population Division (2007).

**Table 3
Youth Population (15–34 years) in India: 1970–2050**

	Year								
	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020	2030	2040	2050
Total population (in million)	548.16	683.32	846.42	1028.61	1220.18	1379.20	1505.75	1596.72	1658.27
Youth (15–34 years) population	174.26	227.89	293.71	354.15	431.94	475.82	487.86	474.22	441.10
Percentage of youth (15–34 years) to total population	31.79	33.34	34.70	34.43	35.40	34.50	32.40	29.70	26.60

Source: Data up to 2000 are from United Nations Population Division (2004) and from 2010 through 2050 are from United Nations Population Division (2006)

Figure 1
Age Structure Transition in India: 1961–2050



annually” (Premi 2008: 9). According to the Indian Labour Report, 300 million youth would enter the labour force by 2025, and 25 per cent of the world’s workers in the next three years would be Indians (cited in Times News Network 2008a: 14).

The significant increase in the proportion of the working-age population in general and the youth segment of the population in particular is, no doubt, due to the decline in fertility rate over the decades. However, the phenomenal increase in absolute numbers is certainly the outcome of high fertility rates in the past. If we can reap the demographic dividend, in retrospect, the failure of the ‘family planning programme’ has been a blessing in disguise! The declining fertility rate, to be sure, will change the demographic scenario in the decades to come, when increase in old-age dependency will be a reality to contend with.

The United Nations Population Division (UNPD) projections show that, while in absolute numbers the youth segment (15–34 years) of the Indian population tapers off after 2030, as a proportion to the total population it tapers off from 2010 itself. Although this tapering off is marginal (from

Table 4
Total Labour Force and New Entrants in India: 2001–2031
(In thousands)

Labour Force	Year						
	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021	2026	2031
Total	418705	472390	525960	576225	623208	669466	653252
Growth rate (%)		2.41	2.15	1.83	1.57	1.43	-0.49
Net increase		53685	53570	50265	46983	46258	-16214
Entrants		79419	83781	85487	87662	92655	160513
Exits		25734	30211	35223	40679	46397	176727

Source: Premi (2008: 8)

35.4% in 2010 to 34.5% in 2020, to 32.4% in 2030) in the next decades, it will be swift in the decades to follow (to 29.7% in 2040, to 26.6% in 2050). Even so, the youth segment of the population will be a massive 441.1 million in 2050 (see Table 3).

Since a majority of the youth knock on the doors of the labour market right by the age of 15, the youth segment of the population will also have to be considered in relation to the larger working-age (15–59 years) population. The UNPD analysis and projections offer valuable insights on this. Although the percentage of the 15–34 age group reaches its peak (35.5%) in 2010 and tapers off from then onwards, the percentage of 15–59 age group reaches its peak (64.6%) only in 2035, and tapers off gradually over the next 15 years to 61.6 per cent in 2050 (still marginally higher than what it was in 2005, that is, 59.5%) (see Table 1).

Thus, the demographic predictions are loud and clear: that the promise of demographic dividend will not last long, in any case beyond 2050. So, how can we take advantage of this in the short-term, say till 2025, and make provision for the expected increase in old-age dependency after that? There is a prime concern here: will the burgeoning numbers of youth be absorbed

by the economy? If not, the promise of the dividend would turn out to be a burden, a worrisome one, too! Globalised economy, no doubt, has been generating new avenues of employment, but recession that has set in the United States of America and elsewhere has adverse implications for India, too (see Times News Network 2008b).³ If we are to believe the economists, it will take at least 5–10 years before there is a positive turnaround. Incidentally, the remarkable rate at which our economy has grown in the last few decades does not seem to hold much promise either, as it has been critiqued as ‘jobless growth’.

To be sure, whatever employment that is generated demands a variety of knowledge, skills, and capabilities on the part of the people; only those in possession of these knowledge, skills, and capabilities will be able to benefit from the opportunities that become available. In this context, Abusaleh Shariff, the chief economist at the National Council for Applied Economics Research, New Delhi has observed: “India’s disadvantage is its unskilled, uneducated workforce which could undermine its global competitive strengths and expose the economy to the risk of stagnation. The growing mismatch between the nature of educated manpower and the demands of newly established companies will pose a serious challenge within the next decade” (2007: 12).

The Indian Labour Report rightly states: “Youth unemployability is a bigger crisis than unemployment, as poor quality of skills show up in low incomes rather than unemployment” (Times News Network 2008a: 14). Thus, enhancing the capabilities of youth and making them employable in a changing economy must be a priority. It is in this context that post-secondary education assumes significance.

It must be noted that, despite the massive growth in ‘higher education’, barely 7 per cent of the 18-24 year-old age group is currently enrolled in higher education institutions, “which is only one-half of the average for Asia” (National Knowledge Commission 2007: 48). Unrealistically though, the National Knowledge Commission (2007) hopes to raise this percentage to 15 by 2015. It is also relevant here to note the types of courses in which enrolment has been taking place. Analysing the data for 2001-02 (Kaur 2003: 366) reveals that those enrolled in arts (46.1%), science (19.9%) and

commerce/management (17.9%) together accounted for nearly 84 per cent of the students in higher education. Among the rest, 6.9 per cent were enrolled in engineering and technology, 3.2 per cent in law, 3.1 per cent in veterinary science, and 1.3 per cent in education. Increasing enrolment in conventional liberal education courses to meet the so-called ‘targets’ would guarantee the creation of more unemployables (or ‘educated unemployed’), something that the Indian Labour Report worries about.

The Survey (61st Round) on employment and unemployment situation in the country, conducted during July 2004–June 2005 by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) (2006; see also Singh 2006), while ascertaining the rate of unemployment among the educated persons, found that among graduates 187/1000 men and 386/1000 women in rural areas, and 207/1000 men and 370/1000 women in urban areas were unemployed. The Survey also found that “at the all-India level, for rural male graduates the worker-population ratio was 836 in a thousand as against 797 for the same group in urban areas. The corresponding rates among females were 364 and 307 in a thousand” (Singh 2006: 8). Furthermore, while these rates reduced by 16 and 21 percentage points for youth males in rural and urban areas respectively, it reduced by about 8 percentage points for youth females both in rural and urban areas. The Survey also observed that, both in rural and urban areas, rate of unemployment among the educated was higher among those whose education level was higher.⁴

Reaping demographic dividend calls for huge human resource investments in youth; merely adding numbers to the existing system will only aggravate the situation. The annual growth rate of public expenditure on university and higher education, however, has fallen over the last three decades. As a proportion of total government expenditure, the share of higher education declined from 1.57 per cent in 1990–91 to 1.33 per cent in 2001–02. Considering the trends in per student expenditure – from Rs.7,676 in 1990-91 to Rs.5,873 in 2001–02 (in 1993–94 prices) – the decline in public expenditure on higher education would appear even more drastic (Tilak 2004: 2160).⁵ Given this, the National Knowledge Commission’s (2007: 55) hope that “government support for higher education should be at least 1.5 per cent, if not 2 per cent of GDP, from a total of 6 per cent of GDP for education” may remain just that (Jayaram 2009: 105).

Youth as a Sociological Category

It is conventional in demography to define 'youth' in terms of age-grades as referring to those persons who are in the age range of 14 to 35 years, that is, from just after the commencement of 'teenage' to the onset of adulthood. It thus refers to the long period of transition from childhood to adulthood. Convenient as this age-based identification of the demographic category of youth may appear, there is neither consensus nor uniformity in enumeration across countries or social science studies as regards the age ranges adopted for the delineation of 'youth'. To the extent that the differences in the identification of youth are socio-culturally rooted, we can well imagine the difficulty in defining youth as a sociological category.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the problems of defining youth; I have discussed them at length elsewhere (Jayaram 2000). Suffice it to state here that 'youth' is not a homogenous sociological category: there are significant differences in terms of region, religion, caste, class and gender. Equally significant analytically is the nature and extent of dependence/independence that the category of population that we identify as youth experiences. The transition from 'dependence' to 'independence' in socioeconomic terms is expressed as 'youth transition'. To capture this, we need rather a decomposed and nuanced analysis than what the demographic characterisation of youth as an age-grade would permit.

Sociologically speaking, 'youth' is a construct. This becomes apparent once we appreciate the inherent limitations of accepting the demographic definition of youth in terms of age-grade, howsoever heuristically convenient and useful it may be. To 'understand' the reality of youth, sociologists per force have to develop a contextually defined analytical construct or an 'ideal type', as Max Weber would have it, of youth. This analytical construct/ideal type may less or more overlap with the demographer's age-grade, but it may not and need not so overlap. What is more important, the analytical construct of the sociologist must be sensitive to the ethno-social construct of youth, that is, the construct that a given people have of youth.

Furthermore, as a construct, 'youth' has two dimensions: processual and collective. The former refers to youth as a *phase* in the development of

individuals, and the latter refers to youth as a *group* in society. In reality, these two dimensions are related. But, depending on the objective of one's research, either of these can be privileged in focus. In either case, the study of youth interests more than one discipline, disciplines beyond the conventional boundaries of social sciences. Nevertheless, no discipline can capture all aspects of the reality subsumed under the rubric 'youth'. As an area of study, youth is, therefore, transdisciplinary in nature. My review of literature on youth (see Jayaram 2000) suggests that, more than others, sociologists are open to crossing their disciplinary boundary. We can thus take a lead in the transdisciplinary study of youth. Of course, I am not recommending self-effacement; quite the contrary: the uniqueness of the sociological perspective lies in locating youth in the larger socio-cultural context. It is this uniqueness that I would want sociologists to take advantage of.

What type of data do we need about 'youth' and how do we collect them in order to capture the nuances that are discussed above? I began this paper by citing some quantitative data drawn from Census and other sources. Such quantitative data on youth are also available in the several rounds of NSSO surveys and the three rounds of NFHS (National Family and Health Survey). These quantitative data are helpful in delineating the (a) large-scale trends and (b) cross-region or inter-state variations. Limited as they may, they provide us with some *generalisations* to operate with.

However, quantitative studies are obviously deficient in micro-level insights, and they can hardly help us *understand* the ground-level nuances. Understanding the ground-level reality of youth calls for rich qualitative data from ethnographic studies. Qualitative methodology is catholic in its approach to different sources of data, including the rich source that is available from the field of literature. In combination with sample surveys and quantitative studies, with multifarious sources of data, qualitative studies can enrich the sociology of youth in India.

Some Substantive Issues

The scope of sociology of youth in a diverse country like India is vast (see Jayaram 2000), and cannot be gone into detail here. Besides the educational aspects that were highlighted in the previous section, I would

like to emphasise four areas on which we could focus our attention. The first and the foremost is youth culture – or, more appropriately, youth subcultures. The extension of the duration of economic dependence on parents among the middle-class children and the early attainment of economic independence among their underclass counterparts provide a study in contrast. Between these two extremes are various categories of youth. Religion, caste/tribe, rural-urban location, and gender constitute the important variables which, in combination, make for the diversity of youth culture. Identity, self-defined and others-defined, is a key element for analysis in the sociological study of youth culture.

The revolution in communication technology has had a profound impact on youth across the world. The number and coverage of the media have increased informational density and brought more and more people under their influence. Not much is known about how the growth of literacy and education have affected youth in the rural areas. Similarly, research on the impact of the virtual reality created by the cyber world is in its nascence. Free-floating of and easier access to a variety of information produced by the IT (Information Technology) revolution has facilitated networking, mobilisation and movement of youth as never before. All this warrants sociological attention.

Karl Mannheim's classic essay 'The Problem of Generations' (1952: 276–320) had established 'generation' as a factor as important as 'social class' or 'gender' in the explanation of individual and group differences in culture, interests, and behaviour. Mannheim's use of the term 'generation' to describe cohort processes,⁶ it must be noted, is different from the term 'generation' as used in kinship analysis to describe relationships. Following this, 'generational conflict' was a popular theme in the early work on the sociology of youth (see Jayaram 2000). Is the generation gap closing? What is the nature of generational conflicts? Have there been significant changes in parent-child relationship over the last half century? What are the differences in generational relations which we find across regions and religions, classes and gender? These questions should interest sociologists in this era of globalisation and consequent changes.

Generational conflict apart, the term youth often evokes the image of an angry young person: not surprisingly, unrest is often viewed as coterminous with youth; passion and rebellion are identified with youth. And rebellion is often accompanied by violence. Student unrest, a recurrent theme in the sociology of education in the 1960s through 1980s, is no more talked about! They were in the forefront of important political changes both in India and elsewhere. Is it that the students are no more characterised by unrest or unrest among students has lost its interest for sociologists? All the same, there is unmistakable evidence that a substantive section of those engaged in extremist ideologies and activities of various types, including terrorism, are in the category we call youth. What does this portend? The interface between youth, on the one hand, and extremism and violence, on the other, deserves our serious attention as sociologists.

It is well known that today's youth was yesterday's children; today's children will be tomorrow's youth. Accordingly, the sociology of youth shares an indefinite border with the sociology of childhood. That is, a sociological understanding of youth by necessity takes into consideration some of the basic issues concerning childhood and the transition from childhood to adolescence. Pressures of a competitive world, reinforced by parental ambitions for children, resulting in the rising incidence of teenage suicides in urban areas are a matter of concern. But more serious are the realities of 'missing childhood' (resulting in child labour) and 'shortened childhood' (resulting from early loss of innocence) contributing to the early onset of youth. So a meaningful sociology of youth would take into consideration the issues of childhood, a stage from which their subjects emanate.

Conclusion

I began with the idea of demographic dividend. This idea highlights the importance of the demographic category called youth and how it is important to invest in youth for reaping the benefits in a globalising world. But a closer examination revealed that, sociologically, youth as a category is heterogeneous and it needs the careful attention of sociologists than what its demographic analysis would suggest. As the epigraph from the Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) has it: "The wine of youth does not always clear with advancing years; sometimes it

grows turbid” (cited in Andrews 1987: 295). The sociology of youth can help diagnose the conditions under which the wine of youth grows *turbid* and suggest what can make it *clear* with advancing years.

Notes

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1. Some of the ideas in this paper were initially presented in my Keynote Address to the VIII International Conference on Asian Youth and Childhoods held at Lucknow, 22-24 November 2007.
2. The statistical data cited in the paper come from two sources: the Census of India and the United Nations Population Division. I am grateful to Professor M.R. Narayana of the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore and Professor S. Siva Raju of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai for providing me with these data, and to Dr. T.V. Sekher of the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai for help with a citation.
3. A study conducted by Manpower India, a human resources consultant group, has revealed that ‘the Employment Outlook’, a measure of keenness of employers to hire fresh staff, is down by 24 per cent over the last quarter and by 27 per cent on a year-on-year basis. The figures are the worst since the third quarter of 2005. However, “India still seems to have the second most optimistic numbers internationally. Of the thirty-three countries surveyed, only Peru has more optimistic numbers than India” (Times News Network 2008a: 14).

4. The rate of unemployment among youth (15-29 years), educated at different levels, is as follows: not literate, 0.8%; up to primary, 2.8%; middle school, 5.7%; secondary, 9.7%; senior secondary, 12.7%; diploma/certificate, 18.8%; graduate, 19.7%; and post-graduate, 18.6% (cited in The Times of India 2009: 2).
5. It is significant to note that the Government of India’s discussion paper on ‘Government Subsidies in India’ (1997) classified elementary education as a ‘merit good’ and higher education as a ‘non-merit good’ warranting a drastic reduction of government subsidies. The Ministry of Finance has since reclassified higher education into a category called ‘merit 2 goods’ which need not be subsidised at the same level as merit goods (Tilak 2002: 12).
6. A generation may be defined as “a social cohort whose collective experience of history is shaped by a significant event or events, and whose memory is constructed around recurrent rituals and significant places ...” (Abercrombie *et al.* 2000: 150).

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