

Changes in Gender Relations Among Urban Indian Youth Around 2010: A Comparative Study with Japanese Youth Culture in the 1990s

2010年代におけるインド都市部の若者のジェンダー関係の変化：
1990年代日本の若者文化との比較

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Abstract: This paper investigates social change among Indian youth in Delhi around 2010. In India, society used to expect young people to marry at very young ages through the institutionalised matrimonial system. Nowadays, although arranged marriages are still prevalent, more and more young people are delaying getting married because of the popularity of higher education and the increasing number of office jobs in big cities. Young people have started living outside of their parents' homes and are financially independent. Their freedom and higher incomes enable them to pursue a certain consumerist lifestyle. The growing number of office jobs has also resulted in an increase in young female workers, which also contributes to their financial independence. The paper explores changes in gender relations in India. In addition, the paper looks at the development of youth culture in Japan in the 1990s as a reference for how a once male-dominated society has changed.

Keywords: India, youth culture, Japan, gender

要旨: 本稿は2010年代におけるデリーのインドの若者の社会的変化について論ずる。インド社会ではかつて若者は早い段階で結婚することを期待されていたが、2010年代前後から経済発展と消費主義の発展にともない都市部の中流層の若者間で変化が生じ始めた。また、ITやコールセンターで働く若い女性も多くなり、経済的に自立した独身時代という時間を持つ層も増えてきた。同じように日本においても1980年代からの女性の労働形態の変化に伴い若者を中心にジェンダー関係の変化も見られるようになった。本稿は日本の90年代の若者文化の変化を参考にしながら、インドの若者における男女間の関係の変化について述べる。

キーワード: インド、若者文化、日本、ジェンダー

Introduction

The Indian economy has been booming in recent decades, and the country has attracted international attention. India's economic growth has precipitated socio-cultural changes in many areas of life. Among young people, the influence of economic change has spread along with the emergence of youth culture, whose development in turn affects gender

relations. The growth of consumerism has been quite rapid, especially in mega-cities like Mumbai and Delhi.

This paper explores how the economic boom affected young people in Delhi around 2010, especially in terms of changes in gender relations. I chose this period due to the rapid changes in consumerism and youth culture that were observed around that time. Many new shopping malls were constructed in the Delhi metropolitan area and young people had begun earning sufficient income to go shopping thanks to their work in new industries, such as call centres and IT. In order to analyse these changes, the paper refers to the development of youth culture in Japan in the 1990s. Japan was selected as the object of comparison because consumer society emerged in Japan earlier than in India and because Japan experienced changes in gender relations in the period between the late 1980s and early 2000s, likely affected by the growth of consumerism. And institutional marriage was common in Japan until the 1970s. Moreover, I have researched consumerism and its effect on gender relations in Japan, which provides an inside perspective for this research.

The paper begins with an ethnography of young people in Delhi in terms of their consumption practices to give a general picture of young middle-class consumers in a mega-city. I lived in Delhi for four years between 2008 and 2011 and conducted fieldwork there. As an anthropologist, I carried out participant observations and unstructured interviews and mingled with young Indian people as much as possible during my stay in Delhi. While the Indian people I contacted varied in terms of class, status and ethnicity, I focus in this paper on young people from a middle-class, upper-caste background in North India, as this cluster is the major driving force behind the recent development of youth consumer culture in Delhi. My research is based on a qualitative data analysis. It is important to conduct surveys to gain a picture of the general trends among young people in Delhi, but it is also necessary to investigate the subtle nuances of informants' comments, which are difficult to extract through questionnaires and surveys. To investigate behavioural changes among young people, it is useful to collect in-depth data, and participant observation is a suitable method for this purpose.

Consumption Practices of Young People in Delhi

In the summer of 2010, I was in Delhi conducting my fieldwork. I had met Deepika, who was 26 years old at the time, through a friend of mine about a year prior.¹ She was working at a call centre for a company based in the United States. She had finished her college

degree in hotel management four years prior to taking her current job and was simultaneously working for a different call centre company. Deepika is from Haryana, and her hometown is not far from Delhi. She has three sisters and one brother; her sisters are married. She had been staying at a paying guest house but had moved to a single-room flat with an attached bathroom in south Delhi a few months before. Because this was the first time she had moved into a single-room flat, she bought a new TV, refrigerator, air-conditioning unit and cooking facilities. Her salary ranged from 25,000 to 30,000 Rs per month depending on her job performance, and she paid 6,000 Rs for rent.

One day, I was invited to a small party with Deepika and some of her friends. Deepika cooked a chicken dish, and her guests drank and smoked cigarettes while she was cooking. Deepika said that she loved cooking, and she was a good cook. When we had finished the meal, we watched TV, with Deepika mainly in control of the channels. We watched a Hindi film, a programme about film awards that showed major Bollywood stars and a reality show on MTV (a channel which broadcasts reality shows featuring young participants). Deepika and her friends seemed to follow the show and commented on the participants.

‘I don’t like this guy’, Giaan said.

Giaan, who was 24 years old at the time, worked for the same call centre as Deepika. She was from Punjab, had attended a boarding school when she was younger and finished her college degree in Delhi. Her father was in the army but had retired a few years earlier and now lived in a city in Punjab. Giaan had a sister who was married to a businessman from Punjab and lived in Australia. Giaan had joined the company after finishing college but was looking for a job with an airline company with the goal of becoming a flight attendant. She had a boyfriend at the time, but he was abroad completing his master’s degree, and her parents did not know that she was dating.

There were about seven people at the party, most of whom were young women. They were city girls who wore casual but fashionable clothes and had new mobile phones. They chatted over alcohol and smoked while watching TV, starting with beer and later switching to whiskey with Coke or Limca. They talked about office gossip, fashion and cosmetics and sometimes commented on the TV show.

When we were chatting, someone knocked at the door. When Deepika opened the door, a young man was standing there. Deepika left the room and went somewhere with him; it seemed that she was chatting with him somewhere in the building. Giaan and her friends Becky and Nima talked about Deepika while she was away. The man who had knocked at the door was her neighbour, who had also moved in recently. Deepika had

started talking to the man and chatted with him whenever she saw him or he saw her. Because Deepika loves cooking, she sometimes cooked food to take to him. Becky said that Deepika had told her that the man acted strange sometimes, so she was a bit worried about whether Deepika should be involved with him.

The above is a 'typical' small home party that I attended in Delhi. Men I met who were from a Hindi-speaking background told me that drinking was a 'bad habit', so in principle men do not drink, let alone women. If a woman drank, she would be considered a 'bad girl'. However, among young women like Deepika and her friends who worked for call centres and were fluent in English, drinking was not considered a bad habit – in fact, most of the women in this group whom I met drank alcohol, and many smoked. Because it was a small gathering and they wanted to chat and relax, they just had a drink, but when they were at a big party, they drank heavily and played music. Some danced and got drunk. When I went to bars and nightclubs, I observed that most people drank regardless of their gender and many were smoking, although they had to go outside to smoke due to regulations.

The young women I mentioned above worked for a call centre. There is a general image that call centre women are earning 'quick money'. Much of the workforce in call centres is young adults in their early 20s to mid-30s. An average entry-level call centre worker's salary was about 15,000 Rs per month in 2010, with a possible bonus depending on performance. The base salary increased each year so that people in their late 20s earned 25,000 to 30,000 Rs per month on average – considerably higher than their contemporaries. Even in comparison with the 'old middle class' of their parents' generation, who worked as lower governmental officers or teachers, their salaries were high.² Considering that these young people were earning as much as their parents did by retirement age, it is reasonable to suggest that they were making 'quick money'. As a result, they spent money relatively freely compared to previous generations. Therefore, in some ways this criticism of these young women is valid. However, as Patel (2011) points out, it is premature to label women who work for call centres as women making 'quick money' and view them as a homogeneous group. Patel (2011) – who conducted her research in a call centre in Mumbai and contacted various women working there – argues that, although some women spend a lot of money on shopping because of their high disposable income, the women who work for call centres have quite diverse backgrounds. Some women have to send money to support their families and siblings, and some are divorced and have to support themselves. Many of the people from Mumbai with whom she conducted research lived with their parents, so their outings were quite

restricted, and some supported the family income by giving part of their salary to the family. From this point of view, the call centre girls differ from what people imagine.

Patel's (2011) in-depth study of young women working for call centres matches my findings. Some of the call centre women I studied supported their siblings by contributing to their schooling or sending some money to their parents. They were not frivolous women but rather stood on their own feet. Still, however, they had more disposable income than the average Indian woman of their age, clearly defining them as one of the core groups supporting the emergent consumer society. Judging from the ethnography above, it seems that youth culture was emerging in Delhi around 2010 and that women played an important role in this new culture.

The Changing Behaviour of Young People in India

The development of a young new middle class in large cities became significant in the late 2000s. Around the same time, new shopping malls were being built in Delhi and the adjacent urban areas, and international brands became commonplace among these new middle class people. According to Jafferrot and van der Veer (2008), the new middle class emerged after the opening of the economy in the early 1990s. Recently, this category has included young professionals who have worked for the IT industry, foreign manufacturing companies and call centres. As these workplaces hire quite a few women, these young women are financially independent.

At the same time, media for young people was also emerging and played an important role in the development of youth culture. In India, media products for young people were mainly from the West and were primarily accessed by English-speaking upper- or upper-middle-class youth. Hindi media products, on the contrary, were intended for a wider audience. Everyone – young and old, men and women – listened to the same music and watched the same movies. Recently, the increasing popularity of Hindi rock music and reality shows on MTV has boosted the formation of youth culture. During my stay in Delhi, I observed that Hindi-speaking young people had started to consume media products that were not consumed by their parents' generation. This separation of media consumption across generations is an important aspect of the development of youth culture. Around 2010, social media such as Facebook and blogs were mainly accessed via desktop and laptop computers and were not commonly used by lower-class people. The language used on such social media platforms was mainly English. However, because of the dissemination of mobile phones among Indian people of all classes, the amount of

media content for young people who speak only Hindi and not English has increased nowadays.

The ethnography above shows that young women have started to enjoy their single lives with their friends, which was previously not the case in India. In terms of media, there were still a limited number of TV programmes targeting young women to promote consumption or a certain lifestyle similar to those in the West and Japan. However, as we have seen above, young women's culture was emerging. Young women gathered at their friends' houses and had private parties, where it was not uncommon for them to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes. Groups of young women were frequently seen in coffee shops, such as Café Coffee Day, Barista or Costa. Groups of young women could be seen in nightclubs, since entrance fees for women were cheaper to attract female customers, although the majority were accompanied by men.

As young women become more and more liberated, some men are not happy about this change. One incident took place in 2009, where a group of young women in Mangalore was attacked by young men who belonged to Sri Rama Sena, a radical Hindu nationalist group, because they were drinking and dancing in a lounge bar.³ This incident can be seen as the men's insecurity in response to their social superiority being threatened by women. Although some backlash may occur, the current trend towards young women's increasing importance in youth culture is unstoppable. Subsequently, gender relations will be affected by this trend, as shown in the ethnography above.

The young Indian men I met in Delhi voiced discomfort in response to this change. Rakesh, a 25-year-old man whom I met in 2009, lamented that women were getting demanding and that it was not easy for him to please women nowadays. I heard a similar comment from Ajay, a 27-year-old man working in a travel agency, who mentioned that he had to please women by giving them what they wanted.

The changes in behaviour among young women in Delhi affected the behaviours of young men. In the next section, the paper examines the case of Japan – where consumerism and youth culture developed earlier than in India – as a reference for possible changes in behaviour among Indian youth in the future.

The Development of Youth Culture in Japan

Japanese youth culture has emerged since the mid-1950s, when many trends and phenomena appeared and disappeared. Youth culture in Japan is not the same as in the US and UK, where 'rebellious youths' are the key players, most of them young men (Ota

2009: 34-38; cf. Bennet 2000). In Japan, women play a very important role in youth culture, and the 1980s were a pivotal moment for women to become key players in youth culture. This section examines the development of Japanese youth culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

There are several reasons for the growth of consumer culture among Japanese women, some of which are economic and social factors. In 1985, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was implemented, which led to more women taking office jobs. In addition, around that time, the Japanese economy was booming and the government promoted the expansion of domestic demands. In the social realm, the average age at marriage shifted later, which meant a lengthening of single life. Women began to have more time and money, and the increased amount of consumer goods in the market tempted them to consume these goods more than ever before. Noticing this trend, marketers began to focus on young women. In 1988, a weekly magazine called *Hanako* was released that targeted young single women living in the Tokyo area who worked for well-known companies.⁴ The content mainly introduced stylish shops, restaurants, cafés and bars in Tokyo or nearby cities. It was the first time that such a magazine had been issued that exclusively targeted women, and *Hanako* became very successful. Before this magazine, information on these matters had mainly been shared by men via word of mouth, so most of the women who were spotted in such places were accompanied by men. However, when *Hanako* gave women easy access to this information, women started visiting these places independently from men. Women began to visit bars, restaurants and cafés with their female friends. As a result of women visiting these places more frequently, shops began to target young women.

The media also influenced gendered power relations. At the end of the 1980s, the term *sankō* entered the Japanese media. The term consists of two Chinese characters, the first meaning ‘three’ and the second meaning ‘high’. This was the term that women at the time used to describe the conditions that they required men to meet when choosing husbands or boyfriends. ‘Three high’ stands for high in terms of education, income and height. In addition, he should preferably be a second son.⁵ This development indicates that women were no longer passive, as men were not selecting them anymore; instead, men had become objects to be chosen by women.

Another discourse in the media related to gender issues involved women who manipulated men for their own purposes. According to the media, a modern woman has a boyfriend, who is called *honmei*, meaning ‘the boy she really cares about’. Besides *honmei*, however, she has other men, who are called *asshii-kun*, *messhii-kun* and *mitsugu-*

kun. *Asshii* is derived from the word *ashi*, which literally means ‘foot’ but is also used to refer to a means of transportation, in this case a car. *Asshii-kun* thus refers to a boy who serves as a chauffeur for a woman: he comes to pick her up, even at two o’clock in the morning when she leaves a disco after having fun. Similarly, *messhii-kun* refers to a boy whom a woman calls only when she wants to be treated to a nice meal in a nice restaurant, and *mitsugu-kun* refers to a boy whom she calls when she wants someone to buy her expensive presents. Whether the *asshii-kun*, *messhii-kun* and *mitsugu-kun* could have a sexual relationship with the woman in question varied in individual cases, but many of them did not, though they hoped that they might be able to sleep with her someday. While men were formerly thought to have several girlfriends at the same time, this phenomenon shows that women were in a more advantageous position than men. While in reality the majority of women were not like this, the important point is that, regardless of the truth, the media created this image of women and some men were affected by it.

After the economic bubble burst, Japan plunged into a deep recession. Now, people could not be as extravagant as they once were. The end of ‘bubble culture’ began in 1992. Women in short, tight one-pieces, which were fashionable during the bubble economy era, also disappeared. However, the media’s attention to women did not: rather, it began to focus on high school girls. Around 1993, *enjoykōsai* began to be present in media. The word was used as a euphemism for sex accompanied by a monetary transaction, but the women (and on rare occasions men) to whom the word was applied were not professional prostitutes; they could be housewives, university students, working women, high school girls or even junior high school girls. They picked up their clients via telephone chat lines, the internet or mobile phone internet systems. As mentioned above, the phenomenon of *enjoykōsai* spread among many women, but the media focused particularly on high school girls. A possible reason for this was that Japanese society was shocked that high school girls were having sex, let alone doing it for money, when this phenomenon became an issue in the early 1990s. As Otsuka (1989) points out, schoolgirls were considered pure and naïve before the 1990s, so sex was regarded something to which they were indifferent. Despite this presupposition, it was revealed that high school girls were having sex with men, especially men who were older than them.

According to Otsuka (1989), men were attracted to high school girls because of prohibition. High school girls should not be sexy because they are still schoolgirls; however, their bodies are mature enough to have a sexual relationship with men. This gap, as Otsuka argues (1989), has attracted Japanese men to high school girls. The school uniform, which is a symbol of restriction, has also been viewed an enhancer that makes

high school girls more attractive.

Otsuka also argues (1989) that the concept of *shōjyo* was constructed because of the creation of the school system in the modern era. *Shōjyo* can be translated as ‘girl’ or ‘young woman’ in English but carries the connotations of purity, naïveté and virginity. In the pre-modernisation agrarian society of Japan, girls were married off around the age of 14 to 15, so they lost their virginity quite early. In addition, as the anthropologist John Embree points out (1946), women in Japanese villages were not necessarily sexually passive; they occasionally expressed their sexual desires to men. Therefore, it could be argued that it was only after *ryōsaikenbo* (good wife and wise mother) education in the Meiji period that virginity and chastity became more important among Japanese women.⁶ The *ryōsaikenbo* discourse became prominent during World War II period, when the military was in power, and remained influential until the 1970s.

Women’s privileged position in social life as well as consumption continues today. Initially, the media exaggerated the idea that women were more *genki* than men.⁷ On the contrary, the media has mentioned that men have become languid. In addition, influenced by political correctness, the media criticise or make negative remarks about men when comparing men and women. As long as people understand the reality that men are in advantageous positions in many aspects in Japan, especially in the working environment, there is no harm when the media makes negative comments about men. However, since it has been over 25 years since this media discourse started, children who do not have media literacy might take these words at face value. From the 1980s through the mid-1990s, despite the image created by the media, young men and boys were still active in social life, but nowadays it has created some changes in the relationship between men and women.

Behavioural Changes Among Japanese Men

In the old days, the stereotypical image of Japanese men was a chauvinistic, macho man who was bossy and short tempered. This type of Japanese men was common and socially accepted, and men could approach women with a conceited attitude. However, things have gradually changed since the 1990s. Nowadays, young Japanese men are in general kind, quiet and soft spoken and are not aggressive. This type of boy is called *sōshokukei-danshi*.

The term *sōshokukei-danshi* entered the Japanese media around 2006 and has been popularly used in the media to describe young men. *Sōshoku* means ‘herbivorous’ and *kei*

means ‘genealogy’, though the English suffix ‘-ish’ would be closer in meaning. *Danshi* means ‘boy’. Therefore, *sōshokukei-danshi* means ‘herbivorous-ish boys’. In contrast, the media notes that an increasing number of girls are classified as *nikushokukei-jyoshi*, or ‘predatory-ish girls’. This implies that boys stopped hunting girls and became harmless. One internet site collected images of *sōshokukei-danshi* from its users.⁸ According to this site, this kind of man is the indoors type, prefers to stay in his own room, speaks in a quiet voice, conforms to his girlfriend’s needs, is not good at deciding where to eat when dating and so on. *Sōshokukei-danshi* are nice and gentle boys, but indecisive and unreliable. The majority are heterosexual, and they are not uninterested in girls, but they are reluctant to approach girls.

Another group of young Japanese men who have received media attention since the 2000s are the *hikikomori*. *Hikikomori* are people who have chosen to withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement. They tend to stay at home and seldom go out. They have hardly any face-to-face interactions with other people but spend their time surfing the internet, playing video games or watching video content such as movies, TV dramas and YouTube. Many of them live with their parents so they do not have to worry about food and lodgings. Many *hikikomori* are men – more than 76 percent – and, in terms of age, they range from teenagers to those in their forties.⁹ Unlike *sōshokukei-danshi*, *hikikomori* men are in general not good at communicating with women, but both *sōshokukei-danshi* and *hikikomori* tend to be insecure. Stereotypical manly Samurai Japanese men are now rare in Japan. Instead, there are many unconfident young men who are reluctant to approach women. A study conducted by a women’s web magazine in Japan shows that nearly 80 percent of women expect men to approach them, rather than women approaching men.¹⁰ Men are expected to approach women in Japan, but they need courage, confidence and a strong heart when rejected.

However, the recent trend of men’s reserved attitudes towards dating women has resulted in an increase in single men and women. More than 71 percent of men aged 25 to 29 are single, as are 47 percent of men between the ages of 30 and 34. In addition, more than 75 percent of unmarried men and 68 percent of women between 18 and 34 years old do not have dating partners. In Japan, it is not socially accepted for an unmarried couple to have a child, so people in Japanese society are expected to have children within the confines of a marriage. The proportion of unmarried people reflects the birth rate. Because love marriages have become predominant, having a dating partner is the first step towards marriage. Therefore, the fact that 75 percent of unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 34 do not have a dating partner is affecting the current low fertility rate in Japan.

Financial reasons are considered an important factor in young people staying single, but Yamada and Shirakawa (2008) point out social reasons for this tendency among young people, as well.

Concluding Remarks: Herbivorous Young Indian Men in the Future?

This paper offered an illustration of young people in Delhi around 2010 when consumer society was developing and the conventional relationship between men and women was changing. As a comparison, the paper explored the development of youth culture in Japan, mainly in the 1980s and 1990s, and noted that it was closely related to the growth of consumerism. Although Japan still has a long way to go in terms of gender equality, the economic independence of young women has been an achievement in the past 30 years. This has influenced the development of young women's culture in Japan, which also affected the current gender relationship, as seen above.

Whether the experience of Japan will be applicable to India is debatable. First, India has a distinct status system, and its ethnic diversity is far more complicated than Japan's. In Japan, partly because status and ethnic identity are weak for most of the population, people tend to identify themselves according to their consumption styles. Young people in Japan distinguish themselves from others based on how they consume (cf. Bourdieu 1984). In addition, media such as magazines and TV programmes that target young women have developed significantly in Japan, and the recent development of internet content is driving the fragmentation of tastes. In India, on the contrary, people did not have to distinguish themselves from others through their consumption style until the 2000s, since 'different' people are everywhere, whether in terms of ethnicity or status. That said, there are some commonalities between India and Japan, one of which is the change in gender relations.

Men cannot simply believe that they are superior to women and try to approach women according to this line of thinking; instead, they have to consider how they could please women in order to be selected by them. The ratio of female MPs or the number of female CEOs is an indication of women's empowerment in a society, but I would argue that the development of consumer society among young women is also an important factor in the empowerment of women. This likely has a greater impact on the lives of most people, as only a limited number of people can be an MP or CEO. On the other hand, if men realised that women cannot be under their control, it would have a large impact on them. In Japan, women's economic independence and the social acceptance of women's

consumer lifestyles have an impact on young men and women in terms of equality. However, some sensitive young men have been negatively impacted by this situation and have become herbivorous or in extreme cases have withdrawn from socialising with women entirely.

Whether intimidated young men such as the herbivorous boy or *hikikomori* will appear in India in the future remains to be seen, but it is worth observing the changes in the gender relations of young people. Because of the increasing popularity of love marriages, the changes in gender relations will be an important social factor in demographic change in India.

Notes

¹ In order to protect privacy, I have used pseudonyms in this paper.

² For a discussion of the middle class in India, see Fernandes (2006).

³ This news was retrieved from the Rediff India Abroad website, 'Mangalore attack: Sri Ram Sena chief arrested', January 27, 2009, <https://www.rediff.com/news/2009/jan/27mangalore-attack-ram-sena-chief-arrested.htm>, accessed on December 28, 2020.

⁴ The magazine was issued in June 1988 by the publisher Magazine House, Ltd. The magazine was issued weekly from 1988 to 2005 but has been bi-weekly since 2006.

⁵ The first son is expected to be the family heir. This means that if a woman were married to a first son, she would be expected to look after her mother-in-law in the future.

⁶ For a discussion of *ryōsaikenbo* education, see Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁷ *Genki* is a Japanese term which is commonly used in everyday life. Its meanings include energetic, vigorous, lively, cheerful and active.

⁸ Goo, "Sōshoku Danshi" no Imeiji Rankingu, [The Ranking of the Image of Herbivorous Boys], Goo Ranking, October 2009, <https://ranking.goo.ne.jp/ranking/9426/>, (accessed on December 29, 2020).

⁹ Naikakufu (2020) [Cabinet Office], 'Tokushu 2: Chokikasuru Hikikomori no Jittai' (Reiwa Gannen-ban Kodomo Wakamono Hakusho Gaiyo-ban) [Special Topic 2: The Actual Condition Survey of *Hikikomori*. (2020 Whitepaper on Children and Youth, abridged version)]. https://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/whitepaper/r01gaiyou/s0_2.html, (accessed December 29, 2020).

¹⁰ Cited from women's web magazine *OZmall*. The data were gathered from: <https://www.ozmall.co.jp/ol/honne/vol139/>, (accessed December 30, 2020).

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