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December
2014

“In a deep dilemma”

A needs assessment of youth in
India-administered Jammu and Ladakh

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Cover image: Inscription on a rock at a workshop campus in Leh, Ladakh. © Research team



Map of Jammu and Kashmir region
 © Kashmir Study Group

Introduction

This research follows on from an earlier study on the needs and attitudes of young people in Kashmir, which was conducted in the Kashmir valley in 2010–11. The findings – *“Living in a pressure cooker situation”: A needs assessment of youth in India-administered Kashmir* – were published in August 2011.

This study focuses on the youth living in the other two regions of India-administered Kashmir: Jammu and Ladakh.

Jammu, the India-administered side, covers an area of about 26,293 square kilometres and has a population of about 5.35 million. It has been a Hindu majority region post-1947. Currently about 65 per cent of the population is Hindu, 30 per cent Muslim and about 3.5 per cent Sikhs. It consists of three subregions – Pir-Panjal (Rajauri and Poonch districts), Chenab Valley (Kishtwar, Doda and Ramban districts) and Jammu (Jammu, Kathua, Samba, Udhampur and Reasi districts). With its proximity to the Indian plains and year round connectivity, Jammu has better transport

infrastructure compared to Kashmir and Ladakh. The Line of Control (LoC) falls on its western side that divides it from the Pakistan-administered parts. The major languages spoken in Jammu are Dogri, Gojri, Poonchi, Mirpuri, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi.

Ladakh covers an area of about 59,146 square kilometres. It is a thinly populated region and includes vast areas of high-altitude desert valleys. The region is subdivided into two districts, Leh and Kargil. Ladakh has a population of about 300,000, of which 94 per cent are Muslims and Buddhists, divided in almost equal proportions; the rest are Hindus. The Muslim population is Shia dominated. Historically Ladakh included Baltistan, which is now under Pakistan control, separated by the LoC. The major languages spoken in Ladakh are Boti or Ladakhi (with different dialects), Balti, Shina and Kashmiri. Ladakh remains invariably cut off from the rest of the world for almost six months a year. Both its land routes, one via Kashmir Valley and the other via the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, are closed in the winter.

Methodology

This study is based on a participatory research framework. It was adapted from the methodology used for the Kashmir valley project in consultation with the target respondents and civil society actors, who engage with social, political and economic issues in Jammu and Ladakh. The main research tools included a survey and facilitated group discussions to obtain and document young people's opinions in these regions.

Using these tools, participants were asked about their perception of the socio-economic situation, with special focus on the issues that they face with respect to the educational and economic situation in the region. The research also sought to assess young people's sense of their rights and duties, and their abilities to engage in political transformation.

The target age group was youth from the Jammu and Ladakh regions aged between 15–30 years. Local research associates, drawn from this target group, were trained and helped conduct interviews, surveys and participatory group discussions. The surveys were administered through a questionnaire-cum-interview schedule – some of the participants were interviewed on an individual basis and others completed the survey on their own. Participants were invited from schools, colleges, universities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The participatory framework helped sensitise respondents to many of the issues addressed by the research; this was achieved through their interaction with the research associates, through group discussions, and by dissemination of information handouts.

Preparatory tours of the Jammu region were undertaken in August 2013 to Doda and Kishtwar,

and in October 2013 to Poonch, Rajauri and Jammu. A preparatory tour of Leh and Kargil in Ladakh was undertaken in September 2013. During these visits, meetings were held with civil society and political actors, academicians and youth groups.

The fieldwork in Jammu commenced in June 2014 and was completed by December 2014. Participatory discussions and surveys were conducted in Poonch, Jammu, Doda, Kishtwar and Banihal. More than 340 youth participated in the surveys and participatory group discussions: 169 responded to the surveys and over 170 participated in the eight group conversations. Approximately 40 per cent of the participants were females.

The fieldwork in Ladakh commenced in July 2014 and was completed by December 2014. Participatory discussions and surveys were conducted in Kargil, Zanskar and Leh. More than 320 youth participated in the surveys and the participatory group conversations: 153 responded to the surveys and about 170 participated in the seven group conversations. About 50 per cent of the participants were female.

This paper presents the main findings from discussions during the group events and the results of the surveys. Charts throughout the text tabulate the survey results. The results and findings are presented separately for Jammu and Ladakh. However, as the findings show, there is quite a bit of overlap between the two regions in terms of the issues raised and examples quoted. In both cases, the aim is to present a fair appraisal of young people's perception of the situation in which they live.

Presentation and discussion of key findings

Jammu

Highlights

- Youth in Jammu exhibit a deep dilemma, torn between asserting themselves and living submissively within the current socio-political environment – unsure whether to engage in the process of the desired transformation or not.
- Youth are faced with a poorly managed economy and the majority of them struggle to secure a livelihood.
- Young people feel that the current educational and learning environment is outdated and does not help them develop their skills and capabilities fully.
- Corruption, poor healthcare and gender based bias are major concerns for many of them.
- The majority recognise the political conflict and want a resolution, however their views are diverse on what the resolution should look like.
- Young people claim that they believe in democracy. However, many have a limited understanding of their fundamental rights and duties.

Socio-economic context

For many young people living in Jammu region, participation in a discussion on socio-political transformation, and on rights and duties, is a rare opportunity. The youth in cities and towns get some opportunities to do so, but in rural areas youth are rarely exposed to such discourses. When such discussions are held, they feel apprehensive about sharing their aspirations unless they are assured of the purpose and feel comfortable with other participants. Many deem such engagement fruitless and would rather focus on their “education and livelihoods”.

In group discussions participants raised issues around livelihood, education, ecological degradation, gender-based discrimination, poor healthcare and problems with the present development paradigm among others. Concerns were expressed about political structures, with participants citing examples of corruption (lack of transparency, lack of accountability and nepotism) in public institutions, unproductive politics, and inefficient day-to-day governance. Similar issues were highlighted in the surveys. Chart 1 shows the percentage of respondents that identified particular issues as a problem, and percentage of respondents that wanted to engage in resolving them.

The discussions also indicated that youth generally are experiencing tremendous levels of stress. Many attributed this to the need for “more cash to live a modern life”, exemplifying this by pointing to the cost of electronic gadgets for communication, electrical appliances to get warm or stay cool, and

petrochemical-based transport. Further examples shared included the cost of plastic and steel items, and new pesticides that are replacing traditional, environmentally friendly materials and practices. All have to be imported and paid for. The modern trends for “privacy” and “individualistic” lifestyles are also replacing the sharing culture. Each family wants to own resources and equipment that communities would share in the not so distant past.

Some link this kind of economic development with environmental degradation and natural calamities. This was also brought into focus by the floods that hit Jammu and Kashmir in September 2014. A diagnosis of the root causes of these calamities and disasters gets overshadowed by the focus on the horrors it brings, making people feel helpless and insecure.

Education and learning system

Education is highly valued by the youth in Jammu region. Individuals who have higher academic degrees or have travelled outside for education are thought to have an advantage. Youth in this region believe that education is the key for getting employment. Some complain that even though that might be true, education does not help them become good at living a fulfilling life. However, most participants expressed a desire for quality education that would pave the way for their livelihoods and help them become better people.

A few participants said that they were able to make good use of the available educational resources and excel in their life, but many suffer from the

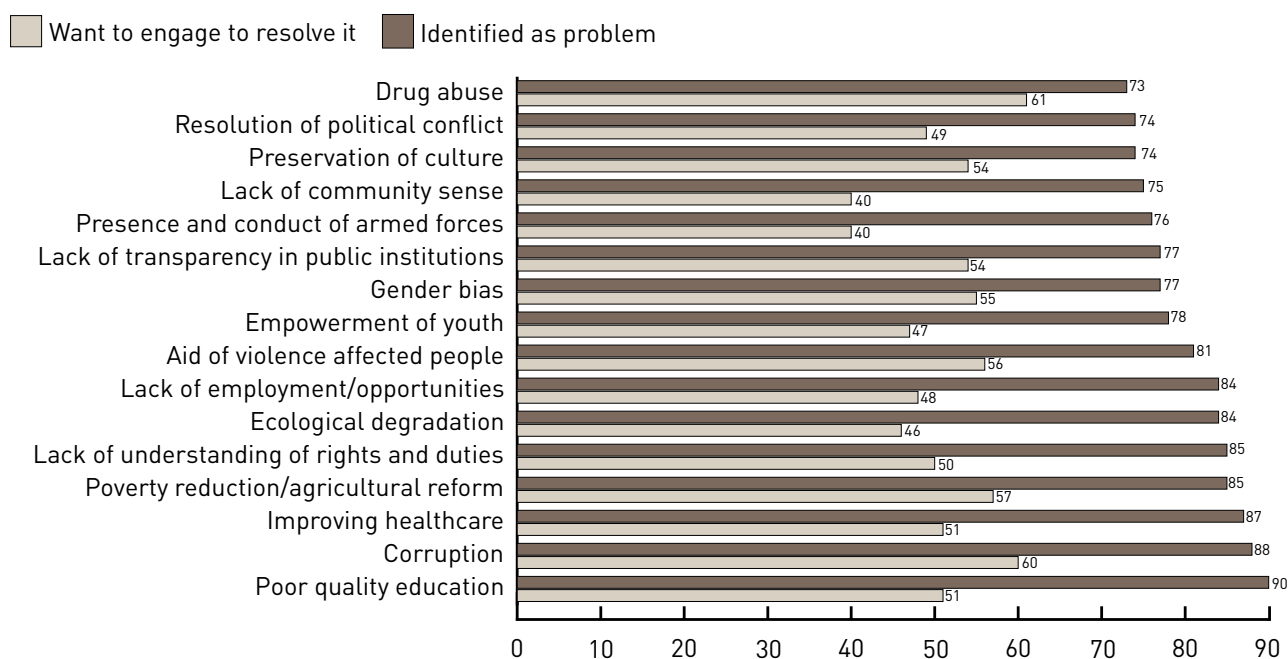


Chart 1: Issues identified as problems by young people surveyed in Jammu, and willingness to engage in resolving problems

consequences of an inadequate and limiting education system: 74 per cent of the survey respondents said they face some kind of a serious problem with education, 90 per cent identified poor quality education as a major problem and 51 per cent said they wanted to engage to improve it.

Although youth are not prevented from attending school or college if they can afford it, they feel the education system in the state is stale and does not teach them much. Some participants were able to articulate the perceived problems in the curriculum and the teaching methodology, which, they say, limit their capacity and inhibit growth in some key areas. They mention lack of focus on important skills such as critical thinking and research, decision-making, process-oriented approaches, managing relationships, leadership and living in their own environment. Some argue that the present education system does not teach them much beyond making them literate.

Most young people in the Jammu region attend government-run schools and colleges, which lack basic facilities like computers or internet connectivity. These institutions do not provide co-curricular activities that may help students develop attributes such as creative expression. Although, the infrastructure of the privately run schools is comparatively better than the government run schools, the methodology remains the same. Technologies like IT are not yet part of mainstream education – youth complain that college and even university students, especially those attending institutions in rural areas, are rarely exposed to IT and other current technologies. In some areas students have to travel distances of 50–100 kilometres to towns to attend college. Those from poor rural backgrounds often dream of getting government jobs (for example, as teachers or clerks) and supporting their families. This is the basic aim of education for them. They are encouraged, and sometimes forced, by elders to get

degrees with the only goal of becoming eligible for a government job.

The participants in the conversations argued that the educational curriculum is outdated and does not reflect the reality around them. Youth are unhappy with the current system and think that its present form is part of the problems they face. Many have to choose subjects that do not necessarily suit their interests or strengths because of lack of options and quality. Little of what they learn is drawn from their own culture and tradition. Participants noted that there is no innovation in education and the system continues to produce graduates in bulk that are only fit to work as clerks in government establishments.

“If we study a law of chemistry – we will read it, but won’t apply it. We won’t observe it. Also, how did the person who has discovered the law arrive at that law? Nobody talks about that. How did they do it? What was the process? Our education system does not teach.”

[Participant in a group discussion]

When asked what they think their school or college education lacked, most respondents raised issues related to the quality of education (including concerns about the curriculum, educational methodology, teaching of life skills, etc) followed by concerns about inadequate educational infrastructure and lack of co-curricular activities, which could help make them become socially and politically aware and productive. Participants also mentioned that there is a lack of public libraries and recreational spaces.

Many participants complained that the learning system does not provide sufficient grounding

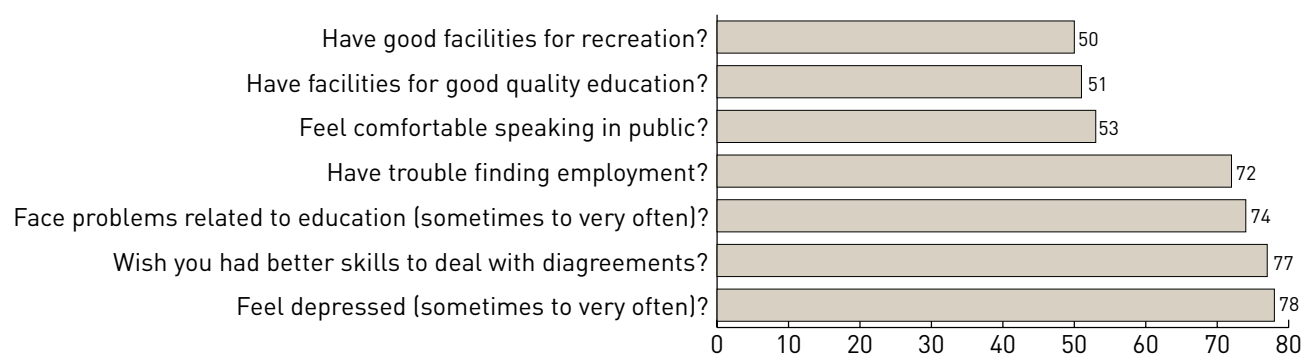


Chart 2: Attitudes to education – percentage of respondents from Jammu that replied in affirmative in response to each question

to allow them to get meaningful employment or become productive citizens. The region's educational system does not integrate with the dynamics of local culture. Overall, the learning environment is judged as grossly insufficient to address the needs of young people.

Young people expressed many ideas and suggestions on how to improve the education system. These included localisation of the curriculum, improvement in teacher-student relationships, addition of co-curricular activities to build socio-political awareness and life skills, and creating cross-regional links with other educational and youth organisations to build mutual understanding. Many doubt that these ideas will be taken up and tried in practice.

Economy – the constant struggle for livelihoods

A major cause of anxiety among young people is the uncertainty about how to ensure their livelihood: 84 per cent of survey participants identified lack of employment options as a major issue; 85 per cent identified poverty reduction and agriculture reform as a major area of concern; 72 per cent said they have trouble finding employment; 78 per cent feel they suffer from depression of varying degrees, primarily because of this uncertainty around livelihoods.

Young people feel that they have been encouraged away from traditional sources of livelihood like agriculture, and they do not trust that the government will be able – or perhaps lacks the intention – to do anything about unemployment. Participants shared that they do not have the confidence to do something on their own. Only a few have been able to secure government jobs or to take advantage of the entrepreneurship support offered by the government and, to some extent, by a few non-governmental organisations in the region.

In rural areas, young people who are giving up farming and other traditional occupations to get education for an “office job” are particularly restless. The key issue is lack of jobs, but many participants also shared that their education does not equip them with skills to earn a livelihood. Although the main goal of obtaining an education is to get a job, many are unable to find work despite spending many years of their life at school and college.

During the group conversations, the issue of bureaucracy (“red tapism”), which is a barrier on ordinary people starting new businesses was also raised. The perception is that those who enjoy power – or who can pay to get around the bureaucratic

obstacles – can get anything done without regard for laws, conventions or social and environmental concerns. For most people wanting to start a business, however, bureaucracy is an obstacle.

“We are not able to face our parents, we can't imagine doing anything for them, we are not able to do anything. There are no jobs...”

“There are [a very] limited [number of] jobs, which leads to competition, selfishness...”

[Participants in a group discussion]

In the discussions, participants also voiced disquiet about government economic policy and regulation. The perception was that the implementation of laws and policies to improve the economy is half-hearted; it is often a record-keeping exercise that does not ensure progress or the achievement of desired outcomes. The participants shared that many people are poor even though governments always claim that they are fighting poverty. Despite decades of promises, plans and heavy expenditure on alleviating poverty, many people are finding it hard to make ends meet. This is exacerbated by rising expectations; young people feel the increasing pressures of a modern lifestyle; a lot of money is needed to achieve or attain what is needed – or what one is expected to have – to live in today's world.

More generally, the youth feel that economic development is haphazard. Basic infrastructure is often missing or lacking. For example, the supply of electricity for a majority of the population is only on for 8 hours to 16 hours a day. Some areas are without electricity. The voltage standard is 220 V, but people in the region get anywhere between 80 V to 150 V, which renders electrical appliances underutilised, inefficient or damaged. (The option of circumventing this problem by buying a voltage enhancer has now been banned as it puts too much pressure on the electricity supply.)

Some participants in the group conversations make valuable suggestions on how their economic prospects could be improved. However, a majority could not articulate ideas on how to address the problems. Suggestions included strengthening of entrepreneurship support, using local resources more efficiently, building new ventures around local resources and for local needs, improving tourism infrastructure and the private sector, and reorientating education for skills development and

local resource-based development. The challenge, many say, is that the present system of governance does not inspire confidence that it can address the economic challenges faced by society.

Governance, politics and conflict

Although some participants were able to share the details of their usual struggles, and how the present social, economic and political systems were affecting their individual life in a manner that demonstrated a comprehensive understanding, many of them were unable to explain details or examples of these issues. The majority, it seemed, were more concerned and focused on their own education and with securing a livelihood. However, when asked a pointed question, most participants did feel that the political conflict was an important concern: 74 per cent of the survey respondents said resolution of the political conflict is important to them. Many were sympathetic to the protest demonstrations (that are mainly held in the Kashmir valley): 63 per cent think that the protests for political rights are legitimate and 51 per cent think such protests are non-violent.

A few participants spoke of the “Jammu perception” that Kashmiris are “separatists” and “want to go with Pakistan”, but many participants also brought up the issue of human rights violations particularly in the Kashmir valley and the suffering of the people there. The political situation is a sensitive issue and there was no consensus amongst those that took part in this study. In some group sessions, this issue was not discussed at all owing to reluctance of the participants to engage in a “political discussion”. In others, participants were divided in proposing a way to resolve the political dispute. However, the discussions indicated that a political resolution should be able to satisfy the “wishes of the people”. Many participants recognised the need for dialogue and interaction between the people of Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir to enhance mutual understanding.

“We have to find the similarities and points where all the people of all the regions can come together, and then after that we can maybe also talk about the differences.”

[Participant in a group discussion]

In some discussions, particularly in the areas around the district of Jammu, many young people spontaneously refer to examples or incidents from Indian national politics. For example, some

noted the phenomenon of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a political party that has its roots in the India Against Corruption movement and which has been successful in elections to the Delhi Legislative Assembly. Some participants were interested in what the AAP phenomenon means and how it might help in a local context. Many also talk about the two major Indian political parties, Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), including what prime minister Narendra Modi is proposing or challenging. Participants discussed politics in a manner that signifies that many young people in this part of the region (especially in and around Jammu district) do not necessarily question the current political arrangement between India and Jammu and Kashmir. Some of the participants do mention Article 370¹, the provision of the Indian constitution that establishes India’s “special” relationship with Jammu and Kashmir, but they often fail to explain its structure, functions and implications for the region.

Many participants in the discussions in this area also claim that Jammu is discriminated against and the problems in Kashmir are paid more attention by the state authorities. They cite the example of the allocation of development funds based on the reports that appear in the media. A few participants also shared that the discrimination was just a perception created by corrupt interests and people should seek to know the real situation for themselves.

In contrast, barring some exceptions, the participants in Pir Panjal or Chenab regions hesitated to discuss political issues. In rural areas, many young people shy away from publicly identifying with politics. Many seem to believe that being a politician necessarily means that you are a manipulative person. Another reason seems to be a tremendous sense of alienation from the institution of politics and governance in general. The political questions in the discussions did not evoke enthusiastic responses from most participants. The presence and behaviour of the army, paramilitaries and police is also a cause of concern for young people. Some participants in these areas said that they don’t feel safe giving political opinions in such gatherings. They raised the issue of how the political protests are dealt with violently resulting in grave human rights violations including killings. Many talked about how the resources of the region, especially water, are used but not for the benefit of the local people. The common examples cited were the July 2013 Gool killings² in Ramban district, and

1 Noorani, AG (2000) “Article 370: Law and politics”, *Frontline*; Volume 17, Issue 19; 16–29 September; accessed from www.frontline.in/static/html/fl1719/17190890.htm

2 *Hindustan Times* (2013) “J&K: Protests over Ramban Killings”, 19 July, accessed from www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/j-amp-k-protests-over-ramban-killings-curfew-in-valley/article1-1094794.aspx

the power projects run by the Indian National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC)³.

Overall, as Chart 3 indicates, most youth are not satisfied with the current role of media and politicians: 49 per cent feel misrepresented. The focus on terrorism and crime, especially the perceived overreaction of governments and media to incidents, fuels an atmosphere of insecurity and distrust. Many question the role of the armed forces and the police – 76 per cent say the presence and conduct of armed forces is an area of major concern – however, a sizable number seems to support them unconditionally, with 42 per cent feeling that police respects and protects people.

In response to the question about the conduct of armed forces, many people wrote remarks like “sometimes they violate our rights” or mentioned the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), which suggests an indirect acknowledgement of human rights violations but without holding the armed forces directly responsible. Most participants shared examples of human rights or of their violation that appear in the local media. Many participants hesitated or were unable to talk about the details of what human rights mean or what their origin was.

Corruption in public institutions, politics and economic development emerged as a serious concern across the board, second to concerns about education: 88 per cent identified corruption as a major problem and 60 per cent wanted to engage with it; 77 per cent of respondents also identified lack of transparency in public institutions as a major concern. Issues ranged from the petty bribes people pay to get things

done in a government establishment to large-scale misuse of power or manipulation of public opinion. In addressing this issue, young people also pointed to a lack of moral courage and sense of responsibility in people, primarily because of a lack of understanding of rights and duties: 85 per cent of the respondents felt that a lack of an understanding of rights and duties was a major problem.

Other major concerns

The healthcare infrastructure, and the frequency and scale of illnesses, emerged as one of the other major concerns for participants: 87 per cent of the survey respondents identified improving healthcare as a top priority. Almost all perceive that there is an increased incidence of various forms of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and flu, etc. Despite being a rich and vibrant society, environmentally and culturally, stress levels run very high resulting in other kinds of health issues; in the survey, 78 per cent of respondents said that they sometimes or very often felt under stress.

The environment emerged as a source of concern as well: 84 per cent of the survey respondents identified ecological degradation as one of the major problems. The issues raised by participants in the group conversations included deforestation, poor waste management and pollution, leading to an alarming decrease in the quality of air, water and food. Many among them blame the government and local administrations for their lack of attention to these issues; they also hold fellow citizens responsible for not being conscious and helpful in preserving natural resources. For example, participants acknowledged the role of the public in ensuring that the policies and laws related to the use of natural resources and

3 *Kashmir Life* (2011) “NHPC in Focus”, 3 Oct, accessed from www.kashmir-life.net/nhpc-in-focus-1788/



Chart 3: Attitudes to politics and security – percentage of respondents from Jammu that replied in affirmative in response to each question

control of pollution are respected, implemented and enforced.

Participation of women in the group conversations was a continuous challenge. In some places women were able to participate, especially when the conversations were organised in a school or a college. The issue of discrimination against women was raised in all discussion groups although hesitantly so in some places: 77 per cent of the survey respondents identified gender based bias as a major issue. With a few exceptions, female participants in group conversations struggled more than the male participants to articulate their concerns and issues.

Ladakh

Highlights

- Youth in Ladakh are struggling to make sense of modern influences that are taking them away from their traditional way of life, which has sustained them so far.
- Young people feel that the economy is being managed poorly and the majority struggle to secure a livelihood.
- Youth feel that the educational system is inefficient and insufficient to build their capacity to take charge of their lives.
- Corruption, poor healthcare infrastructure, and ecological and cultural degradation are also major concerns.
- The majority of youth have a very limited understanding of the Kashmir political conflict, but want to learn more about the problem.
- Young people tend to characterise the relationship of Ladakh with Kashmir as “strained”.
- Many young people say they believe in democracy, but they are unable to talk about much detail of what it means for their role as individuals.

Socio-economic context

Many issues faced by young people in Ladakh are similar to those faced by youth in other parts of the developing world. However, these must be placed in the context of Ladakh’s recent history. Ladakh only started to become accessible to the rest of the world in 1970s, and many facets of indigenous cultural practice still survive in the region, although these are under constant onslaught through the influence of the modern consumer economy and the changing aspirations of the people. However, many people are trying to use the lessons learned from

rampant and uncritical adoption of modernisation in other places to find sustainable ways of development in Ladakh.

Invariably, young people in Ladakh raise issues of poor governance, limited employment opportunities, poor quality education, corruption, poor healthcare, competition for education and economic opportunities, erosion of cultural practices and exploitation. Many Ladakhi youth feel that they need to adapt to the demands of the emerging economy and seek modern employment opportunities. Some, however, feel that the traditional wisdom and way of life that has sustained them over centuries cannot be ignored. They say that modern lifestyles and tourism create so much waste – something that neither they nor the older generations have ever seen before.

Conducting this research in Ladakh was a challenge. Many young people in Ladakh are hesitant or unable to articulate the details of their everyday struggles. It seems as if they are not able to pay attention to the broader trends in their society. The pressures of the modern life keep them busy in pursuing academic education and in struggling for employment. Participation in a discussion on socio-political transformation is a rare opportunity. Most youth, especially those in rural areas, are unable to articulate their views in unfamiliar settings such as a facilitated group discussion. Also many participants were unable or unwilling to respond to some of the questions in the survey, thus reducing the size of the sample for these questions. It seemed hard for them to articulate their opinion or choose a response on some issues. Some young people however, particularly those living in the Leh town area, are engaged in some capacity building programmes run by certain community groups and non-governmental organisations: they are able to raise and articulate their views on many of these issues.

“There has never been such kind of an honest dialogue between Kashmiris and Ladakhis. I look forward to organising meetings like these...”

[Participant in a group discussion]

Education and learning system

The survey and the group discussions indicate that majority of the young people in Ladakh perceive the quality of education they receive as very poor:

87 per cent identified poor quality education as a major problem and 68 per cent said they wanted to engage to improve it. They do not question the need for schooling, but they raise questions about the quality of the curriculum, educational infrastructure and method of delivery. Many young people raise the issue of physical punishments, such as beatings, given to students in schools. They are also concerned with teachers using their position and authority to do “whatever they (teachers) want”. For example, many students shared that they would be asked to bring in food items from home for teachers, and doing this would get them good marks. Overall, 75 per cent of the survey respondents said they face some kind of a serious problem with education.

A major issue in their schooling, raised by many participants especially in Leh and Zanskar, was the use of Urdu as a medium of instruction. Urdu is the official state language in Jammu and Kashmir. It was forced on Ladakhis, for whom it was an alien language. As a consequence, many Ladakhi students fail to follow what was being taught and they invariably fail their exams. Participants reported that until very recently more than 90 per cent of students failed in the 10th grade board exams. Ladakhi students were often termed “dumb” by their teachers, who were mostly from the Kashmir valley. Many young people, particularly in Leh, felt that the teachers from Kashmir valley did not care about the welfare of their students and did not treat them well. According to them, the teachers from the Kashmir valley regarded their job postings

in Ladakh as some sort of punishment – taking them away from their families and forcing them to live on their own. They resented the posting, which reflected in their behaviour at school; their Ladakhi students were at the receiving end of such behaviour. Some participants mentioned that some desirable changes have recently been made in the curriculum and the teacher postings, but much more needs to be done.

Young people also complained that opportunities for higher education locally are very limited. To pursue a subject of their choice or for better quality higher education, most students are forced to go to other parts of the state or further afield in India. Many participants also brought up the issue of competition with only ‘toppers’ in class availing whatever small opportunities there are for personality development. The bulk of other students received no attention except warnings.

Another concern raised by many participants was the education they get in schools and colleges was disconnected from the way they live and from the environment in which they live in. Many participants suggested that the Ladakhi culture and environment should be integrated into the curriculum, so that they can make career choices based on local resources. They also demanded increased use of local language and the employment of more local teachers in schools. Many participants also raised the issue of teachers not being proficient and asked that proper and regular training programmes for teachers should

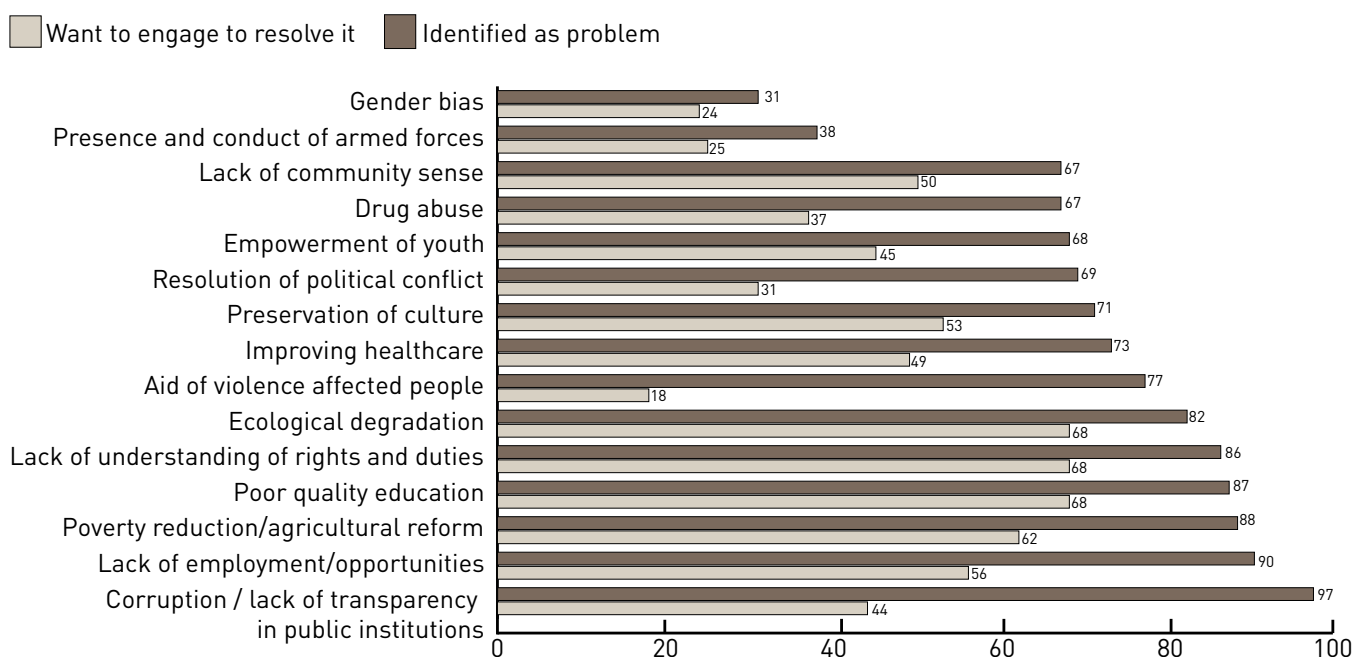


Chart 4: Issues identified critical for transformation of society by young people surveyed in Ladakh, and willingness to engage in resolving problems

be organised. They say the present educational system is a one-way delivery process – from teacher to student. Students are not asked to share what they think or feel, and that is reflected in how they behave outside of school as well.

“Nobody ever asked us whether things are going well with education or not? When we are studying in a school we can’t speak. These discussions should happen in schools regularly.”

“For the first time I seriously thought about where I will be in ten years...”

[Participants in a group discussion]

Most participants perceive that the purpose of education is two-fold: development of skills for employment, and moral and ethical development in order for them to become productive citizens. The discussions and responses to the survey indicate that the present educational and learning environment does not satisfy either of these two purposes, and in many ways exacerbates the problems that the Ladakhi society faces.

Economic issues – struggle for jobs, erosion of cultural practices and traditional livelihoods

Securing a livelihood is by far the top concern for youth in Ladakh: 90 per cent identified lack of employment options as a major issue, 86 per cent said they have trouble finding employment. This is also a major cause of stress: 80 per cent feel they suffer from depression in varying degrees. Young participants said that they feel under pressure from parents and society in general – they perceive that

their “success or failure” are measured on “how much money they can get”. Many young people complain that the education they get is not adequate enough to get them employment; it does not give them skills that can get them jobs.

In terms of career choices, participants considered government jobs and contracts, work associated with tourism (providing supplies and services to tourists), providing services and supplies to the army, and establishing small businesses based around the “modern lifestyle” as some of the major employment generators; handicrafts and farming products are also mentioned. However, many youth feel that farming and traditional practices should form the core of the Ladakhi economy, with other areas and sectors being subsidiary: 88 per cent of the respondents identifying poverty reduction and agricultural reform as a major area of concern,

When asked about their ideas on how to address unemployment, many young participants came up with ideas, such as localising the educational curriculum, strengthening the traditional livelihoods around products and services needed locally, with a focus on agriculture, animal rearing and handicrafts, and integrating these industries with other “modern” sectors like tourism.

“We have degrees, but we don’t know how to do things... if we don’t get a job, we don’t know how to earn a living...”

“To follow our interest, we have to face a lot of problems... this system make us run from one place to other but we can’t get anything done.”

[Participants in a group discussion]

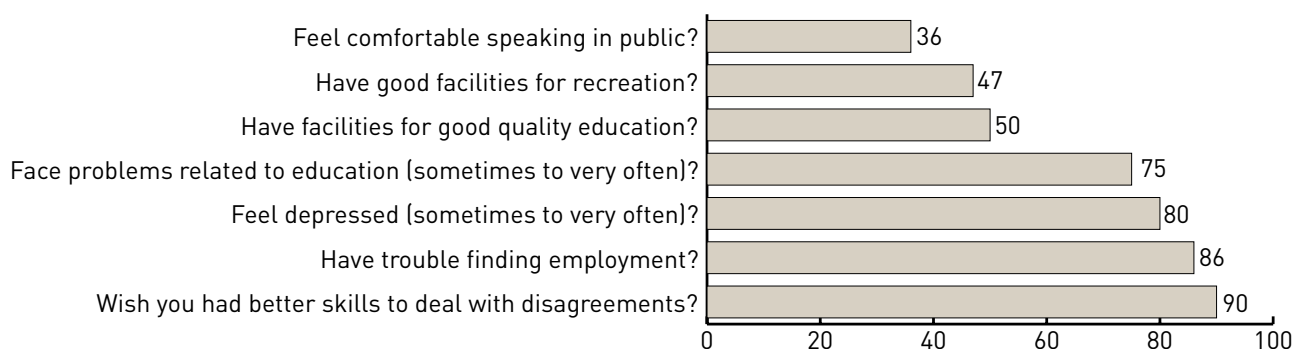


Chart 5: Attitudes to education – percentage of respondents from Ladakh that replied in affirmative in response to each question

Many young people understand that owing to the tough geographical terrain and limited natural resources, Ladakhis have had to develop a unique way of living to survive. With the rapid influences from outside, however, such means of survival are getting eroded. The modern lifestyle encourages imports, with most of the things that are used or consumed in Ladakh brought in from outside. Given the long distances and tough terrain, the cost of transportation – in both monetary and environmental terms – is high and cannot be sustained. In the process a lot of waste is also generated, taking a huge toll on the limited natural resources of the region. Many young people fear that in the near future Ladakhis will be unable to afford imported goods and, thus, will find it harder to survive. Many youth complained that a major portion of the tourist revenue goes to non-Ladakhis (mostly Kashmiris) who have set up businesses in Ladakh. Some Ladakhi youth have started exploring alternatives, such as growing and promoting local products. This interest seems to have resulted from young people's engagement with some non-governmental and community-based initiatives in the region.

Another issue that many participants voiced, especially in Kargil, was the need for all weather connectivity with the Kashmir valley that could give the economy of the region a much needed push. The road between the Kashmir valley and Ladakh remains cut off for almost six months every winter. The youth complained that governments have been promising construction of the Zojila tunnel between Kashmir valley and Ladakh, but progress has been very slow. After a lot of effort by civil society, the work has recently started but it is proceeding very slowly.

Governance, politics and conflict

When asked for their views on the present socio-political situation, corruption in governance and politics is the first thing the participants mention: 97 per cent of the survey respondents identified corruption (and lack of transparency) in public institutions as a major cause of concern and 44 per cent wanted to engage in work to address this issue. Participants in the group conversations shared a common perception that if one has to get anything done in a government office or something that involves public administration one has to pay money or favours in kind. This is also true of the schemes or programmes that are aimed at supporting youth, for example in entrepreneurship. Youth say that politicians and public officials are generally dishonest and cannot be trusted. Not many of the participants were comfortable with the idea of becoming politicians themselves.

Another major concern that young people raise is that they feel the state government is ignorant of the actual needs of the region. They complain, especially in Leh, that administration and development policy has been made by Kashmir-centric politicians and bureaucrats, and most resources are divided between the divisions of Jammu and Kashmir. Ladakh, being part of the Kashmir division, is not paid due attention. Youth complain that the policies implemented in Kashmir are simply replicated for Leh and Kargil districts (Ladakh), while the specific ground realities of this region are ignored. Many acknowledge that the hill development councils – one for Leh district and one covering Kargil district, established in the 1990s and 2000s respectively – are to a certain extent representative of local aspirations; and have had some impact on services and policy making, but much more remains to be done. Many young people also raise the issue of limited representation in the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly (only four members) and the Indian Parliament (only one member).

The participants' responses also suggest that youth in Ladakh lack a basic understanding about how the political conflict in Kashmir affects their personal, social, economic and political life. Some can mention parts of the various problems, but only a few are able to talk about the details – for example of the various political formations in Kashmir – that demonstrate a comprehensive understanding. Some participants mentioned that they have heard of, or know about, the human rights violations in Kashmir valley. Some recognise that their (and other people's) ignorance about this issue favours the corrupt governments and politicians. Most agree that the conflict must be resolved without further bloodshed, with 69 per cent of the survey respondents saying resolution of the political conflict is important to them. When probed, youth agree that people's political wishes should be respected, with 92 per cent thinking that the protests for political rights are legitimate and 77 per cent thinking that the protests are non-violent.

In their own context, although a significant number of young people see the army presence as a major problem, the majority of them see it as something of a given: only 38 per cent say the presence and conduct of armed forces is an area of major concern. With respect to the state police, most participants shared that the behaviour of police was not a major issue, with 82 per cent of respondents feeling that the police respects and protects people. Some of them, however, raise questions about increasing role of the army, paramilitaries and police in socio-cultural activities.

Generally, young people in Ladakh are hesitant or unable to articulate details that can demonstrate a good understanding of human rights. The discourse of human rights or human rights violations is often linked to the Kashmir conflict. When asked to give examples of human rights, responses were varied and covered issues like voting, education, equality, religion, speech, freedom, food, shelter, health, electricity, roads and information. In the survey, 86 per cent of the respondents felt that the lack of an understanding of rights and duties was a major problem.

Other major concerns

The young respondents in the survey and group conversations raised many other issues. These included ecological degradation (82 per cent of the survey respondents identified ecological degradation as a major problem), poor healthcare infrastructure and services (73 per cent identified improving healthcare a top priority), and the erosion of traditional practices and customs (71 per cent identified a need for preservation of culture).

Many youth also felt that because of modern western influences, people in Ladakhi society do

not associate sufficient value to traditional cultural and religious practices. People are copying western fashions (for example, clothes) and festivals (for example Valentine’s Day and Christmas) without thinking about their relevance to Ladakhi culture. Some, however, argue that the modern system provides equal opportunity to those who can, or are willing to, compete.

Some young people feel that their society is quickly losing a community feeling and an individualistic culture is taking over, with 67 per cent of respondents feeling that there is a lack of community spirit. Many youth feel divided between their respect for their culture and tradition, and their need to follow more modern options and lifestyles to secure their livelihoods. This often results in an identity crisis for many youth.

Surprisingly gender discrimination, generally raised as an issue in other regions, does not feature as a major concern for youth in Ladakh. Some young people attribute that to the strong roles women have traditionally played in Ladakhi society. In many cases, women continue to be prominent. Youth say that issues like rape and dowry are not problems they hear about very often.

The dilemma

Overall, youth in Jammu and Ladakh, like in many other places, seem to be in a deep dilemma – whether to continue on the “easier” path of trying to make best use of what is available in the current competitive atmosphere, or whether to channel their energy and ideas in order to engage fully in the political process for the desired transformation.

There is some consensus on the issues to address. Asked about their top concerns, a majority of

participants pointed to issues around livelihoods, life skills and education, healthcare and other infrastructure, corruption, morality, ecology, and the socio-political situation in both Jammu and Ladakh. This matches responses from associated surveys and group discussions in other neighbouring regions. A critical issue here is to what extent are these young people enabling themselves to engage in finding solutions.



Chart 6: Attitudes to politics and security – percentage of respondents from Ladakh that replied in affirmative in response to each question

In Jammu, 87 per cent of the survey respondents feel that youth have a responsibility to try and make things right, 83 per cent think that youth can lead the desired transformation and 63 per cent think that youth have the ability to change the government. Participation rates are much lower, with only 10 per cent of the respondents actually involved in the process of desired transformation. One way to address this is through the empowerment of young people, and 78 per cent of respondents identified this as a major priority.

In Ladakh, 95 per cent of the survey respondents feel youth have a responsibility to try and make things right, 87 per cent think youth can lead the desired transformation, 78 per cent think that the youth have the ability to change the government, and 68 per cent of them identified the empowerment of youth as a major priority. However, only 7 per cent of the respondents were involved in the process of desired transformation.

This shows that most participants feel that youth both have a responsibility and also the capability to lead the desired transformation. This optimism, however, seems limited to the discussion rooms only, with relative small numbers actively engaged in trying to effect such change. This is indicative of the dilemma wherein young people feel they should change things, whereas at the same time they also feel powerless to do just that.

Many participants see becoming part of the bureaucracy or electoral politics as the only way to effect change. They argue that unless they have some power, they will not be able to do anything; thus becoming a bureaucrat or a politician, or setting up a big business, are the only ways to gain that power. Others take a different point of view. According to them, any well-intentioned person who joins the bureaucracy is unlikely to mobilise any change; once people join the bureaucracy they start enjoying the perks of their positions, their motivation to challenge or change the status quo withers and they become part of the problem. For instance, participants cited the example of poor public transport and bad traffic management. According to them, cars need roads and proper traffic management. Pedestrians have the first right of way but they struggle to find space to walk on the roads. Drivers are often at odds with the pedestrians for right of passage. This often leads to confrontations and accidents. Bureaucrats, politicians, military, police and other state officials, on the other hand,

use their official positions to enforce their right of passage. Hence, they do not face the chaos on the roads as the common people do.

Youth see most of the critical public institutions as corrupt and hence do not trust them. These include political parties, police, parliament and legislatures, the judiciary, education and healthcare systems, media, business etc. Youth in these regions feel alienated and, in such a situation, finding the courage and resources needed to fight for transformation seems like a very tall order.

There are other barriers to engagement. The unexplained tension between the tradition and culture that have sustained people for thousands of years and the modern consumerist economy is adding to the stress that youth feel. Many are unable to understand or explain this tension, and they feel divided and in a crisis that they are unable to resolve. Many participants mentioned that they do not know where to start the process of transformation. They do not know whether they should start with action themselves, or work through the media, politics or education. In Ladakh, many youth seem to be thinking about change based on their own culture. In Jammu, which is a bigger region with different socio-political complexities, a lower percentage seemed to attach great value to their traditional culture and were more attuned to modern influences.

A final barrier is the ability to articulate demands and aspirations. During the discussions in Jammu, many participants (even college and university students) were not able to articulate their views or felt uncomfortable about expressing opinions – an indicator of how the education system limits the capacity of the students. Many participants struggled to comprehensively articulate basic concepts of democracy, economy or education. Only 53 per cent of the survey respondents in Jammu said they feel comfortable to speak in public.

Similarly, in Ladakh many young participants were unable to articulate their views or were uncomfortable responding to questions. Many of those who have engaged with programmes outside of the formal educational system have gained better understanding of some of the issues they face; they have also developed the confidence to talk about them in public. But overall, only 36 per cent of Ladakhi respondents felt comfortable speaking in public.

General recommendations

Many suggestions by the participants in the conversations have been outlined above. The following recommendations have been developed from what some of the participants said and reflect the broad direction of the discussions.

Localisation of the educational curriculum and participatory methodology – education of children should be based on the environment in which they live in, drawing on what they see and can experience around them. This means the education should be based on local culture and the way of life that has evolved over thousands of years of the collective experience of society. Education should not only enable children to build on their culture, but also help them think independently and make use of learning, experience and technology from around the world.

A participatory teaching and learning methodology should be used, ensuring that the focus is on inculcating life skills rather than making youngsters memorise facts and theories. The educational curriculum and methodology should be skills orientated, so that it helps youth to engage in meaningful livelihoods.

Building livelihoods on indigenous resources and practices – the primary purpose of the economy should be to fulfil everybody's needs while using resources economically and efficiently. Indigenous practices (like farming and handicrafts) and

resources (like land, water, flora and fauna) that have sustained people for thousands of years should continue to form the bedrock of any new system. Rampant and wasteful use of natural resources should not be allowed. The aim of an economic system should be to explore sustainable ways of prosperous living through the integration of indigenous practices with modern skills, knowledge and technology.

Local community-based credit unions should be established to support new entrepreneurs. The present support systems must be strengthened, made transparent and the overall support atmosphere must be made conducive and encouraging for those wishing to start and grow new businesses.

Participatory models of democracy, governance and administration must be adopted to end the problems of corruption, nepotism and lack of transparency that have become the features of the present system. All government and public administration systems must make voluntary disclosure of all information that is of public interest.

Inter-community and inter-regional dialogical linkages and conversations should be proactively established and strengthened to enhance mutual understanding of the situation in other communities and to foster a sense of cooperation amongst peoples of different communities and regions.

Acknowledgements

This research was only possible because of the willingness of the participants who, as representatives of youth from Jammu and Ladakh, took part in the interviews, surveys and group discussions, and trusted us with their thoughts. I want to express my sincere gratitude to them.

I am grateful to Chozang Namgyal (in Ladakh) and Chetan Ghai (in Jammu), Roof Mir (in Banihal), Nasir Patigaru, Lubna Rafiqi, Sajad Qadir, Mohammad Saquib, Hadia Javaid, Shaheena Parveen, Saleem Malik and many others all of whom cannot be named for their help and support in organising the discussions, conducting the surveys in Jammu and Ladakh, and helping with the analysis of the results.

I am grateful to the many journalists, academics and social workers in Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, who were more than willing to share

information and resources with me and supported this research.

It is with gratitude that I mention Conciliation Resources, an NGO based in London, UK, whose support, encouragement and patience was crucial for conducting this research.

I am also grateful to Kargil Development Project, an NGO based in Kargil, Ladakh whose support to the overall project and help with organising the conversations in Kargil and Zanskar was invaluable for conducting this research.

Thanks are also due to my colleagues, friends and family in Kashmir and other places whose help and support made it possible for me to conduct this research.

I recognise this with pleasure and thank you all very much.

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