



THEIR VIEW

# Young India is fuelled by agency but is being failed by structure

*Young people are doing their bit. Lagging policy needs to catch up with them to drive the country's demographic dividend*



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India is experiencing the first, heady tranche of its demographic dividend, amply visible in the performance and growing influence of a shining sliver, a small fraction, of young India. But to call victory and assume that the rest of young India is poised to automatically follow suit in time is hasty. Our study, 'Drivers of Destiny,' takes a deep ethnographic dive into the large 'mass' or mainstream of young India, pivotal to India's future over the next 50 years. With the belief that a deeper understanding of them will enable policies that deliver better demographic dividends, we sought to understand, from the inside, how young people act, think about their lives and make sense of their world.

The segment chosen for the study represents leading-edge young people from urban 'middle India'. Drawn from 12 big and small cities, and belonging to modest income families in the middle and lower middle-income groups of India, this is a group of college-going or college-educated men and women across a variety of institutions and educational courses, quite a few being first-generation college-goers.

Our overarching conclusion from 100-plus interviews can best be described through the *yin* and *yang* lenses that social scientists use to understand the world—*structure* and *agency*.

'Structure' is about the broader terms and conditions handed down to us (identity, institutions and discourses) that we live within. Yet, generations with varying capacities for enterprise, action and impact make their way in the world. Such a capacity constitutes 'agency.'

Our study testified to an abundance of agency: enterprise, packed routines, a belief in the self, an ear out for whatever might be the latest opportunity. This agency is anxious to find the pot of gold that hyper-information-loaded social media and political discourses constantly allude to, and is often flailing and exhausted in its pursuit, but interestingly neither defeated nor depressed. At least, not yet. Young India's leitmotifs are hopefulness and the belief that things will happen in the wake of relentless effort.

Their world is one where you have to constantly try to do something or the other by the force of your own energy, initiative and enterprise in the short-term, while pursuing your dream of a great life in the long-run, the latter defined as a job that brings stability, security and status. Most are preparing for competitive exams (for years altogether) and seeking public sector and government positions, while staying occupied by trying their hand at whatever comes their way. "It's so difficult" and "I'm constantly thinking about what to do next" were common responses. Nobody sits still, hopping as they do between part-time jobs, college classes, hobby courses and short-term skill build-



ing certifications to enhance their employability and mobility. "College until 1pm; then a short nap and then I go to my job at the supermarket," was only one among a common set of narratives about navigating work and education. Even those who didn't need to work were involved in building their portfolio. "I'm learning to sing, go to college, read, and then I have some work related to the fellowship too," said another.

Young people's aspirations are focused on self-improvement to equip themselves for whatever life throws at them. "I am doing two-three tasks actually. First, I'm doing a part-time job in an organization, Art of Living. And, I'm also doing studies... preparing for competitive exams and all. Sometimes I teach children," was a typical response with a revolving set of details. They are motivated by and seek meaning, success, recognition and validation, but do not know where to stick around to find it. The frequent feeling is of running breathless through an endless labyrinth, a puzzle space, where old maps are gone and new ones yet to come.

And what of the *yang*? What of structure?

No structure, whether education, family or friends, seems to be of adequate help, supported mainly as our interlocutors are by the babble of the internet and the information that can be gleaned from a changing set of people and sources. Parents are appreciated as financially supportive and democratic, but not very useful in either advice or understanding. Peers are seen to be more emotionally supportive, yet sparsely available and mostly unstable as a community. These children of liberalization take comfort in a fairly secure past, but are rendered

aflutter by thoughts of an uncertain future.

Those in the 25-30 age cohort who do find a job are suspicious about its permanence. Hustling until they got there has made them both canny and insecure. Alienating workspaces, the looming threat of layoffs in private corporations, and a stymieing and dissatisfying work grind slowly drain them of all vitality. They also report an inability to connect with new people in these alienating urban spaces with crumbling infrastructure, which in turn deepens their trenchant loneliness. The private sector interprets this often as "They don't want to work hard!"

The list of structural dissatisfactions is long. The constant challenges of gender and caste, apart from universal disappointment with the education system in equipping them with skills for work on one hand and a sense of broader imagination and play on the other, are also part of how they see the world.

Yet, in all this, they display no critique and see no responsibility of the government or the country in finding them jobs. Instead, they see their world as part of the hazy, opaque entity called 'the market.' They focus on how to make themselves market-ready, even as what is good enough keeps shifting as a goalpost, inspiring constant fear of being termed redundant.

This is a story of enormous entropy created by resolute agency bouncing off the unhelpful wall of a failing structure. It is a generation of amazing attitude and energy that is slipping through the very large cracks of our structural failures.

*Commissioned by Bijapurkar, the study was conceptualized and led by Krishnamurthy, with assistance from a fieldwork team at Auxohub.*





| **GUEST VIEW**

# The young of mainstream India are too embattled to dream big

*Sapped by the hustle of the here and now, youth aspirations are limited to low-pressure jobs offering stability and security*



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**A**spirational 'Young India' is a ubiquitous phrase whose taken-for-granted meaning is the intense desire and striving for material and social betterment. It assumes a well-directed action orientation around focused goals and a kinetic energy that powers India forward. Our study started with no such pre-conceived meanings. It performed an emic or insider's deep dive into the contours of aspiration for the world of mass or mainstream young India, a world described in our previous column in *Mint* ('Young India is fuelled by agency but is being failed by structure,' 24 March) as one of exhausting entropy where agency comes up against the paucity of structures. In this piece, we focus on how to understand and read their aspirations and accompanying anxieties.

Our most telling finding was that for so many of our respondents, the aspiration was a government job, a coveted position of stability and security. This holy grail, we thought, had disappeared a few generations prior. However, it showed up with telling regularity, its contours apparently having been mulled over in their minds for a long time. "I want a Central government and not a state job," was also often a clear preference. Their many efforts towards this long-term hope ran parallel to their acts in the here and now, trying to willy-nilly pass qualifying exams, often in multiple attempts. Many respondents found themselves chasing this goal for years; responses such as "Dream job is UPSC [short for Union Public Service Commission] and all the rest I have not thought about," testify to the stickiness and stuck-ness of this aspiration.

The reasons for this specific goal were mainly related to personal well-being—security, low pressures, predictability, high status and recognition. It was also often a last-ditch option, since their educational degrees didn't allow them to access jobs related to their degree. "Not much scope after B.Tech, so I chose civil services", was a typical response. "Nine-to-five peace, and no stress," was another.

Abetting this quest is the sense that entrance exams for government jobs are difficult but within reach, and can be cracked through individual perseverance and hard work. Although aware of evidence to the contrary, they read it as a problem of "not enough" government jobs.

Another dimension of this aspiration is found from responses such as "I just need a stable future and I don't want to live a hopeless nightmare," suggesting that an obsessive focus on some picture of a future secure life helps them in the present too. It seems to provide an anchor of great hope in their world of hustling for the here and now, that we described in our first column. Perhaps that is why



they refuse to articulate any fear that such a future may never come.

The language of difficulty and stress did find a way into their responses, not in relation to this aspiration being unachievable, but as regards their mental and physical health. For a cohort of people not yet 30, an alarmingly large number reported fatigue, sleep issues, vitamin deficiencies, anxiety and mental health concerns, difficult menstrual health and debilitating hormonal fluctuations.

Even when speaking about their health, though, their language took on the tone of their body being a project they needed to master—"must exercise", "I try and stay healthy", "I need to do more."

Read together, these responses suggest two things; one, that all agency is deployed in pursuit of the good—read 'stable'—life. Two, all stress is sublimated and not confronted, except as individual malady. If this were a Netflix series, the blurb would read thus: 'Striving endlessly, and going nowhere, a stressed bunch of young people enrolls in the coaching factory for a government job.'

To be clear, we do not judge the aspiration for a government job. However, when it is so greatly desired merely for the stability and security it provides, our reading is that the sapping of young energies to get by in the here-and-now world is producing in them a voluntarily stunting of their aspirations for their own lives. They are eschewing the full depth and breadth of possibilities that new India offers for them to aspire to, replacing it with

the self-inflicted myopia of bonsai dreams and perfectly stable lives.

Are they untouched by these broader possibilities to aspire for? They do talk about having a work life that abets their well-being, fosters their sense of enterprise and excitement, and recognizes them as valid beings in the world. They chat about possible startups with friends, hope for a world in which their hobbies might become their work, and express desires to do good in the world.

A clear thread through these dreamscapes was the search for meaning as well as community. In these conversations, they displayed a palpable sense of joy, whilst providing the caveat that none of these goals of theirs seemed to ever be able to materialize. "I mean we have a million ideas, but we never initiate any" was the general tone.

It is, therefore, even more tragic, given the evidence of such joy, that the only aspiration they seem to allow themselves is to find a job where they might be able to finally rest after running on an endless treadmill in the here and now. This generation is tired and finding themselves stuck in a waiting room—from which to leave, they need to keep moving.

Why are they not angry and resentful? What makes them keep trying? We will explore this in our final column.

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| GUEST VIEW

# Young India sees consumption as an activity, not identity marker

*The pursuit of material goods does not underpin this generation's aspirations. Peace and quietude make up its dreamscape*



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**D**iscussion around youth consumption in India has been largely focused around observed purchasing behaviour. Despite its enormous value in guiding marketers, two key questions have been left to the realm of assumption rather than data-led insights: one, the larger and more foundational question of where consumption is located in the overall canvas of life aspirations, dreams and emotions of 'mass' or mainstream young India. Two: the 'state of mind' or zeitgeist that fundamentally shapes the lives of this cohort. This is the territory of our last column in this series.

Taking the second question first and drawing on what has been discussed in our previous columns: Despite being a cohort that is tired and entropic from pitting large amounts of agency in the face of an unsupportive structure, rebellion is not its state of mind. Young people do not feel betrayed by national systems. Instead, they accept an opaque and faceless 'market' as being the arbiter of jobs, even as progress in the nation is interpreted as the development of market conditions for work. They do not have a mind state of frustration either (so far). This is, we argue, because of their 'waiting room to a better place' nature of hopeful living in the tough present, while planning for a stable and secure low-pressure future. Increasing individualization along with the lack of a strong collective peer culture, leading to loneliness and emotional fatigue, is an area of felt pain, though. Also, the leit-motif of young India is a mind state of fragmentation, echoing as it does the fragmented and fraught nature of their everyday lives.

The answer to the first question runs counter to the widely held belief that every generation after liberalization is increasingly more acquisitive or consumerist. Consumption of material goods, we suggest, is not the foundation that undergirds this generation's aspirations. The nature of long-term aspirations, dreams and 'the good life' for this segment is surprisingly not about material goods—*gaadi, bangla, makaan*, green card—but centres around security and calm, and a connection with nature. Their search is for a *je ne sais quoi* or as one respondent stated, "magic." A significant proportion of this population dreams of peace, quietude and meaning in animals, nature and pastoral lives. Whichever way we interpret these dreams, as literal reality or as metaphors for a certain kind of life, consumption is notable in its absence *vis-à-vis* this particular dreamscape.

But does consumption not figure in their lives at all? Of course it does, and in a very big way. But only as an activity that offers a temporary thrill and distraction from the real world, as also relaxation and rest—in the words of one respondent, as "therapy."



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This generation consumes distraction and "time-pass", "binge-watching", "self-care", "pampering", via social media, entertainment, shopping and other such daily forms of small pleasures. If we were to name a consumption culture in this regard, it would be that this segment of youth consumes like spongy magpies, distracted by every new thing, before flitting onto the next shiny object.

In the accounts of their lives, aspirations and dreams, material possessions do not feature significantly as a means of self-expression or status signalling that we usually associate with consumption. The closest they came in their consumption habits to this question of self-expression was in relation to becoming a "better version of themselves." These purchasing preferences included motivational books, podcasts and social media content seen as contributing to their physical, social, intellectual and emotional well-being. Hence the primacy of the smartphone in their lives, as also the attention to clothes and grooming, the latter being specific to how they manage their perception and therefore value in the world. In this, apparel, accessories and cosmetics made up a large portion of their choices with a variety of brands featuring in these conversations. However, most did not show any particular indication of either lasting brand loyalty or preference.

There also exists in their expressed consumer desires the search for "newness" and "experiences," travelling abroad being a major preference. In this, however, they had deferred all consumption to the future; very few seemed to possess either the

means or the motivation to travel to the places they listed with great zeal. If anything, their virtual lives seemed to partially fulfil these curiosities and successfully manage such deferral. This, in particular, points to an ongoing blurring of the boundaries between real and reel life for our survey respondents. However, their engagements online do not provide evidence of any one source of influence; their likes and dislikes remain fragmented.

Fragmentation and excessive information stimulus characterize this generation, with no evidence of brand loyalty. Consumption in this study emerged as a temporary dopamine hit, fading out to make way for the next avenue, promising a better everything.

This generation seems to only want little pleasures, has no big spending categories in mind, and more often than not pegs its hopes on the idyllic fantasy of a non-consumerist future spent in the company of nature and animals.

What emerges finally is that this segment of young India careens wildly between involved and engaged forms of learning, experience, pleasure, distraction and consumption, while harbouring fantasies of beauty, peace, animals and world travel. The culture of consumption we identify is one of distraction at one end, with a forever deferred, long-term politics of seeking "something else"—meaning, purpose, joy and connection—at the other.

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