



Talk on the Agenda

A large number of urban youth come together in their search for a platform to voice their views and gain them exposure on issues close to their heart

■ By Shefalee Vasudev

Why do the youth look so vulnerable? The answer that may be closest to the truth is because they are. Spirited they might be, but the members of the Youth Parliament—all between 16 and 23 years of age—don't look in the least tenacious. Questions simmer inside them even as they attempt to find answers. "The youth are seen but seldom heard," says 19-year-old, earnest-looking Ishita Choudhary, student of Delhi's Lady Shri Ram College, who began the Youth Parliament more than a year ago. "Despite our privileged backgrounds, we realised we needed exposure to issues that concern us," she adds. Choudhary's earnestness has rubbed off on others.

The Parliament now has 624 members from various Delhi schools and colleges, with a core group of 149 divided into a research team, creative group and some facilitators. A close-knit team of 49 girls and boys handles the day-to-day functioning. Once a month, the India Habitat Centre allows them free use of conference facilities. The rest of the expenses are met by members chipping in with their pocket money.

The objective of the Parliament is simple: talk about issues. The members all seem to have a common void that they are uncomfortable with, not some fancy, politically correct youth topic. "We want to share our experiences without being reprimanded or told all the time what is right and wrong," say Shahnaz and Haris.

Twenty-three-year-old Simran Brar, the oldest among the members, says it is important for the youth to understand the laws of the land. Another member says that they must find some way to give vent to the tension generated by peer pressure, else it compelled them to adopt a herd mentality. Drug abuse is more about "trying out the high", not about an escapist attitude, says this group which made a video film on substance abuse called *T-junction*. The young people feel the media is responsible for "sensationalising" news. Homosexuality is a choice, so why such a hullabaloo about



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The Parliamentarians want to make themselves heard it? All that tumbles out seems to be a normal collage of views. So it is ironical that in this age of over-exposure and the trend of parents-as-friends, there is a group which says it is "afraid to approach adults for fear of being judged". Says Meenakshi: "We wanted a place where hierarchies of age and position could be questioned." Clearly, a parent-presided drawing room is the last place they find comfortable for self-expression.

The Youth Parliament now conducts monthly training sessions for students. At such gatherings, the members look up references, scan media reports, discuss the attitudes of groups like students, peers and parents. They also have mock plays, where some of them play the roles of, say, rape victims, policemen, homosexuals. Sometimes they get people they talk about, like those dependant on drugs, those who have contemplated suicide or those with alternative sexual preferences to share their views with them.

Amid all this, even as they talk big about reaching out and interacting with society, the one thing that the young people themselves need is to be reached out to. The Youth Parliament may just help them in this. ■