

## Viewpoint

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# Youth in India – the Affluent or the Effluent

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Growing up is always a challenge anytime, anywhere. The kind of experiences one undergoes while attempting to navigate the plethora of life events differ as the demographics change. There has been a huge emphasis on studying the challenges faced by underprivileged, marginalized teenagers due to the obvious biological and environmental factors that can affect well being. However a new demographic has begun to be a cause for concern. The urban, upper middle-class educated youth who do not have any of the demographic attributes considered causal in the development of psychological disturbances, seem to be walking backwards in the area of personal growth and actualization. Rather than using the facilities that are at their disposal in to build themselves up, they seem to be walking down the path of destruction and despair. For instance, research in the United States now shows that young whites are more susceptible to drug abuse based on prescription drugs as compared to blacks. The doctor's belief that blacks are more likely to abuse the drugs led them to prescribe less frequently for blacks and more frequently for whites. The strategy backfired and there seem to be more whites abusing drugs. This finding can be extended to studying the overall life experience of the privileged adolescent as compared to the underprivileged one. The "at-risk" demographic is changing across all cultures.

Practicing in urban India, one is frequently exposed to the experimental attitude in teenagers that has eventually led to maladaptive behavior patterns and lifestyles. Prominent among them is the use of drug and alcohol. A straw poll reveals that the major factor pushing them to experiment with alcohol, weed and nicotine appears to be sheer boredom. Coming from families that are educated, well-to-do and open-minded, such youth find themselves protected at all levels. They are exposed to the healthiest diets, latest in travel and technology and a parenting style that appears more permissive now than at any time in the past. Further these parents are also pursuing their own ambitions and life goals. They appear to crave a life of meaning and purpose for which the preferred parenting style is a hands-off, permissive, non judgmental approach. The freedom afforded by affluent parents, largely involves little or no adult supervision and very little fear of consequences in case of any misbehavior on the part of the children.

Freedom from constant intrusion by parents, wide social networks helped by social media, availability of funds and also availability of space free from adult supervision has left the youth with time and money on hand but not much clarity in terms of career and life goals. Experimenting with various sexual partners is frequently the norm. There is also a seeping in of frustration with the system, be it political or academic. There are a few who like to challenge the system and work towards the betterment of society at their own micro level. However the large majority do not share similar aspirations. Further, the youth claim complete awareness and understanding of their habits and have great faith in their control over themselves. The emphasis is on enjoying the good times while it lasts without much concern for the future as they have not experienced the uncertainty of challenging times. Narcissism is no longer a vice. Institutions and parents have tried so hard to ensure that their children do not succumb to low self-esteem, that they may just have triggered the opposite end of the spectrum There appears to be a growing discontentment among the youth and this is not caused by a biological vulnerability or an environmental stressor.

The obvious query is in understanding the whys of the situation, assessing the factors that are responsible for bringing about this attitudinal change in the youth. The next step is identifying the methods through which such youth can be directed away from non-productive pursuits and encouraged to focus on strength, skill and knowledge building. The palpable reaction of various parents and therapists when they come to know of the youth's drug use and other lifestyle habits is one of sadness, shock and disappointment. The parents usually question their own parenting skills and in an attempt to deal with their perceived failure, bring the child in for therapy or undergo therapy themselves. While this is a good practice, it still raises questions about the current functioning of society which encourages youth in this direction. The explanation provided by these youth or adolescents, some of whom are as young as thirteen or fourteen, does not integrate well with the overall picture of society. More than ever before, the youth and teenage school going adolescents have access to information, activities and finances that can allow them the luxury of introspection and self-development. However, the reasons that cause them to choose unhealthy options as opposed to healthier ones is still a multi-dimensional picture that needs a similar lens to be observed and understood.

One of the unexpected realities of this situation is that the youth do not come from dysfunctional families nor have they yet reached a level of dysfunction that can interfere with their lives in the long-term. The issue besides being one of psychological concern is also based on the current morality as expressed by society. Youth are clever enough to spot the dissonance between what is taught and what is practiced in society at large. In spite of all the information available to them, they are unable to establish a value system that can satisfy themselves and their parents. There seems to be an overhaul in the value based culture that has been experienced till date. Exposure to different cultures has made the adolescents curious about the lifestyle and values of other cultures and their applicability in the Indian system. The concept of values itself has been undermined due to this adulteration of cultures and the perceived rigidity by the youth.

There is also immense focus on the level of peer pressure experienced by the youth. In the face of a compromising lifestyle advocated by most members of the group, the youth are unable to resist the temptation to be part of the new order where everything is acceptable and no action too negative to be ignored. Peer pressure is most often observed in the need to abuse addictive substances and to maintain a promiscuous life style. Although youth claim to be free of such pressures, focus group discussions reveal that lighting up a joint, or sharing a smoke is standard socializing procedure. Availability of medical help and the confidence that parents will support them through all their experiments painlessly, the youth do not find any reason to hold back from following their current lifestyle. They also experience severe pressure to be star performers not just in curricular but also in extra-curricular activities. These upwardly mobile youth are expected to build glittering careers following admission into prestigious institutions where they have to be recognized in all spheres of development. The pressure is experienced as subtle and not just by parents but also by teachers and trainers.

Gender differences are observed with the girls showing greater levels of clinically significant anxiety and depression and boys showing greater addiction and aggression. Girls have to deal with the pressure of focusing on their physical appearances more than boys leading to eating disorders and unhealthy eating habits. They also have to deal with the added pressure of succeeding in a man's world because times have changed and gender inequality is considered a thing of the past. There are also complications in the relationship with the same-sex parent and an attempt to reject and idealize them as role models. These contradictory and conflicting emotions wreak havoc on their general sense of well-being.

In the nation building process, one needs to learn from the wisdom of the experienced and strengthen the youth so that they may fulfill their dreams and actualize their potential. This will ensure the creation of a society that is identified by the well being of its citizens at all

levels. The urban youth who seem to be more privileged in terms of their upbringing and education can be powerful resources in this process. However, if they are ill-equipped to face the stressors and challenges of life, their contribution to their own growth and the growth of the nation will be greatly weakened.

The therapist is now faced with not just working towards the well-being of his or her client, but is also in a position to contribute more directly towards the development of the country and the well-being of its citizens in these changing times. Strengthening the emotional process of youth, clarifying their thought process, working on improving their cognitive skills, enhancing their social and psychological presence; all of this can be targeted by the therapist. These were always the goals of therapists earlier too, however the current social set up with its technological advances, unclear social norms and flexible value system can either end up with a flourishing nation, or one that is marred by abuse, aggression and apathy. The therapist today is called to build up not just his client but the nation and the world at large, understanding the systemic failure and compensating for it with the skill this professionalism provides.

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