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REVIEW ARTICLE

Ecology of Adolescence in India

Implications for Policy and Practice

T. S. Saraswathi · Meera Oke

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Abstract The kaleidoscopic images of Indian adolescents are colored by variations and inequities in region, gender, caste, and social class. The contrast between the privileged and the under privileged makes them appear as belonging to different worlds marked by the "freedoms" of the 'haves' and the "unfreedoms" of the have-nots. What offers hope is the significant improvement seen in literacy during the past decade. Although we are far off the mark in universalization of primary education and the enforcement of the right to education, there is reason for optimism due to significant improvements in literacy over the past decade. Adolescent health and nutrition continue to remain grave concerns. Poor reproductive health, especially of young women at risk of early marriage and pregnancy, contributes to the cycle of poor nutrition, health and poor well-being. Enlightened policies offer hope while poor implementations of programs for adolescent welfare cause for despair. The nation stands at the crossroads of economic development with a large expanding pool of adolescent population who can become contributing members of the society in the coming decades. Investment in their education and health can pay rich dividends even as the failure to do so will bring with it a high social cost. The current paper addresses these issues in the light of available empirical data. (An earlier version of the present paper based on data from the Census of India (2001) was published in Saraswathi, T. S. (2012) Ecology of Adolescence (pp188–210) in M. Kapur, H.M. Koot &M. Lamb (Eds.) Developmental Psychology and Education. New Delhi: Manek Publications Pvt. Ltd for ICSSR, NOW and ESRC. The present paper has used updated statistics from the Census of India (2001) and other statistical data wherever possible.).

Keywords Adolescence · Context · Culture · Literacy · Participation · Peers · Policy

T. S. Saraswathi (✉)
M S University of Baroda, Baroda, India
e-mail: saraswathi.1939@gmail.com

M. Oke
Centre for Human Growth and Development, Pune, India
e-mail: meera.oke@gmail.com

Introduction

In 2002 when asked to describe the stage of adolescence in India, for a cross cultural volume on World youth (Bradford et al. 2003), the senior author of the present chapter chose to capture the complex images with a metaphor of the kaleidoscope. The images change when viewed through the perspectives of gender, class, and locale milieu. The metaphor is equally appropriate presently, and the reader needs to be mindful of this image before making a generalization regarding adolescence or the lives of adolescents in India across wide variations in geographic, social and economic indicators.

Adolescence acquires special significance in the course of life span development. It serves as a conceptual continuity between childhood and adulthood and epitomizes the promise of human capital in the nation's development, provided it is harnessed through appropriate policy, practice and investment in health, education and general well being.

Socially and culturally, this translates into wide variations in what may be described as the stage of adolescence in the Indian context. Based on the ethnographic study of children and adolescents in Gujarat (Saraswathi and Dutta 1988), Saraswathi, in 1999 raised the question "Is adolescence a myth or a reality?" Given the context and culture, the transition seemed almost invisible and imperceptible especially among the rural adolescent girls who assumed the roles of

wives, mothers and home managers even in their early teens. In contrast, with exposure to the modern ways of living, meeting extended demands of education, preparation for specialized employment and consequent delayed age of marriage among the urban adolescents (Saraswathi 1999; Verma and Saraswathi 2002) sometimes well into the late twenties, a distinct phase is observed and lends credence to the phrase "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2000) for the years following adolescence but preceding adulthood. In the Hindu traditional description of the 'Ashramadharmas' or Hindu life stages, adolescence is viewed as a stage of apprenticeship to acquire the skills, competencies and knowledge needed for responsible adulthood (that of a provider and householder).

In practice, there is a lack of consensus in the age spans that cover the phase of adolescence, being clubbed sometimes with childhood and sometimes with adulthood. It might be a reflection of a lack of clarity between special developmental needs during childhood and adolescence and general privileges of adulthood such as voting rights, indicating a merging of needs during the transition period. This however, creates challenges for allocation of resources and for those accessing support from state provisions. This is evident in social and legal provisions for the adolescent age group (Saraswathi 2012). The age varies depending upon whether it is the legal age for voting (18 year), for marriage (18–21 year), or provisions for compulsory education (6–14 year), employment (prohibited below 14 year.), youth policies (13–35 year) juvenile justice and drug abuse (up to 18 year). For the present article we will focus on 10–19 year olds, at times extending our write-up to include 24-year olds.

Regardless of the lack of consensus in age span of adolescence, there is an emerging consensus among academicians, both social (See Arnett 2000; Chaudhary and Sharma 2007, 2012; Saraswathi 1999; Schlegel and Barry 1991; Verma and Saraswathi 2002) and biological/medical (Johnson et al. 2009) regarding the significance of adolescence as a distinct stage that needs to be investigated and understood. Equally important is the recognition of this stage as significant for policies and programs related to health, education and welfare and the fallacy of clubbing this age group with children or adults (UNFPA 2006). Such recognition is based on the assumption that investment in this segment of the population enhances the quality of human capital for better national development by production of educated and skilled workers who can contribute to the nation's economy as well as address social issues/challenges relating to wellbeing/quality of life (including health and fertility control).

In the sections that follow, we will present a descriptive profile of Indian adolescents providing a bird's eye view of their health, nutrition, marriage, fertility control, education and employment status and involvement in crime. We wish to reiterate that in each of these categories/dimensions there are enormous variations in the life experiences of adolescents depending on whether they are girls or boys, rich or poor, living in rural or urban areas. This is followed by a brief descriptive accounts of the social contexts which influence adolescent development be it the family, the peer group, media or the context for civic and political participation. The concluding section will link these dimensions to policies and programs that address the needs of adolescents, and then indicate possible future directions.

At the outset, we would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the present paper is limited to a detailed description of the ecological contexts of adolescents in India. It does not attempt to review and critically assess literature in psychology related to the impact of life situations of adolescents on the development of basic psychological processes like cognition, learning, emotions and motivation. An attempt to do so was made at the initial stages of organizing the paper. But since sound empirical data on all aspects was too sparse to draw meaningful conclusions, we decided to confine the exercise to developing a contextual profile. A critical review of related literature in psychology could be the theme of a separate paper. The current paper does provide an understanding of consistencies and inconsistencies in linkages within and between contexts in which Indian adolescents develop, indicative of possible influences in shaping basic psychological processes.

Demographic Profile

India's bludgeoning population has crossed the 1.2+ billion mark (Census 2011) and the population clock keeps ticking away. Adolescents (ages 10–19) years form 20 % of the population (UNICEF 2012) and the figure exceeds 22 % when those till 24 are included.

The bulge in the lower center of the population pyramid (See Fig. 1) that encompasses the adolescents and youth offers reasons for both optimism and despair. Unlike the near inverted population pyramids that characterize many developed countries with an ageing population, India has a high percentage of young population who will become productive members in the coming decades. The cause for concern is the possibility of a large number of youth who might become a burden on the nation by becoming a part the vicious cycle of poverty if they remain unhealthy, uneducated and unskilled to cope with the needs of changing times. This is likely to happen with inadequate investment in health care, education and skill development.

Divergent Realities

Age of Marriage, Health and Nutrition

In describing the ecology of adolescents in India, what stands out in particular is the age of marriage and attitudes towards child bearing and their corollaries as these have direct

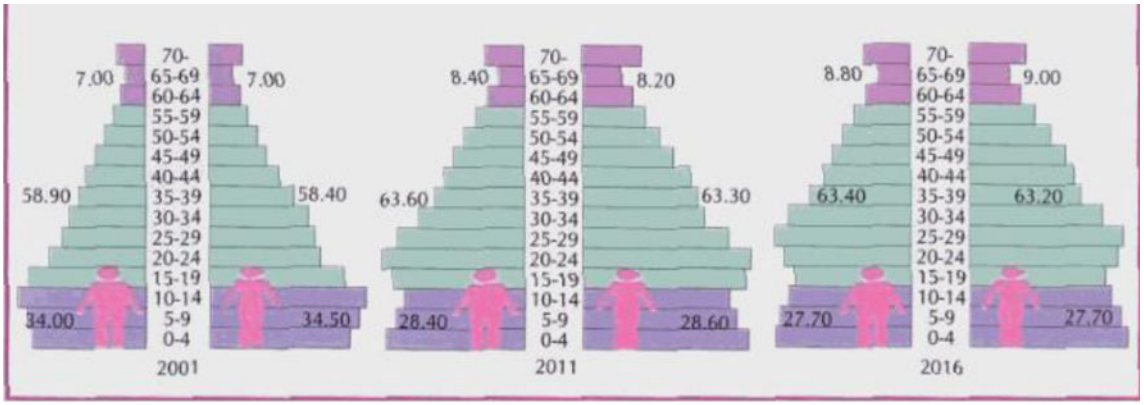

Fig. 1 Population age and sex wise projections. Data for 2011 and 2016 are projected based on Census of India (2001) figures. Technical Group on Population Projections, Registrar General of India (RGI) based on Census of India (2001) http://populationcommission.nic.in/facts1/htm

consequences for education, health care, and fertility at both micro and macro levels. The gendered and class based outcomes become most evident in these indicators. Though the officially recognized age of marriage is 18 for girls and 21 for boys, child marriages have not ceased to exist. Thirty per cent of girls are married before age18 (UNICEF 2012). Figure 2 provides a graphic description of variations across the country. Data reported by UNICEF (2012) indicate that 5 % of boys and 30 % of girls (15–19 year) are currently in marital union. In the Indian context where fertility is highly valued within marriage and a stigma out of wedlock, adolescent girls are mothers early in their marriage. The cultural emphasis on chastity and social stigma related to unwed motherhood is cited as reasons for early marriages. Honor killings for violation of the norm still prevail in some parts of the country. At the same time there are incidences of unwed pregnancies/and abandonment of babies. About 3500 children in orphanages are adopted legally each year (www.adoptionindia.nic.in) and, there are several thousands of illegal abortions. Bruce (2003) and Jejeebhoy (1996) discuss this as an issue that needs serious consideration, especially in the urban context of increasing age of marriage and more freedom to be away from parental supervision.

Birth rate in adolescent girls is 45 per thousand, which is higher than average (23 per thousand), indicating that adolescent girls significantly contribute to the current high birth rate in India. These figures vary in rural/urban and poor/rich wealth quintile populations (IIPS 2007). The richest 20 % of population when compared to the poorest 20 % is more likely to have skilled attendants at birth (6:4) and birth registration (3:1) according to data obtained by UNICEF (2012).

There is a noteworthy positive relationship between early marriage and the socioeconomic development of the different regions in the country. The poorer states consistently show a lower age of marriage than the developed states. Age of marriage and fertility behavior also correlate highly with the level of education (See Fig. 2)

As indicated earlier, there are major deleterious consequences of early marriage and child bearing. Gopalan (1993) had called attention to the high incidence of teenage pregnancies in India as "child labor at its worst". To quote, "We witness the sad spectacle of millions of children (girls 14–18 years) compelled to engage in child bearing and child rearing, even before they have had a chance to, …attain adulthood… It is "labor" which carries greater risks than some other forms of child labor for which there is political outcry" (p.2). By 20–24 years, 22 % the 15–19 year-old girls have had one or even two children. Few (35 % boys and 19 % girls) use contraceptives and are ill informed about their use and about HIV Aids. (UNICEF 2012)

High incidence of anemia among adolescent girls is a major contributing factor to higher age-specific mortality during pregnancy (WHO 2011) as reflected in folklore such as "make plans about the mother and baby if they survive." Anemia accounts for higher complications during and after pregnancy (UNFPA 2006). Based on three large national surveys on the prevalence and consequence of anemia in India, Kalaivani (2009), estimated that over 70 % of the adolescent girls suffer from mild, moderate or severe anemia with greater incidence and severity in lower socioeconomic strata. (UNFPA 2006) Adverse consequences of anemia are well documented (Kalaivani 2009) for mothers (hemorrhage, ante and post-partum complications and even death) as well as the fetus/infant (low birth weight and high infant mortality). In her comprehensive review of early life origins of adult morbidity, Fall (2009) cites the findings of the ongoing longitudinal Pune Maternal Nutrition Study in which she was a co-investigator. The results highlight long term and inter-generational consequences of poor maternal nutrition. Low birth weight and slow growth in early life may result in long term health problems such as cardio-vascular diseases, Type 2 diabetes, and poor academic performance (Fall 2009).

A recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO 2011), documented the efficacy of closely monitored, low cost interventions carried out in four major states (Bihar, Uttar

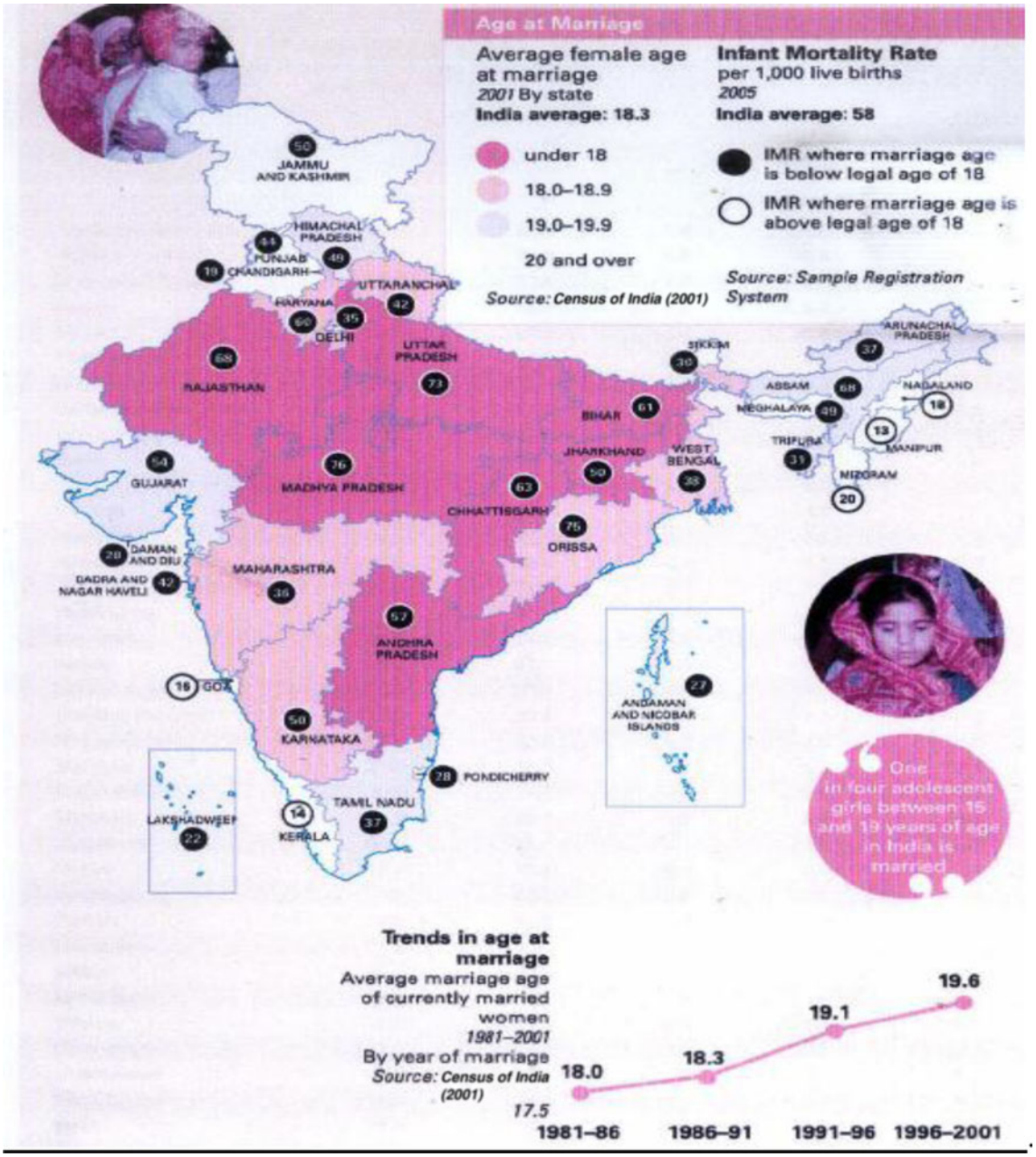

Fig. 2 Proportion of currently married population marrying before 18 years by educational level. Reproduced from UNICEF web site, September, 2009

Pradesh, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh) in India. These programs provided iron folic acid (IFA) supplements free of cost to school-aged girls (in or out of school). The intervention period lasted from 12 to 16 months. The base line prevalence of anemia was high (73–93 %). The compliance rate for the weekly intake of the tablets was also very high and the reduction in anemia ranged from 8.9 %–46.8 % depending on the base line level and duration of administration. It is noteworthy that the cost per individual per year was less than 32 US cents and the compliance rate was very high. As pointed out by Kalaivani (2009) "Technology for detection of anemia and its effective treatment are available and affordable and it is possible to effectively implement these even in primary health care settings and these are very cost effective interventions" (p. 32). In light of such evidence it is ironic that prevalence of anemia among adolescent girls continues to remain so wide spread.

It must be emphasized here that the above description is more appropriate for those at the lower half of the socio-economic class than it does those from middle class and above. As can be seen from Fig. 2 there is a direct correlation between education and age of marriage. Girls from the middle class and above have shown a steady increase in the age of marriage with metropolitan cities showing an average above

25 years (Indian Express, April 2012). Though exact figures are not available many employed women are not only delaying marriage but even choosing to remain single and to not have children when married. In sum, adolescent girls from the lower social class are likely to be less educated, marry early and start child bearing in the late teens or early twenties, and be highly susceptible to health and nutrition related problems such as anemia, stunting and complications in pregnancy than boys from the same social class or girls from the middle and upper classes.

Literacy and Education

Compared to Census of India (2001), the 2011 Census shows a steady increase in total, male, and female literacy. Total literacy for the 7+ population is 74 %, with male literacy being markedly higher (82 %) than female literacy (65.5 %). These figures mask the glaring regional variations with Mizoram showing an impressive 98 %, Kerala, 94 % per cent (Male: 96 %, Female: 92 %), in contrast Rajasthan, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh with male literacy in the range of 63–69 % and female literacy 52–59 % (Census 2011).

The regional variations are captured strikingly in the words of Dreze (2003): "At the one end of the scale, remaining uneducated is almost unthinkable for a Tamil Brahmin, or the Bengali Kayastha, or the Goan Christian, at the other end, literacy rates are as low as 2.2 % among the tribal belts of Bihar and Rajasthan, especially among women" (p.974). This finds resonance in Govinda and Bandyopadhyay' s (2008) comprehensive report on elementary education in India. As stated by the authors, "At one end of the spectrum, there is Kerala with practically every child completing elementary school and transitioning to secondary school; and almost every school having at least five teachers and five class rooms. At the other end, there is Bihar where only one out of two children in the relevant age group is in school; the majority of children entering school fail to complete an elementary cycle; many schools are understaffed; and teachers are often untrained and given little academic support."(p.4)

Gender in combination with a disadvantaged social background acts as a double dis-advantage in the case of girls. Literacy figures in the Human Development Report (UNDP 2000) under the title "…who are the most deprived?" graphically demonstrate this depressing reality revealing that female Scheduled castes from poorly developed regions of the country are, at the lowest rung in the hierarchy. Govinda and Bandopadhyay (2008) echo this observation as well.

The rural–urban divide continues to be significant. Urban total literacy is 84.98 % (males: 89.67 % and females: 79.92 %), compared to rural total literacy 68.91 % (males: 78.57 % and females: 58.75 %) (Census of India 2011). The 10 points difference between male and female literacy in the urban region and 20 point difference in the rural region is noteworthy.

With regard to school education, enrollment at the primary school has increased steadily with 88.5 % per cent enrolled in Grade 1 (UNESCO 2008). It is particularly encouraging to note the gender parity of .94 (ratio of girls to boys) in class1–V and .93 in class VI–VIII. Retention rates have also improved showing a transition rate of 83.53 % per cent from primary to upper primary school (NUEPA 2011). The goal of universal primary education has not yet been achieved despite affirmative actions to enhance enrollment and retention, provision of free mid-day meals, text books, school uniforms etc. (Chaudhary and Sharma 2007). Furthermore, the implementation of the ambitious Govt. of India-Right to Education Act (2009) guaranteeing every child the right to quality education is beset with massive hurdles with inadequate funding, poor physical infrastructure in schools, and non-availability of trained teachers.

Several reasons have been proffered to account for continued non-enrollment and high dropout rates. These include disinterest on the part of parents (which accounts for a small minority today), compulsion to work (again a contentious issue as all out-of school-children are not at work), care of younger siblings and house hold work (in the case of girls), and school related factors such as inability to cope, dismissive or punitive teachers, doubts about the value of education, direct and indirect costs of education (even if supposedly free), distance from home (more so for girls), poor facilities including absence of separate toilets and drinking water facilities in school (See Dreze 2003; Educational Initiatives 2012; Govinda and Bandyopadhyay 2008; Nieuwenhuys 2003 for detailed discussions). Even when enrolled girls have a higher probability of dropping out when family income is limited, the school (especially upper primary and secondary) is a long distance from home, and there are no separate toilet facilities for boys and girls (Pratham 2007).

Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008) examine the reasons for non enrollment and drop out using the interesting concept of the six zones of exclusion. Briefly, the zones of exclusion may be summarized as follows: Zone 1. Children who have never enrolled in school due to school location or family circumstances; Zone 2. Those who enroll but drop out; Zone 3. Silent exclusion i.e. at the risk of dropping out and learning little or nothing in class; Zone 4. Those who complete lower primary but do not continue either due to choice or inaccessibility; Zone 5. Children who complete Grade 5 but drop out during Grade 6; Zone 6 Children who are at risk of dropping out from upper primary school and fail to learn. (p. 32). This categorization is significant (especially the concept of silent exclusion) as each zone has separate implications for the success or failure of universalization elementary education.

Access to quality education is moderated by social class. To quote Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008, p.27) "There is, in fact, a discernable hierarchical division of schools in

India with selected urban schools with good infra structural facilities and teaching staff catering to the rich students, while schools with poor facilities and inadequate numbers of teachers tend to cater to the poor and deprived sections of society". The latter form the majority.

In the past decade a large number of poor quality English medium schools have mushroomed in rural areas and urban slums to fulfill a demand for English education due to its perceived promise to better employment opportunities (Pratham 2007). Meaningful learning takes the back seat in such a context. (See Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008) for more detailed discussion on types of schools and issues related to schooling.)

Much has been written about the condition of the physical facilities and teachers' qualifications in municipal schools in scientific publication (NCERT 2005) and print media (such as Indian Express, Times of India, Hindu). The presence of a well-run municipal school with concrete ('pucca') buildings in good condition, furniture, black boards, toilets for girls and boys, and a playground are there but as rare exceptions. Most schools are described as in dilapidated condition with no toilet or drinking water facilities and often situated close to the main road and traffic. The description of these schools can easily be generalized across the country with schools in some states presenting an even more depressed condition. Teachers' absence and the quality of their training only magnify the poor quality education received by the children (See NUEPA 2011, DISE report for statistical data)

In such a context the education of the children of Scheduled castes and tribes (SC/ST) continues to be a challenge. Compared to the general population, fewer children from SC/ST families are enrolled and more drop out (See Nambissan and Sedwal 2002; Govinda and Bandyopadhyay 2008 for detailed discussion). Even after completion of primary or secondary education (and higher education in some cases), as reported in a news paper report and later produced as a documentary film, a Dalit post graduate degree holder has a job of a rat catcher in the Mumbai Municipality (they actually have such a position!), as none other were available to him. In Kerala, where educational levels are higher than in the rest of the country, it is common to see bus conductors with graduate and post graduate degrees (Personal observation of senior author).

In a thought provoking essay on what happens when schooling fails, Jeffery et al. (2005) examined how educated Chamaars (Dalit) young men reflect on their education in rural Uttar Pradesh where political leaders have been promoting empowerment through formal education and entry into white collar employment. Their research in rural Bijnor district suggests that the most recent generation of high school and college graduates has failed to find salaried employment. As described by the authors based on detailed interviews with young men in the community, some men respond to this exclusion from the job market by reaffirming their faith in the model of progress and establishing themselves as local politicians ('netas'). Other young men voice a growing alienation from the vision of empowerment and speak of themselves as people "trapped by education". Nevertheless, both these sets of young men continue to value education as a source of "cultural distinction", a sign of their "modern status", and means of challenging caste based notions of difference" (p.1, abstract). This observation finds resonance in caste based politics across the country and the role of education in the same.

Much more can be said about the challenges that face education of adolescents in the current Indian cultural context. For the poor it is access to quality education and the fulfillment of the promise that it will enhance their employment opportunities. For the middle class with better access to quality education, the bane is the stress generated by high expectation, poor guidance and intense competition for limited seats in prestigious institutions of higher learning (Arun and Chavan 2009). There is poor understanding of school counseling even in good schools and children pay a high price for coping with academic stress with little support from teachers or parents. The consequences of high parental expectations and academic stress are seen in media reports on suicides every year after the announcement of examination results.

In sum, the glaring disparities caused by gender, class, caste, urban–rural residence and regional variation is most evident in the case of access to education and more so to quality education. Despite all the rhetoric regarding universalisation of primary education and various programs to support affirmative action, adolescent girls from the poor socio-economic groups, from lower castes, from rural areas, and from the least developed regions of the country continue to be denied their constitutional right to education.

Work and Employment

Similar to the Census of India (2001) report, the National Sample Survey of 2007–08 revealed that one of three adolescents between the ages of 15–19 years worked for wages (Dev and Venkatanarayana 2011). The labor force participation of rural adolescents in the age group 15–19 is higher than that of urban adolescents. While 39 % of the rural adolescents worked (Male: 44 %, Female: 32 %), in the urban areas only 17 % of the adolescents were working (Male: 26 %, Female: 7 %) (UNFPA 2006). Data from the National Sample Survey shows a significant drop in child labor. Labor force participation by the 10–14 year olds dropped from 20 % in 1983 to 5 % in 2007–08, and that of the 15–19 year olds from 50 % to 30 % in the same period indicating that more children are likely to be in school. This is supported by the literacy figures of young workers showing that 80.7 % of them are literate of which 65 % have completed between primary to secondary school.

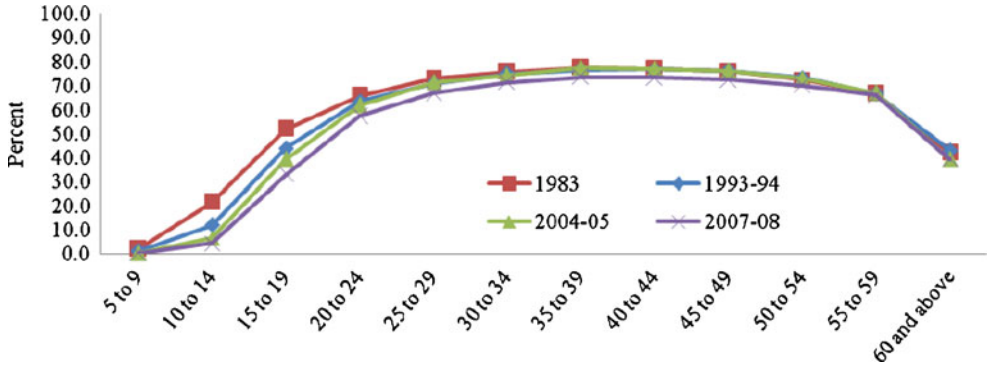

Fig. 3 Employment by age: http://www.igdr.ac.in (accessed April 3, 2012)

By 20–24 years, on average, 50 % of the youth are working, more males than females, and more rural than urban youth. (Also see Govinda and Bandyopadhyay 2008) (Fig. 3).

The concept of child and adolescent labor is a contentious issue in a country like India. The Indian government considers child/adolescent labor as a "necessary evil", and The Child Labor Prohibition Act (CLPRA) does not completely ban but seeks to protect the young and vulnerable from exploitation and abuse. Implementation of the Right to Education Act is likely to change this.

Poverty is definitely one of the major reasons for employment. But that does not tell the entire story (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay 2008). Many young people do make a significant contribution to the family kitty. Additionally, in traditional occupations such as pottery, weaving, cattle rearing, and agriculture young people are incorporated from early years as apprentices and become capable of assuming major responsibilities by the time they reach late adolescence. There is value in the early introduction of apprenticeship in traditional crafts like weaving, cottage industries and even agricultural work (Nieuwenhuys 2003). Yet another rather compelling reason for work is that it is a better alternative to malnutrition, hunger, poor mental health, suicides, and trouble on the streets, when adolescents are pushed out of school. All this however, does not argue against the need for protection of young people from exploitative labor, low and unhealthy working conditions, low skill acquisition and condemnation to a life of poverty (Das 2003).

As in all other aspects of adolescents lives there are marked social class differences. Most of the discussion above pertains to the poor. Adolescents from the middle and upper classes have the privilege of using this stage for preparation for higher education and for acquiring the competencies needed for gainful employment as young adults. Adolescent girls from the low social class are more often than not engaged in work that is invisible. Their contribution to domestic work and home based industry goes unrecognized in the market economy as does their work in unorganized sectors such as work as domestic help or unpaid farm labor. The social belief is that men are the providers even when women keep the homes running. On the contrary adolescent girls in the middle and upper classes today are preparing themselves for employment in par with their male counter parts.

Juvenile Crime and Crime Against Adolescents

In describing data available on juvenile crime, it must be borne in mind that a large number of juvenile crimes go unreported by choice because the police choose to disregard or they are unobserved. The data presented are based on the reports of the National Crime Research Bureau (2010)

Though hardly 1 % one per cent of the total crimes are committed by those below 18 years of age, in terms of sheer numbers it seems large. The National Crime Research Bureau (2010) reported that 30,303 young people below 18 years were booked (Males: 28,763 (95 %); and females: 1540 (5 %)). Majority of the juvenile crimes were committed by those between 16 and 18 years (63.3 %), followed by those between 12 and 15 years (34 %). These include physical and sexual abuse, rape, and human trafficking both within the country and across the borders. Hence along with other acts of social deviancy such as drug use, smoking and alcohol consumption, there is a pressing need for social investment in improving the well-being of adolescents, especially those from less privileged settings. (For more detailed discussions see UNFPA 2006).

Poverty partly accounts for participation in criminal activities, as more than 60 % of those arrested come from poor families. Crime by those from the middle class families is around 12 % and those from the upper class 0.9 %. The latter are a recent phenomenon and receive much media attention.

Generally, the crimes are not of a very serious nature. They include petty thefts, attempt at burglary, causing physical injury, or gambling. With an overworked judicial system and overcrowded jails, a large majority of the arrested juveniles are let off with a reprimand and warning about serious punishment in future. In some cases parents or guardians are called in for reprimand. A small number are sent to institutions or special homes.

Of more serious concern are crimes against juveniles. These include physical and sexual abuse, rape, and human trafficking both within the country and across the borders. Hence along with other acts of social deviancy such as drug use, smoking and alcohol consumption, there is a pressing need for social investment in improving the well-being of adolescents, especially those from less privileged settings. (For more detailed discussions see UNFPA 2006 and NCRB 2010).

The role of gender, class and location (rural/urban) once again affect the kaleidoscopic images. Incidence of juvenile crimes is in favor of girls and the rural locale unlike in the case of health, nutrition and education where the balance is tilted in favor of boys.

The Contexts for Adolescent Development

Family Relations

The family structure in India is essentially patriarchal. Even states like Kerala which historically enjoyed a matriarchal system, have gradually switched over to patriarchy for economic and social reasons. Inter-state migration rates have increased over the years. Migration patterns are from poorer states to richer states; rural to urban on account of employment and marriage. (Deshingkar and Akter 2009) This has led to families living away from extended families or their natal homes. However, a feature that characterizes most Indian families is the emphasis on 'jointness' in family relationships and function regardless of whether the living arrangement is nuclear or extended. Essentially, although there may be a few variations, adolescents in India are socialized to perceive the male as superior, to respect the elders and adhere to interdependence within the family. As stated by Chaudhary and Sharma (2007, p.449), "On the whole, the single most significant leit motif that characterizes Indian adolescents is their constant pull toward the family ethos that encourages them to place individual needs secondary to family needs and subjugate their decisions to those made by the family to maintain cohesiveness".

In practice, what is seen is the preference of adolescents for spending time with the family even for recreational purposes (Saraswathi and Sridharan 1991; Larson et al. 2003). Notable also is the fact that a significant amount of time is spent by parents, especially urban middle class mothers, in either assisting or supervising numerous after-school related academic or other activities. The intensity peaks before and during exams.

Selection of the marriage partner remains a prime responsibility of the family be it through the family marriage broker, bureaus or through matrimonial advertisements and more recently web sites that support mate selection. Much to the amazement of their Western counter-parts, Indian youth prefer the parental/family initiative and involvement on this matter and clearly state that parents know best though increasingly they wish to have a say in the final decision making (Pathak 1994; Prakash 2010)

Marriage is viewed as a family affair. Establishing an alliance between two families and two individuals is seen as 'sowing the seeds for a thousand years' implying the significance of this alliance for future generations. The assumption underlying this belief is that most biological reproduction occurs within marriage (Schlegel and Barry 1991) an assumption that still holds true in most Indian families even today. [1]

The emphasis so far in terms of the stability of family structure and dynamics is not to imply that there has been no social change. As India grows economically, divorce rates are also on the rise but remain a low 1.1 % (www.indidivorce.com). Social change is inevitable and is seen in the increasing nuclearization of families and smaller family size, of women's empowerment through education and employment, delayed age of marriage and prolonged period of education. Young people are increasingly consulted regarding their educational and career choices as well in the final selection of the marriage partner (from among those short listed by parents!). Economic mobility into middle and upper class has led to parents providing more material facilities for their children. Parents are seen as adopting a more indulgent and permissive child care strategy and being less strict with heterosexual interactions, at times in reaction to their own strict upbringing a generation ago (Saraswathi and Pai 1997).

Peers

Peers as a segregated non-kin group become increasingly prominent as one moves up the scale of social class (Saraswathi 1999). The gendered and class based peer experience has been well documented (Garg and Parikh 1993; Saraswathi and Dutta 1988; Sharma 1996). With more adolescents spending time in school and school related activities, non-family peers assume a significant influence.

Regardless, time spent with peers is reported as emotionally satisfying (Larson et al. 2003; Saraswathi and Sridharan 1991). Family time however, still ranks higher. Traditionally, joint and extended families provided a network of cousins and peers within the family itself. Family size was large and often

[1] There was an interesting interaction between an American visiting professor and post graduate students in the class of the senior author in 1999. The visitor opened Pandora's Box by asking" How can you girls marry a stranger chosen by your parents?" The discussion turned to marriage as an institution and how cultural traditions are adaptive to the ecological demands. The visitor received a lesson in cross cultural psychology and left rather red faced when posed with the counter question" why are there so many divorces in your marriages if you choose to marry people you say you love so much?"

nieces and aunts, and nephews and uncles, and various cousins were all of similar age range. Moreover, people lived in well-knit communities in villages and even city neighborhoods and peers came from these. Now, with segregated age groups in school and prolonged schooling, peers have assumed a new significance.

Continued contact with peers is influenced by cultural practices. Religious functions, weddings and market fairs, besides community events provide a rich source of peer contact. Early age of marriage for a large number of young people significantly truncates peer contact (Chaudhary and Sharma 2007, 2012). Most peer groups are homogenous in gender. Interactions with members of the opposite sex, especially for post pubertal girls (or for that matter even boys, See Kumar 1986), is restricted and keenly monitored by the family and neighbors.

In rural settings, family responsibilities lead adolescent girls to spend nearly three hours a day with peers assembling together for agricultural work, fetching water and firewood, caring for siblings and household chores on the home stead. These are often free from adult supervision. Adolescent girls' time with peers in the urban slum setting is closely monitored as mothers' fear they will get into bad company. Boys here have more freedom (Saraswathi and Dutta 1988).

In contrast to the West, where peer engagement is considered a critical developmental task (Saraswathi and Ganapathy 2002), the family continues to assume a prime role in decision making be it regarding recreation, career choice or mate selection.

Civic and Political Participation

We were able to identify only one empirical study on this topic conducted since 2000. The study is cited at length here primarily because of its methodological rigor and fairly large sample coverage on a little researched topic in the Indian context. Besides, the findings substantiate the impressions generated by personal experience, newspaper and television reports on the subject.

Acharya et al. (2010) explore the extent of and the factors associated with youth participation in civil society, their adherence to pro social values, and their participation in political processes, using data from a representative survey of young people in the state of Maharashtra. The survey focused on married and unmarried young women aged 15–24, and married and unmarried men aged 15–29, from urban and rural areas. A total of 7570 subjects were interviewed.

Three key sets of outcome indicators were used: participation in civil society, adherence to pro social values, and political participation. The first was measured by whether youth had taken part in the following four community-led activities: cleanliness drive, health promotion activities, celebration of festivals and national days in the 12 months preceding the survey and whether youth reported membership in any organized group.

Adherence to pro-social values was gauged by young people's attitudes regarding interaction with individuals of different castes and religions. Political participation was measured by a categorical variable indicating whether the respondent voted in the last election for which s/he was eligible.

Results indicated that participation in civil society was limited, especially for young women. Sixty six percent of the young men (N=2336) reported participation in one or more civic activities, but mainly celebration of national days. For young women the (N=4488) the figure was 31 %. By and large, a high percent (75–90) youth reported adherence to pro-social values, including mixing with those from other castes and religions, eating with them, and talking to those who had married outside their caste. As for political participation, a large majority of young people reported disillusionment with commitment of political parties for social change. Despite that 66 % of young men and 57 % young women had cast their votes. Participation in all the indicators was associated with educational attainment (above 9th class), place of residence (urban youth were more pro-social and rural youth participated more in civic activities), and exposure to mass media.

Anecdotal observations by the senior author, based on teaching and counseling adolescents over four decades, substantiate the findings of Achaya et al's study. Adolescents do participate actively in school related social service activities as part of their curriculum requirement. Many volunteer to work with non-government organizations on cleaning and greening drives, running marathons for social causes, renewing dying lakes, canvas against use of plastic (such as in the NDTV initiative since 2009),and the like. In recent years, professionals in the Information & Technology sector have given a boost to voluntary welfare work as their involvement often draws young people to join their activities.

As for political participation, young people's presence in canvassing door to door encouraging people to cast their votes during elections has been noteworthy. These are often sponsored by corporate companies as part of their social welfare services. Despite this voting percentages of young people is not very high. There is cynicism about corrupt politicians in general. This was reflected in the enthusiastic participation by youth throughout the country in the anti-corruption movement initiated by Anna Hazare in mid-2011.

Media, Entertainment, Internet Usage

Most adolescents (88 % males and 72 % females) weekly or daily access at least one source of information media (UNICEF 2012). With easier access to media and multiple programs beaming diverse cultural content, adolescents are surrounded by an ever expanding macro system, growing up

exposed to diverse intra and inter country cultural content. According to a survey 112 million households in India own a television, and 61 % of those homes have cable or satellite service (National Readership Studies Council 2006). Over the years the number of channels available on TV has multiplied,[2] bringing to the adolescents family drama, films, dances, music, and talent shows besides news of the world and faith based programs. Access to TV is much higher and wider in urban locales. The National Censorship board certifies age restriction on viewership, the certification of a general U or A, however, it is rarely enforced by cinema houses, television channels or parents.[3]

A recent report by Vasan (2010) focusing on the media use patterns of youth in south Karnataka indicated that adolescents watched TV for over 2 h per day and between 10 and 20 films per month. As a result adolescents are influenced in their style of clothing (typically copying movie stars who in turn adopt and adapt Western styles), greater smoking and alcohol usage and increased sexual and hetero-sexual communication, more so in males. Although this is not new, movie songs are often used as pick-up lines or cat calls to tease young girls. The potential influence of this medium in identity formation is yet to be elucidated. (See Jensen 2003 for media based indirect influence on cultural identity formation of adolescents.)

Radio channels are also accessible; there is a national beam 'Akash Vani' and nearly 45 FM channels operate in 14 languages (www.asiawaves.net.in accessed on April 12, 2012). The FM channels are popular with youth and it is common sight to see youngsters with head phones, listening to music.

There are daily newspapers and popular magazines in 14 languages and some other city daily newspapers (www.indiapress.org accessed on April 12, 2012) which are delivered at door steps at a very reasonable price. With increasing access to audio-visual medium of communication, the extent to which adolescents read news papers remains uncertain.

Mobile phones are commonly used by urban adolescents while their rural counterparts have access to landlines out of 100 persons 29 persons have a family phone. Although only 4 % homes have internet connections (UNICEF 2012) and are broadband subscribers the actual number of users is large and access is greater through work place and internet cafes. About 14 % of youth use the internet as reported in the Economic Times (Dec 6th 2010). The usage is essentially for email and social networking and infrequently tapped as a source of information and learning. The use of 'Facebook' and other social networking sites such as 'Orkut' and 'Twitter' has exploded phenomenally, especially among seniors in high school and college students from upper middle and upper classes. Commercial sources report the potential of expansion of the use of the internet in transmission of knowledge and information.

Policies and Legislative Framework.[4]*

"Policies reflect the Government's intentions and willingness to undertake actions on social issues. Policies prioritize and address issues and provide a direction and framework to translate intentions into actions through programmes. Backed by political will, they ensure availability of resources for implementing programmes." (UNFPA 2006, p.29).

Adolescents have become a significant target group for the Indian government's policies and programs only since the nineties. The focus till then was on women and children alone. Constitutional provisions for children cover the age group till 14 and India's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1992 has included adolescents up to an age limit to 18 years.

International conferences and conventions have played a significant role in policy development and the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in which India is a signatory, has been a landmark in drawing attention to the adolescent population for fertility control and sustainable development. The National Youth Policy (2003) and the recent draft of NYP (2010) also gives clear recognition for focus on adolescence (Ministry of Youth and Sports Affairs 2011).

The last three, 5 Year Plans (9th, 10th and 11th,) have mapped out in detail the strategies for achieving the goals of development and empowerment of adolescents. The focus has been on improving adolescent education and health including reproductive health. The policies and programs are diverse including sports and recreation in addition to education, health, disability. They address issues of diversity, gender, community participation, poverty, rights, and the need for a multi-sectoral approach such that the inputs converge toward holistic development rather than get diluted through piecemeal interventions.

Acts related to Children and adolescents include:

- The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1927 that prescribes the minimum age for marriage as 21 for males and 18 for females.

[2] A large number of the entertainment programs beamed by the national channel 'Doordarshan' available in 14 regional languages are film based or family based soaps. There are several news channels as well. India is currently the largest producer of feature films (1274 in 2010) (www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/acompfilms.asp accessed on April 28th 2012).

[3] To quote an incidence: (Asked at the movie ticket counter if the film was certified A or U. The ticket dispenser questioned 'do you have television in your house? After an affirmation from me he said… this is an A film but it's not any worse than what you see on TV!) Movies are popular with adolescents and most entertainment programs on TV are film based.

[4] This section has been essentially summarized from UNFPA (2006) Adolescence in India: A profile. Chapter, 3.

- Young Persons Harmful Publications Act 1956 that prevents dissemination of certain publications that is harmful to young persons.
- The Children (Probation and Regulation) Act, 1986 prohibits pledging the labor of children.
- The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995.
- Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 that enables women to opt out of an unintended pregnancy.
- The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnosis Technique (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act and Rules, 1994.
- The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 and amended in 2006
- The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986.
- The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1956
- Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1988
- Criminal Laws to protect children from abuse of any kind by adults. The Indian Penal Code has provisions for abuse such as rape, molestation and prostitution involving children and young persons

Good laws/policies do not automatically translate into or ensure good implementation. Until the general public is made aware of their rights and until the various sectors coordinate their interventions the gaps between policies for adolescents and their successful implementation will remain. The role of the voluntary organizations in advocacy and in helping young people seek protection and assert their rights has been commendable.

Concluding Comments

Where do we go from here? India is poised at a critical juncture with an expanding cohort of adolescents. How we harness and shape this energy will determine what the country will achieve in the next decade. Looking at the increasing numbers, socio-economic indicators and the overall quality of life human development index, at the macro level one is tempted to join the doomsday astrologers who predict that there is little hope for coming generations. Yet, if one looks at micro level contexts, there are reasons for optimism and hope. The Sunday Times of India, (March 25th 2012) carried a write up on declining family size in 55 % of the urban families and 45 % of rural families to less than 4 per household based on the 2011 Census data. There is a steady increase in literacy and education level with improved gender parity of .93 even in secondary schools (NUEPA 2011) indicating changing attitudes towards education. Gender equality still remains elusive as does universal primary education. But we seem to be moving towards the goal. States like Kerala and Himachal Pradesh demonstrate that strong linkages between socio-economic factors and education alone do not account for high enrollment and retention. Backward states like Bihar have made a remarkable turnaround in girls' education proving that there is a need for a strong political will, which can propel social change and prepare young people for a better tomorrow.

Age of marriage remains a concern in many states. Nevertheless social awareness campaigns and improved access to education have made an impact on the age of marriage, fertility control and reproductive health. However, there is no escaping the fact that the steadily increasing cost of living has affected adversely the nutritional intake in all age groups (UNICEF 2012). With low birth weight, and poor nutrition stunting in adolescence is inevitable.

Perhaps the one single cultural factor that enables the adolescents to straddle the two worlds of tradition and modernity is family. Family ties are strong and parents in most cases, cutting across social classes, are willing to support and sacrifice in order to provide a better life for the next generation.

There is also increasing awareness on the part of the state in the value of investing in adolescents. More programs than ever before address the needs of adolescents in terms of nutrition, reproductive health, and life skills learning besides encouraging them to stay in school and prepare for better employment opportunities. All these efforts at some stage are bound to complement the struggle by parents in finding a life course for their adolescents that transcends their own. In this joint endeavor of the State and the family in improving the lives of adolescents and youth is the reason for hope.

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