CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE ENIGMA OF GENERATION GAP

"By the time a man realizes that may be his father was right, he usually has a son who thinks he is wrong".

- Charles Wordsworth.

This remark is more or less universally observed and reflects the notion of the generation gap which is found to exist in almost all societies, varying only in degree and form.

The term “generation gap” was coined by sociologists and anthropologists in the 1960’s and is often still used today. It refers to the difference in age and opinion between parents and offspring. These two generations literally live in distinct worlds. They experience different cultures. They are born in different historical periods and grow up under influences of the then prevailing economy, government, styles, fads, media, technology, beliefs, attitudes and values. Today, it is recognized that the generation gap is essentially a culture gap. Values such as commitment and family identity are seriously questioned by the young as divorces and unmarried households are becoming more common and more accepted. Computers, the internet and other technology has made the world different in ways the older generation cannot fully understand. The older generation is faced with the prospect of contending with their own values and viewpoints, making their own adaptations, while trying to maintain norms for their children and trying to encourage the youngsters to respect absolute truths and standards. This is sometimes perceived by youth as a display of hypocrisy.
Some show of rebellion by young people is inevitable as they struggle to become independent. This is an expression of the Eriksonian need of adolescence to establish a sense of identity, to find answers to the questions of who one is and where one wants to go. In today's fast moving world buffeted by rapid change, each question may have several answers and the turmoil may be confusing and acute.

For the majority of teenagers today, adolescence is a tortuous journey. After graduation, trying to get a job in one's chosen vocation isn't easy; compromises have to be made and the shiny dream gets dented at inception. The goal posts due to the current economic climate keep moving further and further away and for many young people, they disappear altogether, so there has to be a total re-evaluation of one's future. It is therefore not surprising that today's youth feel that their parents had it easier; choices were fewer and despite the limitations, it was easier for them to stay on track; everyone knew what was expected and most people conformed to the rules of society even if they were unhappy with their lot. In other words, they played the game.

Little wonder then that young people perceive themselves as a group apart from the established older generation. This isolation of age groups has led to a teenage subculture wherein parents lose some influence and peer opinions become highly valued. Young people spend so much time with members of their own age groups in schools and colleges that it is not surprising to find values and customs drawn from peers rather than parents. The ideas, attitudes, and feelings of adolescents are usually based upon the volatile mixture of adult maturity and juvenile innocence. For this reason, the views of adolescents often conflict with those of their elders.

Many surveys of youth also refute the notion of a generation gap. These studies show that while youth tend to value their peers' evaluations over parents' on things like
music, clothing and what's "cool", they continue to look to parents for basic values and
guidance in the more important areas of life, such as personal and career goals.
Disagreement does occur, but on superficial issues. Teenagers are idealistic and in their
quest for an identity, they feel almost compelled to disagree with their elders. They
demand a control in population, communal harmony, and a better world to live in. They
ask for a change in the complacent attitude that they feel is prevalent in the adults around
them. With time, as they gain self-esteem and maturity, most adolescents reach an
understanding of universal realities and return to the values they once questioned.

Adolescent behaviour often puzzles or frightens parents. Most parents of
adolescents worry about drugs, alcohol, accidents, sexual activities, and harmful peer
pressures. Some are pressed financially, trying to keep up with the real and perceived
needs of their teenage children. Hence, instead of actively appreciating their children and
drawing them into the community as contributing members, parents view them as objects
of ministry and concern. This prevents adolescents from growing up. Young people are
often forced to postpone the decision to become adults because their parents refuse to let
them take responsibility for their own lives. Parents are obsessed with presenting their
children with perfect choices not realising that it is a valuable experience for adolescents to
be out in the real world making their own decisions, and their own mistakes. The main
reason parents want their children to conform to norms and stick to rules is fear. They are
afraid that things will not work out for their children, their children may get emotionally or
physically hurt, or may do something which may affect them for the rest of their life. All
parents were once teenagers and one of the main reasons they are afraid their children will
make mistakes is because they probably did.
However, this just concern of parents is perceived by their adolescent children as an imposition of adult standards. They view their parents' ideas and values as outdated and prefer not to discuss their peer-group activities with parents. The two generations drift apart in terms of communication. This communication gap is another important contributor to the generation gap.

Generation gap means for some a clash between young and old on basic values such as religion, morality, etc. and for others, a relative lack of communication between youth and adults. Thus, the generation gap can range from a subtle difference of opinion to an overt conflict.

A significant contributor to the generation gap is socio-cultural change. In most societies, socio-cultural change is a perceptible process. Exceptions to the rule are limited to a few simple-structured tribal societies in isolated localities in which social change is paced almost imperceptibly. In such a society, there is very little difference in the cognitive, affective, and behavioural lifestyle of the young and the old. It is also true that such a society undergoes stagnation and eventually, either has to accept change, or fade out.

A simplistic model of generation gap would assume that lapse in time brings about social change. This is responsible for the generation gap. However, this explanation is too simplistic. The generation gap cannot be related to merely a lapse in time. It depends upon the life experiences that the generations undergo during that lapse in time. If the two generations are similar in their life experiences, the gap will be less, or even negligible. But if the two generations differ considerably in their life experiences in terms of exposure to education, urbanization and the mass-media, there will arise a wide generation gap. The
simplistic model assumes an even rate of gap between generations which is only possible in a hypothetical, static society.

In reality, the generation gap occurs in an uneven rate between different generations. A dynamic model of generation gap, would explain the generation gap as a function of the levels of exposure of the two generations to varying intensities of education, urbanisation, and the mass-media. In this sense, the generation gap is a natural and necessary phenomenon of any dynamic society and it offers a brighter future for that society. The dynamic model assumes that dissimilarity in ideas between younger and older generations is a universal phenomenon. The social dynamics of every society undergoing technological and cultural change exhibit some degree of generational discontinuity. Furthermore, the tempo of social change is directly correlated with dissimilarity in perceptions and behaviour patterns among the generations. This means that the faster a society changes, the wider the psychological distance between the older and younger generations.

Thus, generation gap, has a functional aspect. In every society, youth are radically influenced by social change. The attitudes and values of the older generation are more or less set, unlike those of youngsters whose attitudes and values are being formed through questioning which is fostered by modern education. Hence the young can serve as instruments of innovation and societal improvement. What to the older generation is habit, is to them a challenging novelty. Hence, the generation gap can be viewed as a potential resource.

In India, industrial growth and mass education have always been inherent ingredients of the planning process. As such, the generation of young people who know much more than their elders is on the rise. The majority of parents suffer from cultural lag
that leaves them a few paces behind in knowledge in many vital areas of modern life. The younger generation is accumulating knowledge so fast that the older generation is unable to carry out a significant portion of its traditional function of guidance. The present day college students in Indian society are exposed to the highest rate of social change due to the modernization of education. This has brought about a generation gap: attitudinal differences between the students who are exposed more to the agencies of modernization and their parents who are not. These differences are not just educational differences. They include consequent attitudinal, value, and behavioural change too.

1.2 FOCUS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The phenomenon of generation gap has been researched widely in the 1960s and 1970s. It has attracted sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers, journalists and family researchers. Most of these investigators viewed the generation gap in negative light. They maintained that a generation gap necessarily implies negative strain and conflict, bringing about a discord in family relations.

Very few researchers have attempted to study the positive, functional aspect of the generation gap. The present study was undertaken with this in mind. It was decided to investigate the discontinuity among parents and offspring in terms of attitudinal modernity and value orientations.

The concept of modernity is particularly useful in the study of the generation gap because it covers all the important dimensions of socio-cultural values as well as contemporary rational and scientific attitudes. The concept of modernity therefore, highlights the important differences between parents and children. Modernity is a concept which is rooted in the individual but it relates the individual to the society. Therefore, a
a generation gap indicating greater modernity in the younger generation becomes a positive factor rather than a negative one.

The disparity in value orientations among parents and offspring was also taken up for study by investigating the attitudes of the two generations on topics of contemporary interest. It was felt that the difference in attitudes of parents and offspring on contemporary issues would serve as an indicator of the disparity in their value orientations.

Very few investigators have taken cognizance of the socio-economic status (SES) as an important variable determining the extent of the generation gap. The present study recognizes SES as the main independent variable. The SES denotes the sub-group to which an individual belongs in society. Each sub-group has its own typical sub-culture with emphasis on different values, attitudes, and behaviour patterns. Factors like education, occupation and income determine an individual’s SES. Obviously, the higher of these make the individual equipped with better conditions of life and provide better exposure to modernizing agencies like education, mass-media etc.

This study makes an attempt to investigate the magnitude of the generation gap between college students and their parents (both father and mother) by employing SES as the independent variable and attitudinal modernity as the dependent variable.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study shall address itself to the following main research objectives:

i) To examine the extent of the generation gap as a function of attitudinal modernity.

ii) To examine the variations in the extent of the generation gap on the different dimensions of attitudinal modernity.

iii) To examine the influence of SES and sex on generation gap.

iv) To examine the extent and nature of the generation gap in value orientations.