



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT *with* RELIGION *and* FAITH *in the* 21ST CENTURY

Advocating Peacefully for Civil Liberties as a Young Person Using Non-Confrontational Methods

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INTRODUCTION

“To know your future, you must know your past”¹ as without understanding the past or the context of the situation there can be no reform to build a future. Through this paper I would examine what has built my context and reflect on the experiences that I have had as a result of being a young person working in the area of peacebuilding.

Peering into a tunnel, finding a path: Understanding what has built my context

Religious diversity and tolerance are both established in India since long ago, as India has given birth to four religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism; welcomed the practice of other faiths, such as Islam and Christianity; and offered refuge to Jews and Zoroastrians. Religious diversity and tolerance are also established through law and customs in the

last seventy-three years as the Indian Constitution declared the right to freedom of religion to be a fundamental right.²

Looking at the population as per the census data of 2011, out of the total population, 79.80% practice Hinduism, 14.23% practice Islam, 2.30% practice Christianity, 1.72% practice Sikhism, 0.70% practice Buddhism, 0.37% practice Jainism, 0.66% practice other religions such as Zoroastrianism, Baha'i, Bon, Judaism, and 0.24% of population is not affiliated to any religion.³ In the context of youth, India has a large young population, approximately 600 million. More than 65% of Indian population is under 35 years of age and 50% is under 25 years of age.⁴ Therefore, it is important, as peace workers, to note the potential of youth.

Working with youth proactively and strategically to protect them from dangerous messages which could poison their minds is the key mission of peace workers

in India, as also perhaps in many other countries across the world. We need to counter harmful messages with positive ones which appeal to them; making youth question their own myths and stereotypes.

As young people look inward, it is important that they acknowledge their privilege and understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities. While they do so, peace workers should train young people to raise issues in a non-confrontational way so that in future they can become champions of human rights themselves and take forward the agenda of peace.

In the Indian context, human rights violations along with the way in which dissent is being portrayed and dealt with by the authorities is diminishing the ability of civil society organizations to rally and advocate for issues. The act of peaceful protest ‘Satyagraha’ which was popularized by Mahatma Gandhi⁵, the world’s most revered champion of non-violence and iconic symbol of peace, is now being dubbed as an act of treason against the state.⁶ Not only does this taint the revered practice of peaceful protest, it also violates the essence of what the Mahatma stood for, while painting those who believe in advocating for civil liberties as non-citizens.

Political regimes of the pluralist Indian society have time and time again influenced people by appealing to their religious sentiments.⁷ As Indian society is predominantly theistic; the aforementioned strategy has been an effective tool to grab power. The political class through the course of time, having seen fourteen different Prime Ministers,⁸ now has a perfect understanding of how religion, conflict and power complement one another. Further, pressures on mainstream media to tell a compelling story which support political agendas cause even non-religious issues to be portrayed as religious ones.

BREAKING BARRIERS AND BUILDING BRIDGES: UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOSITY AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

As a peace worker given the current scenario, wherein civil liberties have been significantly curtailed, misinformation is rampant and harmful propaganda is widely shared on a daily basis, it is important for us to be able to facilitate the learning journeys of young people and build their capacities so that they themselves grow to understand their reality.

A major challenge faced when engaging youth in interfaith work is their interest in religion itself! Internationally there have been multiple studies conducted on religiosity of a population by age and nation. It is important to understand the audience and the interest of your audience in the intervention before devising the intervention itself. Therefore, I will be dissecting a relevant study done by Pew Research Centre before writing about the intervention methods. Following is the summary of findings of a study conducted by Pew Research Centre⁹:

1. Why do levels of religious observance vary by age and country? Below are some of the observations made by the Pew Research Centre:

- a. One common explanation is that new generations become less religious in tandem with economic development
- b. Each generation contributes in a steadily developing society and therefore would be less religious than the last, which would explain why young adults are less religious than their elders at any given time
- c. Rising education levels are often closely tied to economic development. Some theorists suggest

education could reduce religious identity and practice, although empirical findings about the relationship between education and religion are complex

- d. Many researchers observe that people in poorer parts of the world are, on average, more religious than those in societies with advanced economies
- e. Political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, examining findings from the World Values Survey, attribute the pattern of higher religious commitment in poor places to stark differences in existential insecurity – that is, the degree of safety and security people feel as they go about their daily lives
- f. economic inequality is correlated with higher levels of religious commitment. Societies with very unequal distribution of income tend to be more religious, while those who live in relatively egalitarian societies say religion is less important, on average.

- c. Another theory, drawn from psychology, is that people actually develop new values during life’s later decades, distinct from the values of midlife, leading to greater spirituality and satisfaction

It is important to note that the study conducted by Pew Research Centre provides possible theories to answer two important questions related to age & religiosity. The observations can all possibly hold true and can be used to justify why young people are not as interested in religion compared to older individuals.

Although these studies are highly data driven the cases are not specifically looking at the Indian context. To further elaborate on the Indian context, please refer graphs 2.1, 2.2 & 2.3 generated from data of the YouGov-Mint Millennial Survey,¹⁰ which was an online poll of more than 5,000 internet users spread across more than 180 cities in India conducted by market researcher YouGov in partnership with Mint. All data was generated in January and February of 2019.

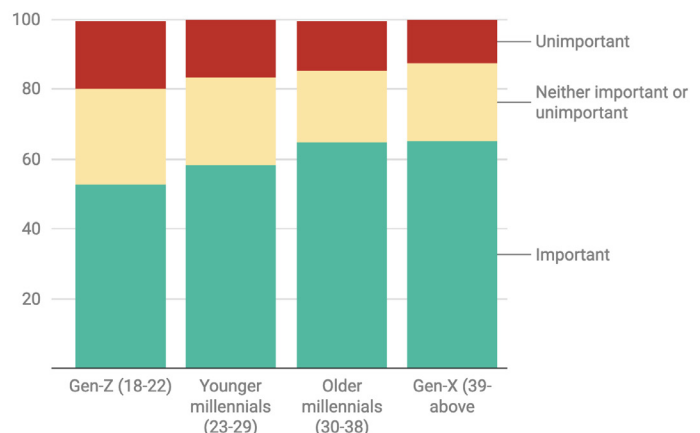
2. Does aging itself make people more religious? Below are some of the observations made by the Pew Research Centre:

- a. Growing older and nearing the end of one’s life could produce a sense of existential worry in an individual, regardless of how comfortable the conditions are in their country
- b. One research team concluded, based on survey data and church-membership records, that people in early adulthood focus more on making money than on religion, and that religiosity tends to decline during this peak earning phase. In their later years, this team posits, most people decide to build up the “religious capital” they believe will help them after death

Fig 2.1

Religiosity increases with age

% of respondents, by age group, who consider religion:

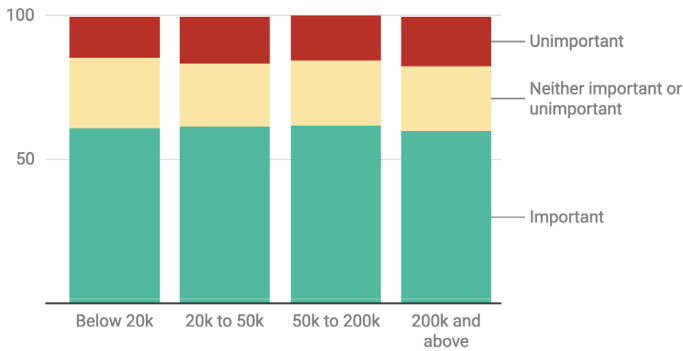


Source: YouGov-Mint Millennial survey (Jan-Feb 2019) • [Get the data](#) • Created with Datawrapper

Fig 2.2

Across income groups, religion is considered similarly important

% of respondents, by income groups (net monthly household income in Rs), who consider religion:

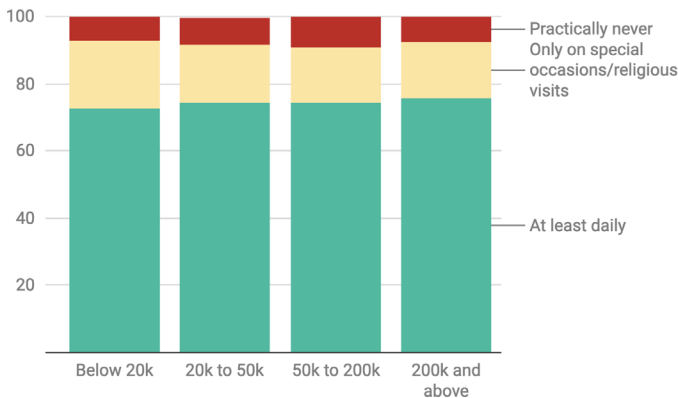


Source: YouGov-Mint Millennial survey (January 2019) • [Get the data](#) • Created with Datawrapper

Fig 2.3

Little difference in praying frequency among different income groups

% of respondents, by income group (net monthly household income in Rs), who pray:



Source: YouGov-Mint Millennial survey (Jan-Feb 2019) • [Get the data](#) • Created with Datawrapper

The graphs generated by the YouGov-Mint Millennial Survey detail out the following points:

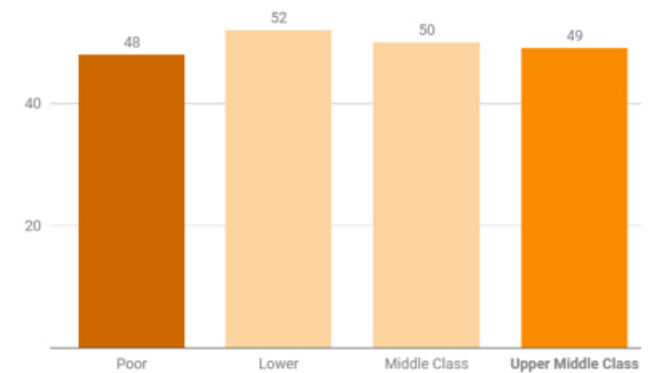
1. Indian religiosity increases with age (2.1)
2. Across different income groups religion is considered similarly important (2.2)
3. There is little difference in praying frequency among different income groups (2.3)

Points 2 & 3 of the YouGov-Mint Millennial Survey which are related to religiosity and income groups has also been seconded by an older & wider study which was conducted by Lokniti research programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in 2015¹¹. The latter research held that participation in religious events transcend class divide please refer to graphs 2.4.

Fig 2.4

Participation in religious events transcend class divide

% Respondents who participated in religious gathering, event, or procession in the last 1-2 years



Economic class classification is based on a multi-dimensional index which considers household income, assets, locality and occupation.

Even if a young person is not interested in interfaith work, it is evident through data that religiosity does increase with age, both internationally and in the Indian context. Therefore, it is imperative that young people develop the right understanding of interfaith

work so that they are better equipped to grow into their religious identities while also developing an appreciation and acceptance of religious diversity and cultural pluralism of India.

To this end, it is important for all peace workers in India to understand that it is a melting pot, not only of diverse backgrounds and cultures but complex challenges as well; many layered interlinkages between peace and other development issues. Although advocacy interventions can be devised to counter issues, in the current political climate due to the rapid decline in civil liberties of the general public along with the ravaging crackdown on peaceful protests¹² and dissenting activists it is my belief that while we persevere, young people should build their knowledge of human rights, through engagement with peace workers learning about non-confrontational methods of advocacy.

By conducting a series of rights based, action-oriented workshops for youth in the year 2020 on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), I realized that by focusing on building capacities of young people so that they mainstream peace work in issues relevant to their context, I was indeed confronting those who disrupted peace and spewed hate speech. Therefore, I believe that the ideal non-confrontational approach is to build 'youth-capital' so that messages of peace and human rights can be mainstreamed in all issues.

Through the above-mentioned workshop series, participants learned about the SDG's while also developing skills such as, filing a Right to Information (RTI)¹³ Application, sending representation letter to the Prime Minister's Office¹⁴, researching & writing journalistic articles, doing media & social media advocacy. To present this argument, I would like to share insights I developed along with a youth group through a series on Sustainable Development Goals¹⁵ which affect the young population of India.

1. NO POVERTY

NSSO data in India reveal that Muslims average per capita spending a day is Rs. 32.66, while it is Rs. 37.50 for the Hindus, Rs. 51.43 for Christians and Rs. 55.30 for Sikhs living in India.¹⁶ Spending in the sample survey has been equated purchasing power of an individual household. It is astonishing to note even though the Muslim community comprises of 14.23% of the Indian population their average purchasing power is lower than the majority 79.80% Hindu community living in India. The average monthly per capita expenditure of a Sikh household was Rs. 1,659 while that for a Muslim household was Rs. 980 according to data. This bolsters the fact that the Muslim community living in India suffers from acute poverty.

As per the Census of 2011 25% of all beggars in India are Muslim¹⁷ ! Even as this fact shocks many, the media outlets blame the ghettoization of the Muslim community living in India on the community itself instead of questioning the state about minority poverty alleviation schemes! Further with incorrect portrayal and segregation of communities, there is a fear of the other which is created, which is harmful to all. Stereotypes such as Muslims are not secular or not inclusive to other people and their cultures are rampant amongst the youth due to misinformation.

2. QUALITY EDUCATION

Education is indirectly proportional to poverty. As we have seen that the largest minority in India has the worst purchasing power in the country, studies also show that acute poverty is due to the lack of quality education. Going back to the NSSO data, one can see that the number of Muslims educated up to the secondary and higher secondary levels is 162 and 90 per 1,000 persons, this is the least among all the communities living in India! Close to half the Muslim population over the age of 15 years is

either illiterate or has only primary or middle school education. Further the number of illiterate people is highest among Muslims (190 per 1,000), followed by Hindus (84), Sikhs (79) and Christians (57). The high levels of illiteracy amongst the Muslim community, along with little to no state intervention to provide quality education to the largest minority community ensure that the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty. The best example to showcase the aforementioned phenomenon is found in a working paper, authored by Sam Asher, Paul Novosad, and Charlie Rafkin from the World Bank, Dartmouth College, and MIT, respectively.¹⁸ They have studied the intergenerational upward mobility in India of various marginalized communities and have found that due to the specific reservations in the area of education and employment for the historically marginalized Scheduled Castes (SC) & Scheduled Tribes (ST) the two communities have upward mobility while the Indian Muslims have a substantial decline. The basis of the study was the data from the India Human Development Survey and the 2012 Socioeconomic and Caste Census. Further the researchers worked with a sample of 31 million men and their fathers born between the 1950's and the 1980's. While analyzing the data on educational attainment of sons compared to fathers, they found that upward mobility remains high among forward castes, this category includes Christians, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists, as well as higher caste Hindus. The working paper goes to elaborate "The expected educational rank of a Muslim child born in the bottom half of the parent distribution has fallen from between 31 and 34 to a dismal 29. Muslims have considerably worse upward mobility today than both Scheduled Castes (37.4–37.8) and Scheduled Tribes (32.5–32.7)". The researchers further debunk the theory of discrimination due to reservation amongst the general category by writing, "Higher caste groups have experienced constant and high upward mobility over time, a result that contradicts a popular notion that it is increasingly difficult for upper caste Hindus to get ahead".

3. GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

As of 2018 the World Bank estimated that India spent 3.54% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on healthcare.¹⁹ India currently ranks 145 out of 180 countries on quality of and access to healthcare, and 179 of 189 countries in prioritization of health in government budgets. Although Indian experts and the government's economic survey make a case that India has only been spending 1% of its budget on healthcare and to meet the healthcare needs of the nation the Indian government needs to at least allocate 2.5% of its budget to the health sector. Due to the COVID19 pandemic the most recent budget presented in 2021 saw an unprecedented increase in health spending of 137%. This fooled many individuals, multiple articles in the media were written about the laurels of the new budget and its focus on health. Taking a closer look, it was seen that items which should have been a part of the budget on nutrition, water & sanitation were also accounted in the budget for health. Further one-time expenses such as cost of procuring COVID19 vaccinations was also included as part of the health budget, inflating the gross figure.²⁰ Numerous lives have been lost as the second most populous nation in the world does not have adequate infrastructure. A shocking example of the same is the ratio hospital beds available to people in India, which shows that there are only five hospital beds for ten thousand people!²¹ As there are shortages in the health sector the affluent are able to access healthcare far more easily and due to polarization of the general population there is heightened discrimination against minority groups and other marginalized communities.

4. CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

To understand how religious beliefs impact the culture of a society, one can look at the sanitation projects undertaken in rural India. Research done by the World Bank in 2018²² divulged that a staggering 48% of Indians continue to defecate in the open. Even

with the Indian government's heightened efforts to mitigate open defecation through its Swachh Bharat Mission, India still has the highest rate of open defecation in the world. The research identified the gap that, even though authorities were providing structural support by building latrines for use, their intervention was not stopping the act of open defecation. Further the paper argued "it is increasingly clear that social norms and cultural beliefs, especially those related to ritual purity and impurity, are crucial obstacles to the reduction of open defecation in rural India" Therefore, it is important that peace workers create messaging which backed by data further rely on scripture, knowledge of texts to interpret and fit their findings using a mixed approach to create awareness amongst communities.

5. GENDER EQUALITY & ZERO HUNGER

According to the NITI Aayog's latest Sustainable Development Goals India Index report, India is struggling to meet the goals of gender equality and zero hunger. The overall country score for these two goals is below 50 for a second consecutive year!²³ Most societies in India barring a few are patriarchal in nature. In most communities, patrilineality (inheritance through male descendants) and patrilocality (married couples living with or near the husband's parents) are normalized. These phenomena perpetuate gender inequality. Further the disapproval of the Indian society of inter-caste, inter-faith marriages along with the dowry system which has transcended religions, marginalizes women to the greatest extent. India ranked 94 out of the 107 countries on the global hunger index in 2020.²⁴ Making matters worse is that \$14 billion worth of food products are wasted annually in India!²⁵ Peace workers should use ethical and moral arguments to create awareness on food waste as a UNICEF report published in 2020 says that, "Nearly half of all deaths

in children under 5 are attributable to undernutrition; undernutrition puts children at greater risk of dying from common infections, increases the frequency and severity of such infections, and delays recovery."²⁶ There is clearly a need for policy changes to empower women and protect children as gender disparities & malnutrition in India persist even against the backdrop of economic growth.

6. DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Unemployment rates are soaring in India! The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) estimated that 11 million jobs were lost in 2018 pushing the unemployment rate to 7.38%. Further the government NSSO report pegged the unemployment rate at 6.10% in the year 2018. This figure was the highest ever recorded in over four decades. The unemployment rates have only worsened with the COVID19 pandemic and lockdowns to control the same, periodically reaching double digits ranging between 11.90% & 23.50%.²⁷ Experts warn that unless structural changes are made to the labour, employment and skill building sectors of the country, due to job insecurity youth of the nation will take to the streets to demand employment. With one of the largest young populations in the world, India has immense potential to capitalize on the youth and strengthen its economy. As peace workers it is crucial that information about employment statistics is explained to young people so that they understand that this is an issue of policy and not religion. A recent communally polarizing story took center stage in India titled 'UPSC Jihad'²⁸ wherein, it was alleged by Sudarshan TV a local news broadcaster, that there was a conspiracy to infiltrate Muslims into the Indian Civil Services. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, did issue a statement saying "the ministry finds that they are not in good taste, offensive and has a likelihood of promoting communal attitudes". but in the end the

Ministry allowed the airing of the show stating that “if any violation of the Programme Code is found in future, stricter penal action would be taken.”

WALKING TOWARDS THE LIGHT WITH MY PEERS: MY REFLECTIONS ON WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people are engaged with multiple stakeholders such as friends, family, colleagues and through the vast medium of social media, the globe. It is important for peace workers to navigate all the aforementioned relationships without pushing the agenda of interfaith work too hard. Therefore, dialogue with youth to understand their needs is the first step to devising an intervention. Peace workers should aid youth to strengthen positive systems around them so that they feel supported while engaged in interfaith work. While working with young people, I realized that peacebuilding and interfaith work was on my agenda and not theirs, therefore they would join me for a short period of time and then leave the organization. I had to understand their needs and develop a system to engage them which would meet their expectations. On multiple occasions the expectations of young people were influenced by the aforementioned stakeholders.

Ownership of the engagement is crucial to the success of the initiative. As without understanding the need or importance for an intervention, young people will not want to sacrifice their time and energy. Further the engagement should be designed to include the voices, thoughts and ideas of young people so that they have an active stake in the process of engagement. Brainstorming ideas and asking team members to develop plans of action is something that has led to volunteers coming forward and taking responsibility for tasks. I had previously assigned tasks to volunteers but more than half the times the task remained incomplete. Although brainstorming and plan development meetings took additional time,

they led to higher number of tasks being completed by volunteers.

Young people are wary of adult governance and tend to dismiss/rebel against those who tell them what to do. Contrary to this they also may want support while attempting new tasks as they may be undertaking them for the first time, or due to existing conflicts within the group, consensus may not be reached. Therefore, peace workers should have an unbiased approach while working with the youth group, guiding them through different tasks. As a young person myself I can attest to this point. Senior leaders at Religions for Peace India have never dictated terms to me, they guided me gently in the right direction. Further senior colleagues at APIYN gave me challenging tasks and encouraged me to ask questions so that I grow internally.

Building self-esteem in young people is paramount, as only when they grow internally will they feel confident enough to engage and impact others. Self-reflection along with other esteem building activities should be a cyclic engagement undertaken over short periods of time. These activities to build self should be evaluated to determine the progress of the individual. Team building activities should also be undertaken so that young people learn to work together in creating change. The best example of this in my experience of the APIYN youth camp held in Manilla in 2019 where even though youth peace workers were engaged in workshops for close to 8 hours in a day, there was immense time for self-reflection and growth. Peace workers in my experience, are by nature of their work, empathetic and non-judgmental. These qualities should be fostered amongst young people and the youth group. A culture of empathy should be nurtured so that youth can share their thoughts within the group without any judgment.

Incentives can be given to young people so that they are drawn to work in the intervention. Although the key goal should always be ownership, incentivized

engagement will fade over time and will require incentives to be renewed. Whereas if the young person owns the initiative, they will work regardless of the incentive.

Peace work is an ongoing process. Therefore, to maintain the longevity of the movement leadership should emerge from within the youth group. Those designing the intervention should devise a plan for their departure and have a mechanism set in place so that new members can transition into leadership roles. As I had mentioned before, India and the world over may be going through unprecedented dark times but we must have faith and persevere. I would like to conclude with a quote of social reformer and activist Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar famously known as the Father of the Indian Constitution – “We must stand on our own feet and fight as best as we can for our rights. So, carry on your agitation and organize your forces. Power and prestige will come to you through struggle”. And for this we need to – Educate. Organize. Agitate.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Quote by George Santayana
- 2 Document: Constitution of India, Article 19
- 3 Website: Indian Census 2011
- 4 Website: Indian Census 2011
- 5 Article: What is Satyagraha
- 6 Article: Stifling Dissent the Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in India
- 7 Book: Religion & Politics in India; A historical overview
- 8 List of Prime Ministers of India
- 9 Pew Research Centre Study
- 10 YouGov-Mint Millennial Survey
- 11 Lokniti research programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in 2015
- 12 Amnesty International report on Human Rights violations
- 13 Right to Information Act of 2005
- 14 Write to the Prime Minister Government Portal
- 15 List of 17 Sustainable Development Goals
- 16 Article: No respite from poverty for Muslims
- 17 News Report: Untouched by economic growth: One in 4 beggars in India a Muslim, reveals census
- 18 Paper by Sam Asher, Paul Novosad, Charlie Rafkin: Intergenerational Mobility in India: New Methods and Estimates Across Time, Space, and Communities

- 19 Website: World Bank, Current Health Expenditure (% of GDP)
- 20 Article: Explained: Despite Govt Claims, India's Health Budget Only Around %0.34 of GDP
- 21 Article: 5 hospital beds/10k population: India ranks 155th in 167
- 22 Paper by Varun Gauri, Tasmia Rahman, Iman Sen: Shifting Social Norms to Reduce Open Defecation in Rural India
- 23 Article: State of the states: NITI report shows who's rising, who's lagging and the gap in between
- 24 Website: Global Hunger Index, India
- 25 Article: As millions go hungry, India eyes ways to stop wasting 14\$ billion of food a year
- 26 UNICEF Malnutrition Data Page
- 27 Website: Trading Economics, India Unemployment Rate
- 28 Article: I&B Ministry Says 'UPSC Jihad' Show Was 'Offensive', Allows Airing With 'Modifications'

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