

AMBIGUITY OF ROLE-MODELS AND VALUES AMONG INDIAN YOUTH*

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Using samples of students and older teachers, inter-generational differences were analysed on three measures, namely, perception and determination of role-models, evaluation of events with socio-moral connotations, and judgment of certain 'ambiguous' behaviour traits. Comparisons revealed that the young had more varied and unstable role-models, were vacillating and undecided when confronted with situations involving moral dilemma, and evaluated the 'ambiguous' behaviour traits differently. Some socio-psychological factors underlying this value ambiguity among the youth have been discussed.

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Youth is a distinct and important period in the life cycle of the individual. It is an important phase in one's life because in every culture youth is valued. Sometimes youth has been stereotyped as being rash, indiscreet, impulsive and foolish, and the expression "*gadah pachisi*" ("donkey's twenty-five") is current in some regional languages characterizing the tendency of youth to resort to unwise and impetuous behaviour which is expected of an individual up to the age of twenty-five and which is to be ignored by the understanding elders. But in spite of certain derogatory and undesirable features sometimes ascribed to it, youth marks in certain respects the peak in the physical and mental growth of the individual. There are legends and stories in which some great kings of yore resorted to penance and worship to maintain the vigour and grandeur of youth eternally, or to regain it after it had been lost with the onset of old age. The period after youth may be characterised by greater wisdom and maturity, but there is a widespread belief that a general decline, however imperceptible and gradual it may be, sets in soon after. Therefore, it is not surprising that not only youth is cherished, but there is often a yearning in the later years to return to this phase of one's life cycle.

Youth is characterised by a biological "coming of age", and it ends the period of one's childhood and adolescence, and marks the entry into adulthood. Physical maturity at this phase is complete. However, psychologically speaking, this period has often been viewed as one of crisis which the individual has to face in varying degrees. It is only by resolving this crisis in some fashion that he can develop to "the fullest extent emotionally and socially into an adult. This period of crisis, whether it be in the life of an individual or that of a whole generation of young people, is often reflected in certain kinds of strains and stresses and has been variously described as generation gap, vocational and social disorientation, alienation, ambivalence and "identity confusion". The concept of identity confusion, as defined by Erikson (1968), denotes a person's uncertainty about his future role in society as well as a sense of discontinuity between his personal past and his future. As experienced subjectively, it means a feeling of fragmentation, of indecision, and of isolation from social and interpersonal contacts. It is not the purpose of this paper to elaborate on the concept of identity confusion or its allied concept of identity crisis. It would be quite sufficient to say that an intensified

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kind of such a confusion is reflected in a variety of psycho social disorders such as anxiety, anomie, despair, depersonalization, meaninglessness, isolation, loneliness, feeling of anonymity, pessimism, and the like which seem to characterize the contemporary youth.

At certain periods in history, the resolving of identity confusion on the part of the individual becomes more difficult. Certain cultural and historical factors influence this intensity. One such factor which is important is the rapidity of change through which a particular society is passing. One of the features of the modern Indian society is the rapid breakdown of traditional values, and the transitional character of our social, political and economic structure. This phenomenon of transition has been taken to underlie the general incidence of high anxiety which has been observed among the Indian student population (Sinha, 1962). There have been revolutionary changes in the entire pattern of life within the last three decades. Old values have tumbled and the new ones are still in a state of flux. The phenomenon has been very aptly described by Leon Guerrero, once the Filipino Ambassador in London, as characterising most of the Asian countries. According to him, the elements in all the movements in Western history — the break-up of the Roman Empire, the overthrow of the feudal system, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the French and American revolutions, the disruption of the social system in the industrial revolution, the class-war of the Russian revolution — are all simultaneously bubbling in the Asian revolution. Gunnar Myrdal (1968) has also remarked about this confusing rapidity and disorderly sequence of all round changes that are taking place in India and other Asian countries: "It is, then, not only a telescoping in the sense that the changes are concentrated in a

shorter time span, but there is also a break in the order in which the changes occur. What could in Europe unfold gradually and proceed as a grand symphony with one movement following the other in thematic sequence is by destiny syncopated in South Asia into almost a cacophony." In such a period of rapid change, the problem of identity confusion is intensified due to the break-down of traditional values and traditional roles and where adult support for youth's search for identity is lacking and where the guidelines for accepted behaviour get blurred and contradictory. On the plane of individual personality, it is often reflected in the experience of contradictions and inner conflicts, and a mode of life which has been characterised as "compartmentalization" by Dawson (1963). Sinha (1962) while analysing the cultural factors in the emergence of anxiety has also remarked on the dichotomies inherent in the Indian situation and personality, and he characterized the same as "tolerance of dissonance" (Sinha, 1974). Nirad Chaudhuri (1966), the famous writer, in his book *The Continent of Circe* designates it as "Janus Multifrons", and talks of "terrible dichotomy" of the Hindu personality with a large number of antithetical though connected traits shaping behaviour. These "opposites almost neutralize one another, and the indecisive tug-of-war stultifies all his actions."

Man inherits a limited repertory of responses. Most of the responses are learned, and a majority of them are learned from others, i.e. culturally acquired. In this respect, among other cultural influences, the perception of role-models which the individual tries to emulate and regard as providing guidelines for his conduct, and perception of what is right and wrong, proper and improper have a vital part to play in the psychological growth of the individual. The present paper is concerned

with reporting the results of a few studies conducted in the year 1969 constituting parts of a larger project on intergenerational differences (Sinha, 1972), and which reflect the ambiguities and confusion in the reactions of Indian youth of today. Directly it is concerned with the analysis of choice of hero-image and role-models, and perception and evaluation of certain "ambiguous" socio-moral traits as well as of some events and incidents representing transgression of certain accepted codes of behaviour. The strategy of the study was to contrast the reactions of the youth against those of persons belonging to the older generation. The sample studied consisted of 300 university and college students from the city of Allahabad and 150 younger teachers below 25, and 150 university and college teachers who were 40 years or above. The overall mean age of the older teachers was 48.18 years, and that of younger teachers 23.03, and of students a little over 19 and 16 years respectively for university and college students.

The sample was subjected to three tests. The first consisted of perception of people and determination of role-models and hero-images. The subject was asked to name five persons from whose life he may have gathered inspiration and whom he considered to have influenced him in his life and behaviour. Later on he was asked to name two of them in order, whom he regarded as the greatest persons of all. Thirdly, he was requested to name qualities possessed by these two persons which in his opinion made them notable. Analysis of responses indicated the role-models accepted by the subject as well as the qualities considered as significant in them.

On the second test, namely, the perception of events, the subject was required to evaluate a number of situations with socio-moral connotations. Each one depicted a transgression of some common social or

moral code like misappropriating public fund because the individual was in urgent need of money, burning a shop by the crowd because it had not closed itself when a general strike was declared, having a secret love-affair with a married woman, travelling without ticket, and similar other situations. The incidents were so chosen that they represented some typical common place occurrences. The incidents were presented one by one to the subject, and he was required to indicate whether he considered each as 'proper' or 'improper', or he was unable to decide about it ("neutral responses"). Analysis was made of the frequencies of each of the three types of responses.

The third study consisted of presentation of a list of "ambiguous" behaviour traits as well as other qualities like honesty, cheating, etc. which when found in a person could be considered as desirable or undesirable, as the case may be. A long list containing some desirable, undesirable, and "ambiguous" behaviour traits, randomly mixed, was presented to the subject and he was asked to indicate whether each quality when found in a person, would be considered good or bad, positive or negative, desirable or undesirable.

The analysis of choice of role-models and heroes revealed interesting age differences. The older generation of teachers displayed higher degree of agreement among themselves regarding the choice of persons and personalities from whom they received inspiration. They belonged both from the past and the present time, and constituted figures from the political as well as religious world, and some were social reformers. Among the young, both students and teachers, the choice of models was more widely dispersed. They chose more frequently role-models from political world of recent times, and did not seem to receive much inspiration from the great

personalities of the past. Besides, they also mentioned as their models persons from the world of entertainment and sports, though the frequency of such choices was not very high. It was observed that hero-image and models for the younger generation were more varied and unstable. Barring outstanding personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri, they did not seem to have any clear-cut role-models from whom they derived inspiration and after whom they liked to shape their conduct. The young displayed relatively greater variety in their choice. Apart from the three personalities mentioned earlier, they referred to a large number of figures from the political world, some of them being local personalities and quite obscure, and even film stars and sports champions. It was also observed that all their models belonged to the contemporary world, and there was little general agreement among themselves as to their choice. Unlike the young, the older sample mentioned even mythological and legendary personalities frequently, and confined their choice generally to well-known mythological, historical, or contemporary people famous for their contributions in the fields of science, literature, politics, religion, and social reform. Lack of agreement and high degree of diversity in the choice of models reflect uncertainty and instability of role-models for the young. However, it is to be observed that when the subject was asked to indicate the qualities which he thought made those persons great, there was considerable agreement not only among the two groups representing the young, but also between the younger and older generations. The most frequently mentioned qualities were patriotism, statesmanship, humanitarianism, social reform and so on. It may be noted that though these were frequently mentioned by the young as qualities that made their "heroes" great,

many of the "heroes" chosen (for example, film stars, cricket players, etc.) were such that these qualities could hardly be said to reside in them. This emphasizes further the ambiguity of role-models of the young.

Similar uncertainty and instability was noticed in the analysis of evaluation of incidents representing socio-moral transgressions. It may be mentioned that compared with the older generation, the young displayed a more permissive and less condemnatory stance. This was true for 6 out of 12 events which were evaluated. However, what was more intriguing was that to most of these situations, there was a sizable proportion of uncertain "neutral" responses. This was particularly high among the two samples representing the young. In other words, when confronted with a dilemma of socio-moral character, the young generation displayed considerable hesitation in judging them either as proper or improper, and preferred to suspend their judgment. In at least half of the incidents presented to them, one-fifth to one-third of the evaluative responses were "neutral". The corresponding figures among the older generation of the teachers was some 10 to 15 per cent lower. In other words, faced with situations involving socio-moral issues, the younger generation tended to vacillate and suspend their judgement while the older people were more definite about their evaluation, and readily judged them either as proper or improper. Vacillation and indecision characterised the reactions of the young as against quicker and decisive judgements of the older generation. Thus, the youth were not only more permissive but also unsure about their reactions which reflected comparatively weaker super-ego development, and failure to reconcile the changing moral codes. The net result was relative lack of certainty about their opinion and judgment. Or, to put it in the words of Nirad Chaudhuri,

they were "t6rn by their internal psychological tussles."

On the qualities considered desirable or undesirable in a person it was observed that there was no difference between the youth and the age on so-called "cardinal virtues" like honesty, duty, non-violence and so on. However, it was observed that there was greater agreement regarding the importance of these among the two groups belonging to the same generation than between the groups representing different generations. Further, such a concurrence was small regarding qualities which were considered as undesirable in a person. While the youth (younger teachers and students) agreed among themselves regarding qualities considered undesirable (correlation being .88), there was only moderate agreement between the young and the old (correlation being .49 between older teachers and students, and .48 between older teachers and young teachers).

On another measure, difference between the young and the old was reflected on the perception and evaluation of some "ambiguous" traits. During pre-testing, twelve behaviour traits were found to yield "ambiguous" responses, i.e., these traits were such that they had almost equal probability of being judged as either desirable or undesirable in a person. On these behaviour traits differences were observed between the generations. Evaluation of some of these behaviour traits among the young and old was divergent. With regard to some of them like cunning (*chalak*), opportunist (*avsarvadi*) and the like, the young tended to regard them more frequently as "desirable", while the older generation viewed them as "undesirable". Similar was the case with qualities like sentimental (*bhavuk*) and restless (*chanchal*) where the differences were in the reverse direction. In other words, such evaluative differences on a few so-called "ambiguous"

behaviour traits were indicative of divergence of values. Further, such differences in perception made it difficult for the young to adopt and accept as their model the members of older generation.

The above findings indicate a number of points. There prevails value ambiguity among the youth as a result of which they were not able to have clear-cut evaluative response to certain socio-moral issues. It reflects the socio-moral dilemma which the young faced and vacillation and uncertainty characterizing their handling of such situations.

The reason for this "ambiguity" in the young can only be guessed. One of the factors which is likely to be operating is the relative lack of exposure in the older generation to mass media and the almost complete immersion of the younger generation in various mass media like the radio, films, television, the press, and magazines so that the world of arts, sports, entertainment and contemporary events are constantly brought within their psychological field leading to a proliferation of role-models available to them. While the choice of the older generation was largely limited to the figures and personalities about whom they had heard from their elders in the form of stories and legends or read in the books which projected more or less unambiguous roles for them, the young was confronted with a large array of "not so-important" figures made familiar by the mass-media. As a result, the young had available to them a wide range of models for making their choice. The proliferation of roles with which they were confronted made it difficult for them to identify wholesale with any set of clearcut roles or personalities which is so important in the formation of one's ego-identity. This is reflected in the fact that barring a few exceptions, the frequencies of choice in selecting a particular figure as "hero" was relatively low

in the younger group. Since the "heroes" for the contemporary generation were diverse, mostly consisting of "minor" personalities, it can be asserted that by and large there was an absence of what may be called "normative models" for the youth as a group. While the outstanding "heroes" could provide definite roles, the roles tended to get largely obscured in the person of "minor heroes".

The youth very rarely found their identification models among the great personalities of the past. This is indicative of the absence of link with the past and what could be called the traditional values. A mature psychological identity presupposes a subjective sense of continuous existence, and a coherent memory. It is anchored in the past and at the same time links itself to the future. This continuity did not seem to exist in case of the youth.

It is often suggested that in the process of identity formation the individual looks to some person, usually parents, teachers and elders or someone from his peer group, whom he tries to emulate and whose qualities he tries to introject into himself. They provide him with guidelines for conduct and help him in resolving identity confusion. But the sample of youth studied seldom found inspiration from the lives of personalities from the past, and also very rarely chose their parents or teachers as their role-model. There appeared to be complete rejection of parental models by the university and college students under study. The reason for it is hard to find. It is quite likely that for the bulk of the rural youth who had 'migrated' from the villages to the university or the colleges with new aspirations and professional goals, the values and life-patterns represented by the parents, especially living in rural areas, had very little to commend. There was hardly anything in their life-style and behaviour which the modern young man con-

sidered worth emulating. Once they had shifted to the cities, they were completely overwhelmed by the pattern of life and new norms prevalent on the campuses and they were so much dazzled by the newer values and way of life that they no longer found anything worth emulating in their parents. Parents in some cases may have been the focus of identification earlier, but at least at this stage they had ceased to play any significant role in providing models for conduct and life-goals to the younger generation.

Similar was the case with the teachers which is indicative of the psychological distance between them and the students, and the general attitude of hostility towards the teachers which has of late developed in quite a few educational institutions. Whatever may be the reason for this rejection, it is obvious that for the young, the parents as well as the teachers did not serve as a beacon for the life and conduct. The diversity and uncertainty of the response of the youth indicate that they had not only rejected the past but also the parents and teachers. These had not been replaced by any other stable models, so that as a group the young did not possess clear-cut role-models which made the resolution of identity confusion more difficult.

It is further observed that the elders who could constitute the role-models for the young were themselves often perceived as presenting an ambiguous facade. Those who are today's elders are themselves facing value conflicts and ambiguities of social situations in an era of rapid change. It is suggested that the elders of today when they were themselves young could easily identify and find role-models among the older generation of that time because the latter belonged to a more stable society, and presented a figure which was not torn by contradictions. But the same is not the case with the contemporary youth. The

older generation of today who could have provided guidelines of conduct, due to value contradictions and conflicts which have beset them in a fast changing world, have failed to provide in their life and behaviour stable models free from ambiguity and contradictions to the youth. The author has analysed this point at some length in an earlier paper, and has regarded it as one of the factors generating high anxiety amongst modern youth (Sinha, 1962). It is felt that the consequence of the role-ambiguity and ambiguity of values which con-

front the youth has intensified the problem of resolution of identity confusion. It shows itself in a kind of "role refusal" on the part of the young, and is reflected in unrest on the campuses, development of "counter culture", and intergenerational differences which is trying to assume tensional character in many spheres of our social life. Absence of ideological commitment which seems to characterize the youth on many of the campuses (Altbach, 1968) complicates further the problem of identity formation.

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