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Youth and Politics in India-I

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1. Introduction

This paper spells out the ways in which, and the reasons why, young people in India today engage in politics. An answer to this research question is attempted by first locating the politics of youth within its economic and educational contexts so as to identify the factors that draw young people into politics. Explored in the process are the problems of boredom, exclusion, unemployment and the desire to escape, all of which are closely connected to the contexts in which young people operate. Finally discussed is the issue of alienation, a condition deriving from various identified issues, which causes youth to turn to politics in search of identity.

I. Defining 'Youth'

The Wall Street Journal has recognised the growing importance of the youth population in India, calling it “one of the youngest countries in the world, where youth accounted for 20% of the total population in 2011”.² Based on the “United Nations' definition of youth” as

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² Kundu, K.K., 2012, ‘Young, Jobless and Indian’, *The Wall Street Journal* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2012/11/23/young-jobless-and-indian/>.

“people from 15 to 24 years of age”,³ “the proportion of people in the age-group 15-24 years has increased over time”.⁴ It is, therefore, timely to study and understand the features and ramifications of their behaviour.

It is difficult to settle on a specific definition of youth, considering that “the operational definition and nuances of the term ‘youth’ often vary from country to country, depending on the specific socio-cultural, institutional, economic and political factors.”⁵ However, “given the rise in average life expectancy, longer education and the problem of lumpen youth (that is, remaining with the family with no apparent professional activity until an advanced age), people of up to 30 years old could be regarded as being youth.”⁶ This is especially applicable to India’s youth, as many of them live with their parents past their teenage years due to (alongside cultural factors) the problem of youth unemployment which in India “has consistently been above the national average”.⁷

Therefore, if we are to take this definition of youth, the implications of India’s youth politics become even greater as “nearly 40 per cent of the Indian population is aged 13 to 35 years”.⁸ The variations between states, in the population share of youth, suggest that the politics of young people unfolds in various ways across region. Based on the age range of 13 to 35 years, Delhi and Chandigarh are the most-highly youth-populated places in India, with youth making up 46.19 per cent and 47.19 per cent of the total population of these territories, respectively. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, on the other hand, are at the lowest end of the spectrum, with youth populations of 37 per cent and 38.34 per cent respectively.⁹ However, given that these are still sizeable youth populations, the politics of young people throughout India is potentially powerful and transformative.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Dev, S.M. and Venkatanarayana, M., 2011, *Youth Employment and Unemployment in India*, Goregaon: Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, 2.

⁵ Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, Government of India, 2011, *Report of Working Group on Adolescent and Youth Development*, Shastri Bhavan: Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 1.

⁶ Ghimire, K.B., 2002, ‘Social Movements and Marginalized Youth in Brazil, Egypt and Nepal’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, **30** (1), p.38.

⁷ Kundu, K.K., 2012, *op cit.*

⁸ Decent Work for Youth in India, 2012, *International Labour Organization* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/info/WCMS_175936/lang--en/index.htm>.

⁹ Total and Percentage of Youth Population (2001) – All India and State-wise, 2001, *Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.youthportal.gov.in/statistics/TotalandPercentageofYouthPopulation2001AllIndia-State-wise.htm>>.

Total and Percentage of Youth Population (2001) – All India and State-wise¹⁰

State/UT	Total Population	Youth Population (13-35 Years)	
		Number	Percentage
INDIA	1028610328	422337315	41.05
JAMMU & KASHMIR	10143700	4314348	42.53
HIMACHAL PRADESH	6077900	2574931	42.36
PUNJAB	24358999	10396346	42.67
CHANDIGARH	900635	425099	47.19
UTTARANCHAL	8489349	3466298	40.83
HARYANA	21144564	8961393	42.38
DELHI	13850507	6398304	46.19
RAJASTHAN	56507188	22206872	39.29
UTTAR PRADESH	166197921	63725261	38.34
BIHAR	82998509	30710453	37.00
SIKKIM	540851	244467	45.20
ARUNACHAL PRADESH	1097968	450543	41.03
NAGALAND	1990036	909099	45.68
MANIPUR	2166788	961671	44.38
MIZORAM	888573	390915	43.99
TRIPURA	3199203	1394159	43.57
MEGHALAYA	2318822	948404	40.90
ASSAM	26655528	11349077	42.57
WEST BENGAL	80176197	34016100	42.42
JHARKHAND	26945829	10525981	39.06
ORISSA	36804660	15309375	41.59
CHHATTISGARH	20833803	8255402	39.62
MADHYA PRADESH	60348023	24197997	40.09
GUJARAT	50671017	21754353	42.93
DAMAN & DIU	158204	85366	53.95
DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI	220490	103971	47.15
MAHARASHTRA	96878627	41347821	42.68

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

ANDHRA PRADESH	76210007	32756234	42.98
KARNATAKA	52850562	22915253	43.35
GOA	1347668	612451	45.44
LAKSHADWEEP	60650	25628	42.25
KERALA	31841374	13207561	41.47
TAMIL NADU	62405679	26794108	42.93
PONDICHERRY	974345	434474	44.59
ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS	356152	167600	47.05

The employment patterns among youths are also particularly telling about their attraction towards politics. In 2007-2008, only 15.5 per cent of India's youth (aged 15 to 24) were employed in regular salaried work, whereas 49.8 per cent and 34.7 per cent were self-employed and casual labourers, respectively.¹¹ Not only are the majority of youth excluded from regular salaried work, but they are also "more likely than adults"¹² to be casual workers. The socioeconomic vulnerability of youth and its implications for the viability and benefits of youth politics, therefore, become apparent when considering that "casual work is the least secure and lowest-paying type of work in the Indian labor market."¹³

II. The Youth as a 'New' Class of Political Actors

Literature has described youth as an important part of Indian society in relation to the surge of political participation amongst young people in the country. More interestingly, the literature has consistently depicted these youthful populations as 'new' in one form or another. This has been done, not only to depict the increasing involvement of Indian youths in politics as a relatively new phenomenon, but also to convey the ways in which new cultures, both political and social, have emerged out of the spaces in which youth and politics intertwine. This includes the "emerging culture of political entrepreneurialism",¹⁴ evident in the practices of extortion by youths in Uttar Pradesh, Meghalaya and Kolkata.

Whether it concerns *Shiv Sena* activists in Maharashtra, *Naxalites* in Bihar and Jharkhand, jute workers in Kolkata, students in Meghalaya, young *Dalit* men in Uttar Pradesh, or even IT (information technology) professionals in Bangalore, the literature has consistently portrayed

¹¹ Dev, S.M. and Venkatanarayana, M., 2011, *op cit.*, p.15.

¹² Biavaschi, C., Eichhorst, W., Giulietti, C., Kendzia, M.J., Muravyev, A., Pieters, J., Rodriguez-Planas, N., Schmidl, R. and Zimmermann, K.F., 2013, *Youth Unemployment and Vocational Training* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank), pp.67-68.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.68.

¹⁴ Jeffrey, C., 2010, *Timepass: Youth, Class and the Politics of Waiting in India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), p.161.

the youth of the past few decades as ‘new’ in terms of their levels of political engagement as well as their political behaviour.

The studies by Pai (2000, 2002) on four villages in western Uttar Pradesh explored the emergence of a new class of educated *Chamar* men who optimistically link their education with the BSP (Bahujan Samajwadi Party) and ideas of *Dalit* mobility. The studies by Ciotti (2002) on eastern Uttar Pradesh similarly depict the impact of low-caste politics on the formation of ideas about low-caste identity and mobility. It documents “educated young Chamars who have successfully obtained government employment and identify closely with the BSP’s idealised model of social mobility.”¹⁵ Even in the case of unemployment, some young men have responded by “cultivating an image of themselves as local political operators: urbane, knowledgeable and part of a wider low-caste movement”.¹⁶ Anirudh Krishna’s (2002) study of educated unemployed people in rural western India in the 1990s argues that “educated ‘new politicians’, some Dalit and some from middle-caste backgrounds, challenged caste prejudices in rural parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan”.¹⁷

There are no published sources that have fully captured the meanings and implications of the protests, by mostly middle class college students in Delhi and other parts of India, in the past two years. However, many newspapers reporting worldwide on India’s recent cases of corruption and rape have hinted at the significance of these protestors. They have done so by noting their increased presence in the public and political sphere. However, in spite of these attempts by youths to resist and ultimately transform the social ills of caste, corruption and sexual discrimination through politics, there is much literature to suggest that the consequences of youth politics, especially that of unemployed youth, are less positive for social progress (due to the reinforcement of caste), cohesion (due to the divisions along identity lines) and security (due to the possibilities of violence).

2. The Idea of “Escape”

I. Politics as an Escape from Education

The common experience of boredom within the education system in India helps to explain the dynamics of youth politics. Young men are often expected “to take up streams which have high earning potentials and are so-called more ‘masculine’ in nature”.¹⁸ Due to their prestige and potential earning capacity, such streams increase the eligibility of young men, thereby

¹⁵ Jeffrey, C., Jeffery, P. and Jeffery, R., 2005, ‘When Schooling Fails: Young Men, Education and Low-caste Politics in Rural North India’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, **39** (1), p.11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Jeffrey, C. and Young, S., 2012, ‘Waiting for Change: Youth, Caste and Politics in India’, *Economy and Society*, **41** (4), p.642.

¹⁸ Goswami, P. and Suvarna, S., 2007, ‘Who are the Victims of Gender Discrimination in the Choice of Stream of Education: Boys or Girls?’, A Study on Undergraduate Bengali Students of West Bengal, India. *Social Science Research Network* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://ssrn.com/abstract=985272>>.

providing their families with greater bargaining power within the process of arranging marriage and determining dowry. As a result, many men are encouraged and in some cases even forced by their families to pursue “prestigious professional programs such as engineering, medicine, or business”.¹⁹ With this pressure to conform academically, many young men in universities end up studying subjects they have little interest in, leading to an unsatisfactory and uninteresting academic experience that causes them to view politics as a more exciting alternative and a way to pass the time.

The poor quality of teaching by faculty members in Indian universities is another contributing factor to the problem of boredom. Mohan (1987) writes that the “good ones leave for another new institute or for greener pastures abroad. Since the average age of teachers in India is low, universities are then doomed for decades”.²⁰ With students “adrift and bored by their uninspired professors, courses and miserable surroundings”,²¹ politics serves not only to overcome boredom but also provides an ‘escape’ from college life. This is evident in the escapades of many of the student politicians and political fixers interviewed in Craig Jeffrey’s book, *Timepass* (2010), who admit to poor attendance records, frequently skipping lectures to conduct their political activities.

II. Politics as an Escape from Manual Labour

In addition to creating boredom, from which young men seek to escape through entering politics, the experience of education in India is identified in some of the literature as a fundamental part of the problem of unemployment (which is also cited as a primary cause of youth politics). For example, Shaljan (2002) argues that “the disdain for manual labour inculcated among the pupils at the schools and colleges has resulted in the high incidence of unemployment among the educated youth”.²²

Education, therefore, not only contributes directly (through boredom) but also indirectly to the appeal of politics. Attitudes and social capital accumulated through education lead young people to perceive politics as more socially acceptable than manual labour. Political participation enables them to preserve their status, as many young men who are unable to access employment to white-collar work choose to enter politics instead of labour-intensive work.

¹⁹ Kurien, P., 2003, ‘Gendered Identity: Creating a Hindu Indian Identity in the United States’, in Hondagneu-Sotelo, P., *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), p.158.

²⁰ Mohan, D., 1987, ‘Science and Technology Policy in India: Implications for Quality Education’, in Ghosh, R. and Zachariah, M., *Education and the Process of Change* (New Delhi: Sage Publications), pp.142.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp.149.

²² Shaljan, A.M., 2002, ‘Other Side of Unemployment in Kerala’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, **37** (46), pp.4651.

Moreover, Shaljan's argument strengthens the idea mentioned previously of politics as an escape. Whilst it has been argued previously that the literature hints at how politics, in part because of its active and exciting nature, is seen to represent an escape from the boredom of college life, what can be drawn from the work of Shaljan and others is that politics provides another escape route. It also allows educated men to escape a hard, physically draining, low-paying, and, in their eyes, socially demeaning life in manual labour. Politics is not only far less physically intensive and repetitive than manual labour, but also able to "mask de facto downward mobility".²³

II. Politics as an Escape from Unattractive Work/Life Options

The increasing relevance of youth is evident in Chitralkha's (2010) research on *Naxalites* in Jharkhand and Bihar, as it seeks to uncover the reasons behind the increasing membership of youths in these parties. It makes a connection between the "rapidly changing" profile of *Naxalite* parties and the "influx of young people from landed, relatively well-to-do and even upper caste families into these parties".²⁴

The research findings from Chitralkha's "sample of forty *Naxalite* armed cadre",²⁵ from across Jharkhand and Bihar, suggest the possibility that the *Naxalite* lifestyle may be more powerful than ideology in drawing young people to join such parties. Where ideology is concerned, Chitralkha states that "only eight (a fifth of the sample) had in fact killed for it, or because of it".²⁶ This may be because of the way in which the prospects of danger, unpredictability and violence, commonly associated with *Naxal* parties, are seen by youths as solutions to their problems of unemployment and restlessness and their desires to experience excitement and "make something"²⁷ out of their lives.

It is, therefore, possible that, rather than joining *Naxal* parties because of convictions regarding political ideologies or as a way to react against the injustices of the state, the incentives for young people to join such parties are driven more by their desire to escape the problems and circumstances of young adulthood and enjoy aspects of the perceived *Naxalite* lifestyle.

²³ Li, T.M., 2012, 'Waiting to Enter, or Locked Out? Educated Unemployed Youth in Craig Jeffrey's Timepass', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, **2** (1), p. 105.

²⁴ Chitralkha., 2010, 'Committed, Opportunists and Drifters: Revisiting the *Naxalite* Narrative in Jharkhand and Bihar', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, **44** (3), p.315.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.299.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.302.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.319.

III. Politics as an Escape from Boredom

In addition to the repetitive routines of labour and schooling in India, common experiences of boredom outside the space of education contribute to the increasing attraction of politics amongst young men. Newspaper reports have commented on the changing nature of India's movie theatre industry, with multiplexes that cater to the middle class replacing single screen cinemas as "the profile of filmgoers changed to shop-eat-catch-a-flick at multiplexes".²⁸

These multiplexes often charge "exorbitant ticket prices",²⁹ thereby excluding much of the working class who are frequent cinema goers. Such an analysis may be useful in explaining the growing problem of boredom in India and why working class men increasingly use strategies to cope with it.

With "diminishing access to theatre, art, music and sport" in Indian cities, coupled with the fact that "movie theatre prices exclude large parts of the youth population",³⁰ young men have gravitated towards politics to fulfil their recreational needs. In the place of cinema theatres and concert halls, "the street becomes the stage for acting out adulthood".³¹ The politics of youth, which is highly active both in orientation and in practice, requires the open spaces of streets and college campuses to play host to restless demonstrations and strikes.

IV. Exclusion, Boredom and Escape as Causes of Youth Politics

Whilst there is no explicit connection made in the literature between the lack of recreational facilities in cities and the politics of youth (though the creation of a violent and abusive youth culture is noted), this may very well prove useful in helping to understand the dynamics of youth politics. This is because parallels can be drawn between the narrowing access to entertainment and factors commonly influencing youth politics, such as unemployment.

Parallels include the similarity between the feeling of boredom and the experience of "living in limbo"³² which Craig Jeffrey commonly refers to when writing about young men being stuck in a phase of their life where they are expected to swiftly transition from education to employment. Another similarity is the feeling of exclusion that occurs as a result of being unable to access both formal employment and forms of entertainment that are not self-created (like youth politics) but formalised and institutionalised.

²⁸ Govindarajan, N., 2012, 'Curtains Come Down on Another Single Screen', *The Times of India* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-27/bangalore/36021078_1_single-screens-pallavi-multiplexes>.

²⁹ Rizvi, A., 2013, 'Objects on Screen Only Reflect a Partial Picture', *Tehelka* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://tehelka.com/objects-on-screen-only-reflect-a-partial-picture/>>.

³⁰ Swami, P., 2013, 'The Rapist in the Mirror', *The Hindu* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-rapist-in-the-mirror/article4295240.ece?homepage=true>>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Jeffrey, C. and Young, S., 2012, *op cit.*, p.641.

2. Unemployment

The issue of employment forms a substantial part of the youth politics equation. It is by no means exclusive from the other causes of youth politics, considering that unemployment is sometimes a choice made by educated young men who desire to escape a life of manual labour. However, the issue will be dealt with separately whilst acknowledging its linkages with other causes for the purposes of uncovering its complexities in depth.

I. The Reality of Educated Unemployment

The literature reveals that the problem of educated unemployment is not only intense but also widespread across India. If we are to apply the theoretical link between unemployment and youth politics (which will be discussed later in the section on ‘alienation’), it would suggest that the former plays a large and highly pervasive role in pushing young people towards politics.

In the case of Kerala, the mismatch between the “excess supply of educated” youths and “the small size and low growth of the organized sector”³³ has resulted in large numbers of educated unemployed youths in the state. In Bangalore, IT institutes and private industrial institutes have “led to an oversupply in technically trained workers and an inflation in entry level requirements for basic jobs”.³⁴ Since liberalisation, Andhra Pradesh’s local labour market has witnessed “decreasing opportunities for recruitment into the public sector and few prospects of anything other than insecure, flexible, temporary and poorly remunerated work”.³⁵

These examples alongside similar findings on other states in India suggest that the problem of educated unemployment is a national rather than a regional one. It, therefore, explains patterns of youth politics across the country.

II. The Political Behaviour of Unemployed Youth

Patterns of unemployment are also discussed in the literature dealing with a topic not wholly dissimilar to youth politics – youth gangs. Given the similarities between the employment prospects of young men involved in politics and gangs, this would suggest that unemployment has a part to play in leading young men to participate in activities that are informal, public, group-based and potentially violent. This highlights the usefulness of viewing gangs and youth politics as similar patterns of behaviour. Whilst the literature on

³³ Prakash, B.A., 2002, ‘Urban Unemployment in Kerala: The Case of Kochi City’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, **37** (39), p.4073.

³⁴ Nisbett, N., 2009, *Growing Up in the Knowledge Society: Living the IT Dream in Bangalore* (New Delhi: Routledge), p.53.

³⁵ Cross, J., 2009, ‘From Dreams to Discontent: Educated Young Men and the Politics of Work at a Special Economic Zone in Andhra Pradesh’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, **43** (3), p.358.

youth politics clearly identifies the extent to which unemployment is a fundamental part of the process, the “absence of career routes and job opportunities seem largely to account for the development of youth gangs”.³⁶

Sirnate’s (2009) study, on the politics of uranium mining in Meghalaya, shows how the consequences of unemployment and the characteristics of youth play into young people’s political behaviour, determining the spaces they inhabit within the wider political arena. She conveys how students “from both rural and urban areas”,³⁷ who join the Khasi Students Union (KSU), are similar to most youths in India who find themselves inadvertently drawn to politics, in that they do so as a response to their economic insecurity. This trend can be traced historically to 1978 when the KSU was first “started by students who faced high levels of economic uncertainty”.³⁸

The KSU, which over the last three decades “has turned into the self-appointed custodian of Khasi culture and identity”,³⁹ forms the subject of much discussion in the study. KSU members approach the public space in Meghalaya in a way that indicates a desire to establish a sense of importance, agency, power and respect from other citizens of the state. Extortion is a common method to achieve such aims as “businessmen in Shillong’s thriving business district, Police Bazaar, talked of “polite extortion” and “voluntary contributions”, i e, KSU members asking for a full tank of gas, taking small favours and on some occasions even borrowing private vehicles for short periods of time.”⁴⁰ These acts bear links to the acts of intimidation and extortion practised by some of the young working class men featured in Gooptu’s (2007) study on declining jute industrial areas in Kolkata.

In illustrating the link between underemployment and politics, Gooptu explores how working class men in Kolkata have responded to the casualisation and irregularity of their employment in contradictory ways, “ranging from petty crime and extortion to social service”.⁴¹ Despite being decidedly different in nature, these can all be categorised as innately political forms of behaviour. The concern of these activities is using power as a vehicle for achieving personal aspirations and erasing emotional insecurities. Gooptu highlights the way in which they are both political as she terms extortion as “criminalized politics” and social service as a form of “responsible and accountable politics”, with both being driven by the same intention – to “search for identity and agency in the context of a loss of sense of self”.⁴²

³⁶ Spergel, I.A., 1995, *The Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press), p.4.

³⁷ Sirnate, V., 2009, ‘Students Versus the State: The Politics of Uranium Mining in Meghalaya’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, **44** (47), p.19.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p.21.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.21.

⁴¹ Gooptu, N., 2007, ‘Economic Liberalisation, Work and Democracy: Industrial Decline and Urban Politics in Kolkata’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, **42** (21), p.1930.

⁴² *Ibid*.

The common motivation behind these activities is clear from how they both constitute “expressions of power in the locality”.⁴³ As a result, practising petty crime and intimidation, not for material gain primarily, but as an end itself, represents an “aspiration for recognition of adult malehood and a sense of exercising local influence”.⁴⁴ Similarly, those involved in community activities try to “define a leadership role and autonomous agency for themselves in the locality and in the community.”⁴⁵ The idea that both intimidation and social service are intrinsically political activities can also be linked to the history of Indian politics which has shown that both activities provide a viable route to entering politics – convicted criminals stand just as strong a chance as ‘good boy’ leaders in becoming politicians.

4. Alienation

I. Alienation as a Consequence of Exclusion from Employment and Entertainment

What often results from unemployment and in turn precipitates the desire to establish or re-establish a sense of masculinity through politics are feelings of alienation. Unemployed young men experience these emotions due to the perception of employment as crucial to male identity. Under the obligation system, which typifies child-parent relationships in India, parents wait for returns on their investments in their children. As a result, “obtaining employment is essential for a son to maintain himself and meet the consensual and normative demands of both the family and society.”⁴⁶

Young men without employment experience a sense of confusion. The ramifications of one’s inability to perform his expected social role are evident from how unemployment imbues young men with a “sense of self-defeat and frustration”.⁴⁷ As this leads to “deterioration in interpersonal relationships”, what in turn develops are “feelings of loneliness” and “isolation”.⁴⁸

This description of the emotional trajectory of unemployed men helps in explaining much of the literature which consistently portrays social alienation both as a condition that afflicts many unemployed youths in India and as a driving force in the process of searching for masculinity through politics.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.1929.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.1930.

⁴⁶ Singh, L.B., 1996, ‘Alienation: A Symptomatic Reaction of Education Unemployed Youth in India’, *International Journal of Psychology*, **31** (2), p.106.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.107.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

II. Depictions of ‘Alienation’ in Literature on Youth Gangs

In addition to this idea of alienation as one that covers, or rather stems from, a sense of identity dislocation, its other connotations of loneliness and isolation bear resemblances to the literature on youth gangs.

In Pitts’ (2008) East London study of youth gangs, some joined these groups “because gang members were friends they had grown up with. A lot of these young people were not that interested in being ‘gangsters’, they wanted to play football, make music, dance, or just ‘have a laugh’.”⁴⁹ The tendency of youths to gravitate towards gangs in search of fun can also be seen in India. In the case of Hyderabad, the idea of fun for many young people “often borders on criminal behaviour” which in turn leads them to participate in gang activities such as street fights and damaging public property in order “to satiate their lust for thrills”.⁵⁰

The intentions to socialise and seek friendship, which seem to drive many young men to integrate within gang structures, arguably carry with them a fear of loneliness and a desire to avoid isolation. Such fears are similarly contained within the alienation felt by unemployed men in India who hope to improve their circumstances through politics. Therefore, the literature on gangs has much to offer in relation to understanding the politics of Indian youth.

For example, to take this idea of friendship, which appears in the literature on gangs, and extend it to the situation of youth politics in India, is a particularly useful way of highlighting both the nature of and the driving forces behind youth politics. Concentrating on the idea of friendship points us towards the fact that the politics of young people in India is by no means conducted in isolation. Instead, it involves groups of men from similar circumstances partaking in various activities that are particularly conducive to social interaction and exchange. It, therefore, provides a platform for men (who are likely to identify with each other) to perform alongside each other in a way that allows them to connect and consequently overcome feelings of alienation they may have prior to their political engagement.

5. Conclusion

The literature reveals that social isolation and alienation, which commonly arise from unemployment (or in the case of the men in Gooptu’s study, unstable and informal employment), are deeply responsible for the political engagement of young people, although such engagement manifests itself in a myriad of ways. Problems of unemployment and alienation do not necessarily determine the political direction or path of young people, as it

⁴⁹ Pitts, J., 2008, ‘Describing and Defining Youth Gangs’, *Community Safety Journal*, 7 (1), p.30.

⁵⁰ Henry, N., 2010, ‘Youth Gangs on the Prowl’, *The Times of India* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-11-08/hyderabad/28229957_1_youth-gangs-spray-paint-street-rage>.

may range from criminal behaviour to social service. However, they certainly cause men to respond in a way that is distinctly political, whichever way that may be.

For some young men, the excitement and action of politics represent an escape from a life in manual labour or from boredom within the college or outside. For other men, politics is sometimes the only path left when faced with exclusion from employment and entertainment. Whilst boredom is the driving factor in the case of men who desire to escape through politics, for those excluded, alienation contributes heavily to the ‘push’ towards politics. Boredom also certainly features in the lives of unemployed youths who are constantly in a state of waiting. Unemployment and underemployment, in particular, are characteristics distinct to youth politics as evident from the politics of young working-class men in Kolkata’s jute industry, students in Meghalaya and young *Shiv Sena* activists in Maharashtra, all of whom come from backgrounds of economic insecurity.

As a consequence of unemployment and underemployment, alienation influences the likelihood of youth political participation in several ways. Identity dislocation and isolation both produce the desire for a sense of relating and belonging – this is satisfied by the many informal political movements and groups that emphasise the importance of identity. In mobilising along religious, caste, class or ethnic lines outside formal politics, youths seek and discover a common identity in relation to other participants and a heightened sense of physical interaction.

Even in the realm of party politics where youths typically play a less active role in the shaping of politics, the emphasis on identity nevertheless pervades. This conveys the link between youth and identity which even political parties have become attuned to. The *Shiv Sena* in the 1990s, for example, very deliberately deployed multiple forms of identity such as caste, class, religion and ethnicity simultaneously in its strategy to mobilise youth. This is evident from how “the typical activist in the Sena organization, then, was young, in his late twenties to early thirties; was at least a matriculate; was Maharastrian, native to Bombay; and came from a middle or lower-middle occupational and class status.”⁵¹

The casualisation of the labour market has led to common experiences of anxiety and instability as well as uncertainty over identity. For those yet to enter or already excluded from the workforce, emerging practices of timepass have come to represent “expressions of a soul-destroying boredom now afflicting millions of educated, unemployed young men in India today”.⁵² Both patterns, in conjunction with narrowing access to entertainment, disdainful attitudes towards manual labour and the poor state of education, have provided the conditions for youth politics to spread beyond the confines of its romanticised past. Historically associated with the “upper-caste male – either a decadent young man who gets politicized” or

⁵¹ Katzenstein, M.F., 1977, ‘Mobilization of Indian Youth in the Shiv Sena’, *Pacific Affairs*, **50** (2), p.234.

⁵² Fuller, C., 2011, ‘Timepass and Boredom in Modern India’, *Anthropology of this Century* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://aotcpres.com/articles/timepass-boredom/>>.

“an already politicized upper-caste youth showing his elders the error of their feudal ways”,⁵³ youth politics now occupies the imagination of an entire generation of youths trying to navigate the fast-changing landscape of neo-liberal India.

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