

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

Panel 1: Self and Identity

Modern (Mis)fits: Madrasa Youth, Desire, and the Barzakh of Identity

This paper explores how the madrasa youth inhabits contradiction not as a mark of alienation but as the very condition of their becoming. Drawing on Joan Copjec's Lacanian reading of Ibn 'Arabī, it reinterprets this dissonance through the concept of barzakh, the liminal interval that both separates and joins, conceals and reveals. Based on personal journals and semi-structured interviews with fellow seminarians, the paper traces how everyday experiences of belonging and estrangement, faith and fatigue, discipline and disenchantment form a living barzakh-ian condition within the seminary. Rather than seeking resolution or transcendence, the paper proposes the barzakh as both an ontological and ethical structure through which religious youth live, create, and negotiate meaning.

Author bio: Muhammed Raazi, University of Calicut & World Institute for Research in Advanced Societies (WIRAS).

The Swaero as Veil: Crafting Double Selves and Subaltern Identity in Telangana's Gurukulams

This article examines how the Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TGSWREIS), popularly known as Gurukulam, cultivates new moral and aspirational identities among Dalit and Adivasi youth through the institutional identity of the Swaero. Coined by R. S. Praveen Kumar, Swaero (a fusion of "Social Welfare" and "Aero," meaning sky) reimagines marginalized students as "self-warriors" who embody discipline, dignity, and neoliberal selfhood. Based on 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in TGSWREIS schools across three districts in Telangana from 2022 to 2024, this paper conceptualizes the "Swaero

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

identity” through the work of W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 concept of the veil is a moral and pedagogical boundary that both conceals caste stigma and fosters a reflexive “second sight” for students to reflect on their identity critically. Within Gurukulam’s pedagogic state apparatus, neoliberal ideals of merit, competition, and mobility are reworked through Ambedkarite ethics of equality, self-respect, and collective uplift. Through ethnographic narratives of students such as Akhil, Santhosh, and Sunitha, the article explores how youth navigate this doubleness—performing neoliberal selfhood while remaining grounded in subaltern moral worlds. The Swaero veil mediates between two registers of being: the neoliberal self, trained for cosmopolitan futures, and the subaltern self, rooted in caste histories and Ambedkarite ethics. Situated within the literature on neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 1978; Ong 2006; Gooptu 2013), moral economy (Muehlebach 2012; Bear 2015), and Dalit modernity (Ambedkar 1935; Paik 2014; Still 2014), the paper argues that Gurukulam students embody neoliberal moral subaltern selves—youth who do not simply assimilate neoliberalism but creatively reshape it through moral vocabularies of dignity, self-respect, and community uplift. Gurukulam thus emerges as a key site in the development of vernacular neoliberalism in contemporary India.

Author bio: Shankar Gugoloth, PhD Scholar, IIT Hyderabad; Fulbright Scholar, UMass (2024–25).

Youth, Migration, and Elderly Care: Intergenerational Negotiations in Contemporary Kashmir

In contemporary India, youth migration—both internal and international—has become a defining feature of social and economic mobility, yet it carries profound implications for the care and well-being of the elderly left behind. This paper explores the intersection of youth migration and elderly care within the broader framework of aspiration, obligation, and intergenerational transformation. Migration is often framed as an act of hope and self-realisation among the young, seeking education, employment, or better living conditions. However, these movements simultaneously disrupt traditional systems of familial care, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings where

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

elders remain rooted. The resulting “care deficit” challenges long-held cultural expectations of filial responsibility and raises questions about emotional distance, loneliness, and the feminisation of caregiving among those who stay. Drawing upon ethnographic and sociological insights, the paper situates this phenomenon within the dynamics of a rapidly modernising yet uneven India—where digital connectivity coexists with moral and affective disconnection. It argues that youth migration reconfigures kinship, responsibility, and belonging, compelling both generations to renegotiate the meanings of care and presence in translocal lives. In doing so, it highlights how the dreams of mobility and the dilemmas of ageing are intimately intertwined in shaping India’s social future.

Author bio: Mushtaq ul Haq Ahmad Sikander, Independent Researcher, Kashmir.

Panel 2: Reimagining Education (1)

Reimagining Education: Muslim Women’s Participation in Higher Education in Purba Medinipur, West Bengal

Reimagining education requires centring the voices of those at the margins of formal learning spaces. In India, access to higher education remains unequal due to various socio-economic factors such as gender, religion, caste, class, and geographic location. Muslim women, in particular, are doubly marginalised, facing both gender and religion-based discrimination along with cultural restrictions. Despite the overall increase in female enrolment in higher education, Muslim women continue to face persistent barriers that hinder them from accessing the full benefits of education (Rahiman, 2023). This study explores the realities of Muslim women’s access to and participation in higher education in Purba Medinipur. With its mix of urban and rural areas and four distinct subdivisions in West Bengal, this district has the state’s highest literacy rate (Census, 2011). Despite notable progress in women’s education overall, Muslim women in the district often struggle with attendance, participation, and continuity in higher education. Drawing from an ongoing PhD study, the research adopts a qualitative approach, engaging 20 Muslim women students through

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

semi-structured interviews and conducting four focus group discussions to foreground personal narratives of persistence and challenge.

The findings reveal a complex picture; while government schemes and supportive families enable access, women continue to encounter discrimination in classrooms, economic constraints, cultural restrictions, and institutional barriers that shape their educational journeys. Reimagining education in this context means ensuring numerical inclusion and fostering spaces of dignity, voice, and agency. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Muslim women, the study contributes to debates on equity and justice in higher education and calls for policies and institutional practices that move beyond access to genuine participation and empowerment.

Author bio: Papia Khatun, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

The Weight of a Dream: A Discussion on the Experience of the Student- Youth in the Indian Institute(s) of Technology

This paper examines the everyday lifeworld of students in India's premier technical institutes, the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), to interrogate how ideals of merit, potentiality, and endurance shape the becoming of the "IIT subject." While scholarship has extensively discussed caste and gender-based exclusion within these elite spaces, less attention has been paid to the banal, affective dimensions of endurance that structure student life. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2022 at IIT X, I argue that the institution produces a crisis of potentiality where students are caught between the neoliberal promise of social mobility and the existential demand to constantly prove merit. The IITs operate as testing grounds of "potential," creating hierarchies not only of inclusion but of survival, where failure is diagnosed as individual inadequacy rather than systemic contradiction. Through student narratives and institutional discourse, the paper reveals how the IITs, as spaces of aspiration, simultaneously produce despair, transforming "potential" into a marketable trait and merit into a form of lived suffering. Ultimately, I argue that the IIT model illuminates the contradictions of youth aspiration in contemporary

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

India, where dreams of excellence are sustained by the ordinary labour of enduring the institution itself.

Author bio: Yogita Suresh, PhD Scholar, Shiv Nadar University, Greater Noida

Democratizing Higher Educational Spaces: Experiences of First-Generation Youth from Marginalized Communities in India

In the larger discourse on youth as demographic dividend, education (especially higher education) plays a central role in creating human capital that can lead to long term dividends for the society (Mason et al 2016). However, higher education has not been equally accessible to youth historically in India, though waves of democratization in higher education have happened over the past few decades as the demands of social justice movements have been met with affirmative action in certain scenarios. This has led to the gradual entry of first generation learners from the deprived Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi (DBA) communities. However, this democratization of access needs to be complicated with the actual experience of the first generation students in higher educational institutions (Guru & Sarukkai 2012). We know that young people from such marginalized communities sustain through multiple dimensions of disadvantage. Migration, poverty and precarious livelihoods multiply this further. Additionally, policy negligence, inadequate schools, under-resourced infrastructure, vernacular languages as medium of instruction weakens the foundational learning outcomes. The systemic barriers like lack of access to basic resources, networks, digital divide and financial support hinder their educational aspirations (Subramanian 2019, Sukumar 2022).

Only through affirmative action and scholarship opportunities a growing number of first-generation students from these communities are breaking these barriers and entering elite higher educational spaces. Yet, scholarships alone cannot help the democratization. The current study focuses on the intersectionality of caste, gender, language, culture and religion in shaping the experiences of DBA community students, and to understand the process and limitations of democratization in elite higher education universities. This study has employed qualitative

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

interviews and participant observation across public and private universities to understand their experiences once they are admitted into a higher educational institution and explicate the factors that facilitate or hinder their navigation of these environments. The preliminary results show that socio-cultural and economic capital influenced or hindered in pursuing higher education at elite universities. Language and network groups expose them as identity markers to further ostracize them from socialization. The main objective of the paper is to argue that democratization of higher education requires structural and cultural transformation of the academic spaces.

Author bio: Shireesha Chitlapally, Kakatiya Governance Fellow; Asim Siddique, Assistant Professor, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

Panel 3: Youth, Work and Aspirations

Entrepreneurial Aspirations and the Reimagining of Home: Youth and their Futures in the Darjeeling Hills

This paper examines how youth aspirations in the Darjeeling Hills, India, have taken shape amid limited employment opportunities and an atmosphere of political uncertainty. Drawing on fieldwork conducted for my doctoral research between 2021 and 2024—including semi-structured interviews and informal conversations—the paper explores how, in the mid-2010s, a wave of enthusiasm around self-employment and small businesses, ranging from homestays and cafés to local craft enterprises, trekking outfits, on-line lifestyle venture shaped local youth’s imagination of possibility and progress. For many, this form of entrepreneurship was not simply about economic independence but also about reimagining ‘home’ as a site of possibility, anchoring life within the hills rather than leaving in search of ‘proper jobs’ elsewhere. The narrative of ‘doing something at home’ carried a quiet discontent against migration and a sense of remaining marginalised in one’s own place. While entrepreneurship is often framed as a vehicle of neoliberal self-making, in my field such pursuits were deeply embedded in local social structures, producing a form of entrepreneurialism inseparable from older political struggles, expressed through

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

demands for a separate state of Gorkhaland, ethnic mobilisation, and contestations over governance. Further, the actual trajectories of these entrepreneurial activities undertaken have been uneven. Studying the idea of ‘home’ through the lens of entrepreneurial aspirations reveals how youth negotiate between hope and uncertainty, and how the desire to make and remain at home becomes a means of reclaiming value and envisioning a future from the margins of development.

Author bio: Lasang Lepcha, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

Footloose Youth: Joblessness, Micro-Mobilities, and Agentive Capacity in North India

Young people’s transitions from education to employment have become more difficult amid conditions of neoliberalisation, precarious labor markets, and varied socio-political changes across contexts. Following year-long ethnographic fieldwork in Meerut district, western Uttar Pradesh, north India in 2022 – 23, I found vast sections of rural, lower middle class young people who had opted for more educational qualifications simultaneously struggling to find jobs commensurate with their degrees and educational investments. Instead of following popular norms of migrating to big cities or engaging in international migration, they travelled to and from the rural parts of the district to the central city hub on a daily basis, engaging in ‘looping’, micro-mobilities, to find work or prepare for secure employment. Thinking about young people who invested in educational pursuits especially as mobile individuals accessing urban Meerut over a long period of time as a ‘generation’ using Mannheim (1952), this paper examines how this generation of ‘footloose youth’ seek to find ‘work’ in the absence of formal

avenues of secure employment. I use the term ‘footloose’ as a comparative theoretical tool, taking from Breman (1996, 2020), to examine to what extent and how young people who engage with global images of education empowerment and micro-mobilities bereft from the structures of the formal economy generate informal, precarious sources of employment in the political, economic, and educational spheres. Unemployed young people’s ‘work’ involves participation in youth politics, economic entrepreneurship, and government job preparation across different spaces from the formal university to the shadow education markets in Meerut to navigate the limbo in their

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

lives. This strategy is especially informed by regional notions of success and agency as well wherein notions of class and caste played a crucial role.

Author bio: Avishek Jha, University of Melbourne.

“Speak Perfect English in 60 Days, Be Set for Life!”: English Coaching Ecosystems, Linguistic Mobility, and Youth Precarity in Neoliberal India

Since the early 1990s, English coaching centres have emerged as pivotal sites through which young Indians negotiate mobility, recognition, and modernity. Their rapid proliferation reflects the privileged status of English in postcolonial India, where the language is experienced as both a promise and a stressor: a pathway to class mobility, but also a marker of one’s cultural capital and belonging in the neoliberal age. Privatizing education systems and job-market demands further reinforce English shadow education as a site that provides students an individualized solution to systemic issues, with many coaching centres promising students relief from unemployment, social alienation, and disorientation amidst globalizing media cultures. In the post-pandemic era, English language coaching has especially flourished on digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, where educators condense the complexities of language acquisition into bite-sized, easily consumable media for youth in tier II and III cities - many of these educators themselves young creators navigating opaque platform logics and knowledge economies. This research situates English coaching in India in the cultures of “self-improvement” and “personality development” increasingly shaping aspirations and lived experiences of Indian youth. This study suggests that English coaching underpins an analytical site where neoliberal education and aspirational subjectivities intersect. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 18 participants across offline and online spaces, it argues that English coaching is not merely about linguistic upskilling but exemplifies the paradoxes of being young in neoliberal India – where the pursuit of education generates both mobility and marginality, aspiration and discontent.

Author bio: Anshuman Jha, Pavithra P. Baiju, Swastika Patnaik, Delhi School of Economics, New Delhi.

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

Panel 4: Youth Cultures

Between Wellness and Worry: Health Consciousness, Body Politics, and the Paradox of Fitness among Contemporary Indian Youth

In recent years, India’s urban youth have witnessed a dramatic rise in health and fitness consciousness, marked by the proliferation of gyms, dietary regimes, fitness influencers, and social media aesthetics of the “perfect body.” While this trend reflects growing awareness of health and wellness, it also reveals the darker undercurrents of obsession, anxiety, and alienation. This paper examines the emergence of *menorexia*, a form of extreme dieting, and disordered eating, through a sociological lens, situating it within the larger framework of neoliberal health culture, body politics, and youth identity formation. Drawing on theories of biopower (Foucault), performative masculinity (Connell), and consumer culture (Baudrillard), the paper explores how fitness becomes both an instrument of self-discipline and a marker of social aspiration in post-liberalization India. Through digital ethnography and media analysis, it investigates how online fitness cultures and influencer economies shape ideals of masculinity and success, producing new forms of bodily governance and anxiety. The study further reflects on the paradox of health: how practices framed as “self-care” often reproduce capitalist demands for productivity and control. By linking *menorexia* to the broader sociological themes of aspiration, surveillance, and precarity, the paper situates this phenomenon within the “dreams, dilemmas, and discontent” of contemporary Indian youth. It ultimately asks: what does it mean to be “fit” in an age of insecurity—and at what cost?

Author bio: Akansha Singh, Visiting Faculty, NLSIU Bengaluru; PhD Candidate, JNU.

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

Learning to Labour on the Football Ground: Youth Aspirations, Neoliberalism, and the Transformation of Public Space in Bangalore

The concept socio-cultural history of football in working class neighbourhoods of Bangalore dates from colonial India to the modern day. In this the aspiration of youths turning into professional football player also changes in different periods of time depending on what is assumed to be the most lucrative form of football at that time. The transformation of playing football for local clubs established by the public sector in Bangalore and later by private clubs in the modern day. This paper analyses in the historical context of the football ground offers the spaces to turn from space of playing football as leisurely activity to an aspiration to be a professional football player. In this process the youths who also perform the task of being the bread winners for their respective families and schools, where the football ground becomes the space for deviance. The youths who performances of coaching and performance offered by media in the site of a football ground becomes a site for labouring. Bringing in the argument provided by Paul Willis I want to argue that these footballers are not only learning to labour in school but as well as in the football ground.

Author bio: Srinath S, RV University, Bengaluru.

Up the Creek with a Paddle: Examining Class, Community, and Space in Pickleball Sports Culture

My paper studies the youth sporting culture in Mumbai, examining dynamics of sports-based community building based on a differentiated accessibility to urban spaces. Ethnographic work, across public and private sporting spaces, undertaken in the form of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in organizing and playing sports, helps shed a light on the sporting culture in the city. This paper looks to elucidate upon the evolving socio-spatial trends in contemporary urban youth sporting culture through the microcosm of the sport

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

of pickleball. The exponential rise in popularity of pickleball offers key insights into the nexus between consumerist capital and a neoliberal space order responsible for shaping the evolution of urban sporting culture in this city. The age- and gender-agnostic sport, with its low floor, asserts democratization, inclusion and high accessibility. Pickleball's promoters claim it answers peoples' search for third places, a demand reinvigorated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Played in enclosed spaces one must pay to enter, the sport becomes a tool of social signaling. This setting for competitive socializing facilitates social networking by connecting people with shared interests but also similar means. Thus, explaining pickleball's growth as the recreational group activity of choice among the affluent social strata. This paper studies how the ecosystem evolving around pickleball impacts the city's infrastructure and the sociality emerging out of its sporting culture.

Author bio: Vishal George, PhD Scholar, National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru.

Panel 5, Youth and Democracy (1)

***“On the day of my exam, I was arrested by the police”:* Youth Precarity and Politics among Educated Unemployed Young Dalit Local Leaders**

This paper examines the life-course trajectories of young Dalit men who have emerged as local leaders in rural western Uttar Pradesh. Part of the author's doctoral work, this study is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Saharanpur, western UP. The primary respondents of the study consist of current and former members of a social collective called the Bhim Army between the ages of 16 and 42. The Bhim Army or the Bhim Army Bharat Ekta Mission was founded by a group of young men from the Scheduled Castes to fight against the growing caste based atrocities and discrimination against Dalits in Saharanpur. This paper shows how the rise of new young local leaders from the Scheduled and backward castes has reshaped the issues of unemployment, aspirations, education and politics. This paper argues that the life courses and aspirations of young

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

Dalit men are disrupted and reshaped by widespread unemployment and unstable labour markets, as well as permanently redirected through participation in political movements and early encounters with the state and prison. It argues that an early encounter with policing and involvement in “police matters” creates barriers for young Dalit men in their education and employment aspirations. With encounters with the police verification procedures and pending First Information Reports that disqualify them from government employment. Arrest is experienced as a temporal foreclosure of their life course pathways. While having “gone inside” accrues symbolic value within the movement, it simultaneously collapses future horizons and redirects them into political work. By situating these narratives within scholarship on youth precarity, caste and the carceral state, the paper shows how aspiration is reshaped under conditions of structural insecurity.

Author Bio: Vaishali Khandekar, PhD Scholar, Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad

Negotiating Democracy: Youth Subjectivities and the Political Imagination in Indian Higher Education

Globally as well as in India, it has been contended that the landscape of higher education has become the new battleground for political assertions between social groups. Major changes have occurred in the character and composition of Indian universities in the last three decades or so, owing to their changing demographic composition induced by the policy of affirmative action. While the goal of egalitarianism and progress has driven the democratization of higher education in several postcolonial nations in terms of social mobility, it has also transformed these ‘fields’ into spaces of competition. Further, with the onset of policies of economic liberalization and growing tendencies of religious nationalism, these sites have become credible spaces of contentious politics. They have rejuvenated themselves as significant spaces that serve to strengthen and perpetuate identities rather than weaken them. In recent years, questions of nationalism and nation- building, citizenship and even secularism have become important within such a context. Against this background, this paper presents an ethnographic account of student union activism at a premier

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

public Indian university — the University of Delhi (DU) — during the period 2017 to 2021. Within this context, student activism appears increasingly aligned with external political forces and dependent on mainstream political parties. The idea of students as agents of social transformation and nation-building has long been central to the discourse on youth and politics in India. Yet, in contemporary times, this ideal has become entwined with the strategic efforts of political parties to mobilize the youth by invoking narratives of responsibility and national duty. Drawing on a Bourdieusian theoretical framework, the paper argues that the university functions not only as a field of ideological and political contestation but also as a site where aspiring youth actors accumulate and negotiate political capital. In doing so, it highlights the complex entanglements between education, politics, and democratic subject formation within India's higher education landscape.

Author bio: Soumodip Sinha, Assistant Professor, Alliance University, Bengaluru

Panel 6: Youth and Democracy (2)

The Colonial Roots of Forced Bachelorhood and Vigilantism in the Agrarian North

Situated in Western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, the paper (1803-present) traces the contemporary roots of forced bachelorhood in the agrarian north from the vantage point of colonial and post-colonial political economy. The paper examines the appropriation of 'tradition' as a crucial category that informs the very axis of imperial sovereignty. This extends into the period comprising the post 1950 Nehruvian government. The claim to protect tradition was deployed by empire to primarily validate the working of the land settlements as representing a longer continuity to revive ancient 'yeomen traditions'. Propertied castes who emerge as a fledgling class of landowners in the late 19th century respond to colonial political economy by also using 'tradition' to make demands on empire. Some of the important instances include Landholder petitions to secure revenue remissions as well as demands to ban cow slaughter. Post-colonial policies on food security and

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

the consequent responses by peasant unions in the 1970s rallied around a colonial era obsession with the ancient yeomen spirit. It offered dominant propertied castes the elbow room to identify with majoritarianism and as a class that identified with the romantic ideas of the peasantry. In the more contemporaneous period, 'tradition' is redrawn to suit the majoritarian aspirations of the rural unemployed, also forced bachelors (randuas). An agrarian crisis that was inaugurated with the earliest land settlements in the early 19th century has now produced a surplus demography of men. The latter are accommodated within and respond affirmatively to pan Indian overtures to the Hindu Far Right ecosystem led by the Bhartiya Janata Party. The paper shows how this has opened avenues of work for (randuas) who interchangeably use of the terms samaj sewak (social work) or dharam Raksha (protectors of faith). The two terms intersect to assuage anxieties of marriage and joblessness while also lending validation to the far-right character of an atrophied political economy.

Author bio: Vishal PS Deo, Assistant Professor, Manipal Institute of Social Science, Humanities and Arts, Manipal

Agrarian Transformation, Rural Youth, and the Reworking of Communal Politics in Contemporary Bihar

This paper offers a theoretical rethinking of communalisation in rural India by placing rural youth at the centre of contemporary political transformations. Existing scholarship has treated communalism largely as an urban, event focused phenomenon, or as a strategic mobilization engineered from above (elite conspiracy). In contrast, this study argues that the emergent communal tensions in rural Bihar must be understood through the shifting subjectivities of rural youth, subjects produced at the intersection of agrarian restructuring, stalled social mobility and the dynamics of local politics. Drawing on an extended case study from one of Bihar's most agrarian districts (Katihar), the paper conceptualises rural youth not merely as recipients of ideological influence but as political actors whose aspirations, frustrations, and affective investments actively reconfigure the moral and political economy of the countryside. The analysis

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

develops two theoretical propositions. First, that communalisation in regions without a historical memory of communal conflict is enabled by the dislocation of older agrarian hierarchies and the emergence of youth as a semi autonomous political category seeking recognition in altered rural publics. Second, that the everyday practices of young men, from digital circulation of communal narratives to new performances of political masculinity, constitute a repertoire through which right wing imaginaries are localised, moralised, and naturalised. By foregrounding youth as a generative analytical category, the paper argues that rural communalism is best understood as an outcome of the structural coupling between agrarian change, precarity, and youthful subject making. This re-theorisation expands the conceptual terrain of both youth studies and the study of communal politics in India.

Author Bio: Supriy Ranjan, Assistant Professor, Gitam University, Hyderabad

The Affective Life of Politics: Izzat, Maza, and the Formation of Political Youth in Ranchi

This paper examines how Hindutva acquires affective traction among marginalized youth in Ranchi, Jharkhand—a city where Adivasi and Harijan lives intersect with the expanding reach of majoritarian politics. The broader context is one of social precarity, unemployment, and the erosion of older solidarities, where young men seek visibility and moral worth amid unstable futures. The central question animating this paper is: how does Hindutva become emotionally meaningful to youth who remain structurally excluded from its promise of cultural and civic belonging? Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, the paper argues that the appeal of Hindutva among these youth lies in the intertwined idioms of *izzat* (honour) and *maza* (pleasure), which together transform politics into an emotionally sustaining practice of self-making. Rather than treating them as distinct, the paper conceptualises *izzat* and *maza* as mutually constitutive affects: *izzat* lends moral dignity to participation, while *maza* provides the sensory charge that makes belonging feel real. Through the narratives of two young men—an Adivasi participant seeking respectability through *seva* and a Harijan youth finding thrill in collective assertion—the

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

paper shows how the pursuit of dignity and the experience of fun converge in the everyday enactment of Hindutva. Methodologically grounded in ethnographic immersion, the study reveals how the Sangh's civic world turns discipline, spectacle, and service into affective capital, allowing ideology to be lived as emotion. By tracing how *izzat* and *maza* fuse aspiration with pleasure, the paper rethinks youth politics as an affective labour of belonging within Hindutva's expanding moral economy.

Author Bio: Kunal Shahdeo, Assistant Professor, Azim Premji University, Ranchi

Panel 7 Reimagining Education (2)

Beyond Rehabilitation: Education and the Making of Aspirations among Puroik Youth

This discussion foregrounds the educational experiences and aspirations of Puroik youth in Arunachal Pradesh. The observations are drawn from a recently concluded exploratory study (Rajan, 2024) in Seppa (East Kameng district), which investigated the trajectories of education, livelihoods, and social mobility within the Puroik tribe- a community historically engaged in bonded labour relationships with the Nyishi tribe. The participants of the study include Puroik community members, state and school functionaries in Seppa, as well as Puroik youth currently pursuing higher education in different parts of the state.

The relationship between the Puroik and the Nyishi is complex, marked by historical subordination and ongoing social tensions. While traditional forms of bonded labour may have diminished, other forms of domination persist, such as the continued use of the identity label 'Sulung' (meaning slave). In terms of education, only a few young people access quality schooling from an early age and go on to pursue higher studies outside the district. Many tend to discontinue their education midway. Access to education is shaped by a range of factors, including information and awareness, school availability, the validity of legal documents, financial constraints, state interventions, the quality and attitudes of teachers, and overarching structures of social domination that continue to

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

affect Puroik lives. The differential access to resources between the Nyishi and Puroik communities further deepens this inequality. Ownership of mithun (a traditional marker of wealth and status), control over land, and stable livelihoods remain largely concentrated among the Nyishis, while Puroik households continue to navigate marginal, insecure forms of subsistence. Despite the promise of rehabilitation and inclusion, there have been no substantial shifts in material relations or cultural hierarchies.

Despite persistent exclusions, the study finds that migration to urban areas and access to higher education are viewed by many Puroik youth as avenues of hope and potential social mobility. Those who manage to pursue higher education see it not only as a means to overcome structural and historical barriers but also as a pathway to contribute to the upliftment of their community. Their aspirations go beyond personal achievement. They are deeply invested in the upliftment of their community, for instance, through regular participation in community collectives such as the All Puroik Welfare Society (APWS), where they work on awareness programs and fundraising initiatives. Despite financial struggles, social exclusion and uncertainty about future career, these young people aspire to contribute meaningfully to the betterment of the Puroik people.

In short, this discussion foregrounds the liminal locales of schooling and higher education as sites that actively forge, but have yet to fully realize, the promise of freedom for the Puroik community. The moral discourse of progress through education risks obscuring the enduring hierarchies of power and the liminal spaces that entangle the Puroik community, as youth strive to 'become somebody' (Crivello, 2011) or 'aage badhna' (Dost & Froerer, 2021) within systems that continue to devalue their identities and social locations. In this sense, the aspirations and struggles of Puroik youth reflect broader processes of schooling among marginalized tribal communities in India, where the promise of education operates within deep rooted social and economic hierarchies.

Author Bio: Vijitha Rajan, Assistant Prof, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

Learning Rights versus Living Them: Notes on (Un)Encultured Legal Education in India

This paper draws on two years of fieldwork conducted across nine National Law Universities in India as part of the UNFPA-funded project ‘Making the Invisible Visible in Law, Practice and Legal Education,’ specifically its component ‘The Youth Project’ at NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad. As a law teacher and researcher, I conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with law students across these institutions to understand how young law students, immersed daily in the language of rights, equality, and justice, translate these ideals into their personal lives. In my findings, I observed a striking dissonance between what students learned in the classroom and how they applied those lessons in their everyday relationships. My participants could articulate constitutional principles and values with precision; however, when it came to embodying these values in their own dating choices and interpersonal relationships, they expressed hesitation and caution. This revealed a more profound disconnect between the doctrinal understanding of rights and the lived experience of rights. Drawing on Upendra Baxi’s idea of enculturing law, the paper conceptualizes this gap as a form of (un)encultured pedagogy, where law is learned as doctrine rather than as moral practice. To respond to this, our team employed humor, storytelling, and creative dissemination to reimagine what Baxi calls “rebellious pedagogy.” Humor became a means to question authority, foster empathy, and initiate difficult conversations about desire, risk, and social conformity. Through this experiment, the paper explores how legal education might nurture moral imagination and bridge the distance between learning rights and living them.

Author Bio: Prerna, Assistant Professor, NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad

Trajectories of Transition: Understanding the Journeys from Education to Livelihoods for Economically Vulnerable Muslim Youth in Urban Bengaluru

After the lockdowns of the COVID 19 pandemic, even as the country returned to business as usual, the public health and economic crises exacerbated existing inequalities, leading to increased distress employment (Azim Premji University, 2023). Already in the midst of several transitions

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

such as those from childhood to adulthood, and education to paid work, young people were faced with uncertain futures as schools and colleges moved their lessons and exams online, excluding a large portion of India's population. Karnataka, the pandemic brought with it an added set of challenges for the Muslim community in particular due to the spread of misinformation, fuelled by mainstream media. These circumstances have made the navigation of youthhood and its transitions even more formidable for young Muslim people stepping into a strained economy, already characterised by increased informalisation and contractualisation. Additionally, the controversial Hijab ban in parts of Karnataka has resulted in a sudden decline in women's enrolment and completion of higher secondary school and pre-university college (PUCL, 2023), and is likely to have affected Muslims women's entry into paid work. As we know, the Sachar Committee Report highlights the extent of educational disadvantages of Muslims and their link with drop-out rates (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2006). In the context of such inter-religious disparities, it is important to draw attention to the lives of Muslim youth, their ideas and aspirations with regards to their education, work and everyday lives. The current study sets out to understand these context specific experiences, focusing on the micro-processes (Salman, 2020) that affect Muslim youth's educational and work pathways. Importantly, the study uses a feminist participatory approach by working with eight Muslim youth research collaborators for a period of six months. It is an effort at foregrounding youth voices and everyday knowledge making practices, and translating these into large understandings of youthhood in urban India. As Jamil (2016) writes, an emancipatory impulse is critical to feminist method and inquiries into phenomena that throw up questions of hierarchies including and other than gender, will be influenced by the feminist politics of authors. Building on the 'real life methods' that the author argues for in such studies, we employ an auto-ethnographic approach by the research collaborators. The collaborators, hailing from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds in Bangalore city, engage in self-expression and enquiry about their educational and work journeys through interviews, diary and creative media such as vlogs and sketches. These forms capture interrupted education, livelihoods, and modest/restrained aspirations, but also illuminate resourcefulness, humor, resilience, and persistence of hope. The proposed paper focuses on the methodological challenges that the project throws up: namely, what counts as data, evidence and analysis when knowledge is co-created with

DREAMS, DILEMMAS, DISCONTENT



**YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
13–14 FEBRUARY 2026**

young people who have uneven familiarity with formal research methods. It highlights both the possibilities (ownership, richer insights, reflexivity) and the challenges (sustaining engagement, asymmetry of skills, translation) of participatory approaches. By centering Muslim youth as knowledge producers in their own right, the paper argues for the value of participatory methodologies in youth research, and for challenging conventional hierarchies of knowledge production.

Author Bios: Shraddha NV Sharma & Soumya Mittal, Samvada, Bengaluru

