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# Millennials Don't Have a Taste for Politics

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# MILLENNIALS DON'T HAVE A TASTE FOR POLITICS

Social media and shared consumption tastes among the youth do not offer reliable clues to their political attitudes





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omantic images of youth as a time of wanton freedom and exuberant spirits surround us. Youthfulness, it would appear. is an experience present every

where at all times. In practice, however, this view will seem incorrect. Consider the Indian experience. For centuries, mar riage at an early age and survival in a subsistence economy meant that the brahma charya—the bachelor student phase of life in scriptural texts, a rough equivalent for the age now viewed as youth—did not

exist for most people in India. The spread of formal schooling and the arrival of higher education alongside the creation of an industrial economy, and the emergence of legal regulation of the age of marriage fundamentally transformed the experience of age and brought new demo-graphic categories like teenage, youth, middle-class and, more recently, the millennials into public discussion. The enmeshment of "age" with social and political processes is often glossed over in public commentaries

A recent report in The Indian Express erved that 81 million young Indians will vote for the first time in the 2019 general elections, and could decisively influence electoral outcomes in 282 parliamentary constituencies. The report also said there will be an estimated average of 14.9 million first-time eligible voters in each Lok Sabha constituency and this figure is larger than the winning margin in 297 seats in 2014. Reports like these tacitly suggest that the first-time voters, unlike the older ones, are impressionable and lacking in evolved politi-Blind focus on political

cal attitudes. Are the millennials a political constituency? Do they share a distinct set of political views from having lived through a time of fast socio-economic trans-formations? Indeed, these questions are natural corollary of the

results of the YouGov-Mint Millennial Survey of over 5,000 respondents spread across 180 cities published in the pages of this newspaper. The survey showed that a large proportion of millennials (someone born between 1981 and 1996 and is aged 22 to 37 years in 2018, according to Pew Research Center) prefer to access news on digital platforms, spend their leisure time on social media and shop online.

#### STARK REALITY OF POLITICAL

peculations about the political inclina-Stions of the millennials will need to confront the stark, sobering fact of high political indifference among the Indian youth. According to a 2016 report Anxie ties and aspirations of India's youth Changing patterns by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Konrad  $A denauer Stiftung \, (KAS), which surveyed \\ over 6,000 \, respondents \, aged \, between \, 15$ and 34 years in 19 states, 46% of Indian youth have "no interest at all" in politics

and 18% only have "little interest".

The cross-cutting influences of gender class, caste, religion and region, which powerfully shape social experiences in India, also demand a scepticism towards the "millennial" as a distinct category of the electorate.

The influence of gender on youth attitudes is strong and clear. Fewer women, for instance, are interested in politics than men. In a graphic illustration of the power of patriarchy, large numbers of male and female youth concur that wives should remain obedient to their husbands and not work outside the house

 $Class\, and\, caste\, in equalities\, have\, major$ onsequences for the social experience of youth. For instance, economic compul sions push the lower class youth to find work and take on adult responsibilities earlier in their lives than the middle and upper class youth. With a high likelihood of pursuing higher education, the latter defer decisions on employment and marriage and experience a longer period of

Illustrating the strong correlation between class and caste hierarchies, the

preferences of youth is

driven by dependence

of political parties on

market and election

CSDS-KAS survey reports that over twofifths of upper caste youth identified themselves as students whereas only about onefourth of scheduled caste youth and a mere one sixth of tribals did so.

Making available dif

survey agencies ferent kinds of livelihood challenges, the class and caste locations of the millennials make them respond differently towards socio

Contrary to popular impression, there fore, a large proportion of Indian youth support either caste-based and/or class based reservation in government jobs and educational institutions. Only 17% of the respondents opposed any form of reserva





While ZNMD celebrates a hip urban youth culture, Masaan portrays entanglements of caste, class and gender

## RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND

The millennials among religious and ethnic minorities and lower castes experience higher job insecurity and workplace discrimination. While a l0th of the upper caste youth declared that they were either professionals or government employees, only 5% of the backward caste scheduled caste and Muslim youth shared that self-description. Some 9% of the scheduled caste youth are doing low paying unskilled work whereas the corre sponding detail for the Muslim and backward caste youth is 5%. Further, more than half of the tribal youth pursue agriculture and allied activities.

Needless to add, the complexity of social differences eludes the binary of majority and minority communities. As per the CSDS-KAS survey. Muslim vouth were largely in favour of abolishing death penalty while Christian and Sikh youth were least supportive. More than twothirds of Muslim youth consider beef consumption a matter of personal choice, but only a third of the Hindu and Sikh youth shared that view. Among the Hindus, the vegetarians disapprove of beef consump

tion more than the non-vegetarians. A close affinity prevails between cultural attitudes to beef eating and political affiliation. Almost 90% of the Hindu youth supporters of Left parties did not disapprove of eating beef. Disapproval of beef consumption was the highest among the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporters and found moderate support among the youth supporters of regional partie

There are other layers in the social picture. The idea of inter-caste marriage according to the CSDS-KAS survey, found greater acceptance among the married respondents, even as the bulk of them had married within their own caste. Further, about a half of the unmarried youth preferred an arranged marriage and only around a tenth among them wish for "a love marriage". And, in a clear illustration of the economic distress of rural India, the



#### WHAT

According to some estimates nearly 81 million young Indians will vote for the first time in the 2019 general elections, and could play a key role in the formation of the next government.

## **BUT**

Are millennials really a political constituency? Do they share a distinct set of political views from having lived through a time of fast socio-economic transformations?

## WHY

The influences of gender, class, caste, religion and region, which shape social experiences in India the 'millennial' as a distinct category of the electorate.

number of unmarried youth in rural areas  $is \, rising \, sharply \, when \, compared \, with \, that \,$ 

#### STRONG APPEAL OF REGIONAL **IDENTITIES**

Regional cultures offer a space of belonging in the lives of youth. While many millennials strongly identify as Indians, regional identities also have a strong appeal to them. A close embrace of regional identities—the Malayalees, the Assamese and the Gujaratis, among others—is likely to matter in the scheme of their political priorities. The Kannadiga millennial might not have taken to the streets over the use of Hindi language in metro stations in Bengaluru last year. Yet she vigorously supports the Kannada cause on social media platforms, assists in the development of free software to help non-Kannadigas learn Kannada and helps build internet content in Kannada.

It appears that the millennials share more with the older generations inside their states than with their peers elsewhere in India. For instance, in states where the older voters prefer regional parties, the youth too supported these parties.

Indeed, the support for regional parties  $among the youth \, matches \, that \, for \, the \, BJP$ and far exceeded that for the Congress

Inside the states, political culture shifts between urban and rural areas. In rural India, where ties of clan and caste tend to be strong, familial inheritance of political power is more likely to seem acceptable than in urban India. Whereas the country side demands adequate farm prices and affordable education and healthcare, urban India tends to obsess more over the quality of physical infrastructure. A healthy diet, clean air and respect for animal rights, which are among the value shaping the moral imagination of the urban middle-class youth, hardly resonate as political issues in rural India.

The urban and rural locations of the millennials, therefore, translate into a marked difference in their political values The urban-rural divide parallels the lin-

guistic divide between English and Indian languages. The recent remarks of the head of the Karnataka BJP social media unit Balaji Srinivas, disclose an awareness of this detail: "We have concentrated on generating content in Kannada this time around-95% of our content will be in Kannada. The remaining 5% will be in English to cater to the urban audience

The deep self identification of the Janata Dal (Secular) as a farmers' party with a rural base has meant a near indifference  $towards\, cultivating\, support\, among\, urban$ voters. Nearly all of its spokespersons transact only in Kannada and do not dis play urban savviness. Since rural commu nitarian culture is found among the migrant as well as the non-migrant populations in cities, "the rural" and "the urban" are better seen as forms of social dwelling rather than spatial categories. Immense social

The specificities of regional socio-economic structures make for a varied millennial experience. Higher lev els of university education and greater expo sure to social diversity and new economic opportunities among

the millennials in the cities of South India sets them apart from their counterparts in some of the northern states. The all-En glish interaction with Congress president Rahul Gandhi seen in Stella Maris College in Chennai is hard to imagine in an under graduate girls college in Uttar Pradesh

The regional variations in social media ecologies reflect the above diversity. The aggressiveness with which the BJP sup-

porters intervene in Karnataka's social media, for instance, contrasts starkly with their diffidence in social media groups in Nagaland. Likewise, the Congress's affir mation of Christian values on social media platforms in Nagaland stands in sharp contrast with its official secular self-image

#### THE ROLE OF DIGITAL AND CIAL MEDIA

In both Bengaluru and Dimapur, most youth access information on smartphones from the similar websites and aspire to a similar lifestyle, but their political preferences can diverge sharply. Social media dependence and shared consumption tastes among the youth in themselves do not offer reliable clues to their political attitudes. Memes, news clips, home videos, fake news and an assortment of other materials in digital space have shaken up the horizons of millions of Indians. The social media technologies alongside greater domestic and international travel and new cultures of consumption and entertainment have indeed influenced the cultural tastes and political values of the millennials.

The influence though unfolds against immense social heterogeneity across the country which precludes the emergence of millennials as a singular political community. The appeal of the category of "millennial" in election discussions then probably owes to the growing dependence of political parties on market and election survey agencies for gauging the mood of voters.

Hindi films like Dil Chahta Hai (2001) and Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara (2011), which celebrate a consumption-driven hip urban youth culture detached from

community life, were blockbuster hits in big cities but failed to click in small towns. A sense for the ethos animating the lives of small town youth can be found in films like Masaan (2015) and Muk kabaaz (2018), where protagonists find them elves in painful entan glements of caste, class

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The millennials in contemporary India inhabit very differing cultural predicaments. Any claims about them being a dis tinct political community therefore ought to seem shaky.

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