HARNESSING YOUTH POWER FOR SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

When we envisage societal transformation, there are many players who are significant in that arena. And the most important of the players is the youth, as they are the pillars on which every development will be built. They are the future who will sustain the edifice of societal transformation. Hence, we can say that youth is the fulcrum on which the societal change rotates and develops. However societal changes can be made possible, only when youth in all national societies are provided suitable opportunities to acquire skills, right, and just guidance and made partners in the decision-making, governance and management.

KEYWORDS: *Decision-Making, Governance and Management*

INTRODUCTION

In short, complete freedom to prove their worth and metal, which would harness the tremendous power they possess, leading to sustainable development and societal transformation. But with the on slot of cyber age and communication revolution, the hype generated by mass-media and influences of a culture alien to rural surroundings, place the youth in the quagmire and the problems of psychological adjustment, push them to the verge of high-risk behavior, affecting their health and waste of resources. Youth is an exuberant stage in anyone's life. Young people are a major force in the contemporary world. They are often referred to as the 'future of the nation' or the "beneficiaries' and are hardly considered as active partners of today. They are looked upon as useless and careless and are always associated with troubles like HIV/AIDS, social violence, drugs or vandalism. They lack involvement in decision making at all levels: be it on the state priority, as to what policy and programs they need or personal matters, like choosing a career or life-partners. Issues such as employment, health, career and personal rights– though most important in the personal development of the youth and that of the nation–have never been given higher priority, at all levels. Let us, therefore, examine the different attributes that constitute to the power of youth in India.

Youth and Statistics

Youth in India, as officially recognized by the Government of India, is all those in the age group 15-35. In India, in contrast, and also interestingly in many other countries of the global south, the age group considered youth is the same as that of India, which is 15-34. According to current estimates, India is – and will remain for some time - one of the youngest countries in the world. The following population figures from the World Bank gives a clear picture of the potential of India's demographic dividend. In 2000 India, Brazil and China had nearly 34% of their population as a youth as compared to less than 28% in Germany and the USA. In 2020, India alone will be 34% while all the other large countries will have dropped below 31% including China which will be 28.5%. In 2020, it is estimated, the average Indian will be only 29 years old, compared with the average age of 37 years in China and the US, 45 in west Europe and Japan. This demographic process entails a massive and growing young labor force which, it is held, will deliver profound benefits in terms of growth and prosperity. The changed age structure of India's population also means an overall younger population as something more than simply a statistical fact since it has political and social consequences for India and the world. Exploring the attitudes and perspectives of India's young population, therefore, becomes as much an exercise of historical curiosity as it is a political necessity. Hence, young India if well harnessed as tremendous potential.

Family and Social Networks

Family and Social Networks yield an interesting finding of the youth in the institution of the family. As expected, there seems to be no clear disjuncture between youth and their parents with varying levels of acceptance of parental authority in areas as diverse as career and marriage. A majority of youth contacted, as much as 60%, accepted that the final decision on marriage should be taken by parents. From it, one can see that parental authority has considerable leverage in the life of most Indian youth. Youth in India prefer to remain within the cultural codes of their family and social networks. The fact that parental authority is not seen in adversarial but in benign terms can be gauged by the number of respondents (55%) who felt that they would like to bring up their children in more or less the same way as they were brought up. The family remains a key institution in the life-world of Indian youth. Even though inter-religious and inter-caste marriages run the risk of social violence, as we can discern from daily newspapers across the nation, especially in the North, one could hazard a view that youth buy into these cultural mores and do not think that an assertion of individuality means that parents must not have a say in the making of decisions concerning marriage and careers. The Swedish saying that 'if the Stone Age children had obeyed their parents we would still be living in the Stone Age', does not appear to hold water in India. Or does it, in these modern times?

Politics and Democracy

The data on Politics and Democracy presents a mixed picture of politically engaged Indian youth, where it differs from region to region, while in some parts youth exhibit several interesting attitudes: high participation in politics, in other

parts the youth have no participation in politics, whatsoever. India is an intensely political place with sites of democratic practice increasing in the polity as can be seen most vigorously in the university system where student politics is fairly competitive and intense, which is currently undergoing reform as per the recommendations of the Lyndogh report. The participation of youth is also supported by their political opinions where a large majority of youth believe in the values of democracy such as the importance of the political opposition, the importance of freedom of expression, and the abjuring of violence to settle disputes. The acceptance by the youth of the values of democracy indicates that in the political realm, at least, the journey to modernity has been quite straightforward. While there are differences between Indian and Western youth in their dispositions towards politics these may be more a difference of stages between the modern and the post-modern worlds of politics. In India, most youth are still in the modern world of endorsing the state and its authority. The Indian youth should have a more robust interest in politics and democracy, which would be a good sign for the future of Indian democracy. Then only, democracy will become the commonsense of youth in India and hence they would attach a premium to arguing for it or defending its values. If this happens new blood will be infused into Indian politics that would be bereft of petty, parochial beliefs based on caste, creed, but possess as its building blocks, equity, tolerance and development through bold scientific approaches.

Governance and Development

From the rubric concerning Governance and Development, the big story that is emerging is that of unemployment and poverty. While this, in itself, is not unexpected, it is worth noting that the concerns are highest among those who are non-literate, of low socio-economic status, from rural areas and among marginal groups of Dalits and adivasis. This is a cause for alarm since this concern of the lower social strata, that has fewer life chance opportunities, may turn into discontent and this, in turn, may undermine the commitment to the values of democracy that currently seem to be widely shared by the youth. The increasing violence in rural India, especially in the Naxalite affected regions, and among Dalit youth protesting against their life situations, something akin to the violence in the urban areas in France, needs to be borne in mind. This finding suggests, more than anything else, that we run the risk of squandering our demographic dividend and the power of the youth will flow into the wrong direction.

Nation and the World

The one issue that we could perhaps reflect on is the divided opinion of youth on the advantages and disadvantages of globalization. The number of those who see it as advantages from among the lower socio-economic group was about the same as those who saw it as disadvantageous. There seems to be an increasing perception that globalization is the only way to enter the future and that that the older strategies of self-reliance and autarkic development are strategies of the past. Since the challenge is to convert what is inevitable into an asset we need to democratize development, which is what many of the social movements are asking, in other words, to make development more inclusive. For a more just order, the policy goal should be to the recognition of the aspiration of a large proportion of youth for the benefits of globalization and also a series of policy Steps to address the concerns of the sizeable number who see it as disadvantageous.

Young People for Socio-Economic and Political Life

India is home to one of the world's largest and fastest-growing youth populations, with 40% of its people between the ages of 13 and 35. Stable democratic governance, economic growth, improved access to school and university education, and better health are all factors that today enable young people to play a much larger role in Indian social, economic and political life. But are they doing so? Are young people emerging as a vibrant, innovative and constructive force that can find solutions to persistent social problems and create a more just, equitable and peaceful world?

Youth as Instruments to Transformation

Youth have the power and potential to transform as they constitute as the backbone of society. The raw youth potential at our disposal would need maturation which will result in growth and transformation. Transformation refers to a complete change. It signifies the essence of growth and progress. The true wealth of a nation lies not in its foreign exchange reserves and riches, but in its citizens, especially its youth. Youth have the power to transform and hence, on their strong shoulders, rests the responsibility of leading the nation towards progress and prosperity. Youth form the backbone of any society and in this context, we are extremely fortunate to have a vibrant youth potential numerically unmatched in the world. India, in the past, has had its glories, but much greater glories await this great nation in the future (Ramakrishna Mission, 2008). It is here, that our youth will have an all-important and distinguished role to play. Transformation of our youth would be the key to this projected image of our country. Any transformation that we seek would inadvertently have to begin from ourselves (Abdul Kalam, 2004). The youth potential is in need of maturation, without losing the essence and elixir of youth and this can be achieved by the motivation to undergo transformational exercises, resulting in growth and awakening, which would lead to a transformation in the desired direction.

Youth as Agents of Social Change

For the successful implementation of various national development programmes, it is necessary to bring about a change in the attitudes of the community. The youth have a special role to play as agents of social change, in transforming the socio-economic structure of society. The struggle against poverty, illiteracy and social evils, and improvement in the conditions of the rural poor and the slum dwellers in urban areas are possible only if the energies of youth reinforce other efforts in this direction.

The power of Youth for Political Change

We need to recognize the power of youth in bringing out a political change. It was in large part the power of young people that delivered Barack Obama's victory as US President, ushering in the possibility of a new dispensation in American politics. The same potential exists in India, according to Larry Schwartz and Pooran C Pandey. With 400 million youth, with most of them possessing the voting power in the elections, the youth power can become a real force for change in India. What is required is to view India's youth (people between the ages of 13 and 35) as a strategic asset.

Youth Perspective on Development

Youth Initiative envisions a situation where young people are involved, valued, respected and listened to; where they can develop to their fullest potential and the quality of life is enhanced for all members of the society. Thus from the youth perspective, development should be able to boost the quality of livelihood of all young people and their societies. It should be able to create a situation where all young people find a space to demand their rights and involve themselves as equal partners and stakeholders, at all levels, from nation building to developing their societies and communities. It should also be able to create an environment that enables people to have freedom of choice. It has been realized that youth are not useless but used less and are not careless but cared less. To be heard and hold stakes as the present, not the future; as partners, not beneficiaries; as solutions, not problems and as the most potent of all human resources of the nation, involved in nation building without being exploited.

Youth Not Beneficiaries but Partners

Analyzing the role of youth in national development, we must acknowledge the fact that the youth of India are not just beneficiaries of tomorrow, but also the partners of today. This fact has been realized by the youth. Moreover, the youth have been able to come forth and express their vision of development, the constraints that abound and their role in the way forward to a better India. The youth have established the fact duly that the involvement of the youth is quintessential to the development of the country. The requirements of development have, thus, come to presuppose the fact that such ingredients of development can only be served if the youth of the country play their envisioned roles. Therefore, it goes without saying that consolidation of youth into one constructive power is necessary for development.

Role of Youth in National Development

It has been witnessed that the learned youth of our nation pleasingly opt for abroad assignments rather than serving our national interests to which we term as 'Brain drain". The generation of civic sense and social sensitivity among the youth is a way out of this problem. Making the youngsters aware of the social hindrances obstructing our overall development, will make them sensitive towards society, which in turn will urge them to contribute towards national development. A sense

of nationalism, patriotism and social awareness will make our youth force stronger and will help us to achieve the goal of a developed and progressed India. The power of youth and its capacity is unquestioned. The overwhelming energy and urge for selfexposure keep our youth accelerating on the ways of innovation and creativity. If this force is channelized in a proper and positive manner, it will surely lead to a tremendous thrust and will boost our national development.

Mainstream Young People in Governance

By virtue of its scope and nature, India's democracy is one of the most impressive in the world, according to Larry Schwartz. However, the problem for young people is that they are in the youth wing. "You don't want to be in the youth wing — you want to be in the main wing and be represented in the mainstream of all politics in the country." How can young people be mainstreamed in public life? The Government of India, through the Planning Commission, made a key decision to invest in youth and in women and has planned outlays accordingly. At present various processes are in place to quantify the contribution that young people, women, and volunteers make in Indian society. A Youth Policy (2003) is in place and is currently up for review. These initiatives indicate a willingness on the government's part to focus on youth, but there is also a view that youth interests are not being sufficiently mainstreamed because of a lack of pressure from the youth sector. For example, a number of the provisions of the 2003 Youth Policy have not yet been implemented (such as the creation of a youth development fund governed jointly by civil society and government).

Development through NSS

The NSS is an association, an organization, where youth power could be channeled for development. Youth have to play a catalytic role in accelerating the process of national development. Their boundless energy and innate idealism could introduce into the various development activities a direction which could bring about the social transformation needed to make it suitable for their own future. Involvement of youth is particularly relevant because of the resolve of the country to progress in the direction of building up an egalitarian society, emphasizing not only economic and technological development but also improvements in the quality of life of the common man. It is totally possible if the youth could actively involve in NSS activities which sows the seeds of development. For, Today India is facing numerous social problems and taking into consideration the ever-increasing job burden on the government and the administration, it is required that public-private partnership must deal with this situation. People should take up various issues and work towards solving the problems. NSS makes the students aware of the social conditions around them.

NGO Networking for Social Transformation

It is important to point out that networking is essentially about mobilization and advocacy. For networking for social transformation to be effective, it has to be rooted in communities and made up of organizations and movements of poor people. The organization and mobilization of the people have to be bottom-up, ie., organizing from below. In this, the participation

of youth is most necessary. If more youth are involved in NGO activities changes, in innumerable fields, can take place. The idea of NGO networking for social transformation is essentially targeted at bringing about development in society. However, development is always associated with good change and progress. This brings us to the point that we need to look into specific areas to focus in order to channelize to the maximum, the power of youth for societal transformation.

Areas of Focus

The following issues are the real concerns of the youth which need to be focused and given due recognition. ·

- Recognition: Recognition of youth and their capabilities, free from the unfortunate stigmatizations, as the able partners of development. ·

- Empowerment: Empowerment through the facilitation of means to eliminate the constraints that refrain from the expression of their full potential as the partners in development. ·

- Involvement/employment: Involvement/employment of the youth, in collaboration with the other, agents of development, in eliminating the constraints of development and drive the country to welfare.

This is investing in youth for active citizenship. For this, we need to take into consideration the following four points.

1. Realize the fact that youth are key to changing people's attitudes on a range of issues
2. Recognize the power of youth in the 21st century
3. Break youth stereotypes and recognize youth as assets
4. Mainstream young people in governance.

In order to harness the power of youth, in the words of Pooran C Pandey, it is necessary to motivate young people and help them understand why they are so important. We need to help them become more aware of the issues and tell them: 'You have the ability and power, the bargaining capacity to play your part. We are there to help you. Together we will set the development agenda — political, social and economic changes for the better of our national development.' The risk is that society sees youth as a homogeneous group, which it is not. Young people have different interests in terms of class and caste, and the reality is that there is growing inequality all over the world. Nevertheless, young people have to fight for recognition and we need to guide them to do so.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Setting standard age criteria of youth as 13 to 30 years old. Ensuring that the youth minister can fully represent youth interests by being less than 45 years old.

- Creating a comprehensive data bank on youth demography, resources, organizations, and opportunities, including effective dissemination strategies.

- Greater collaboration among youth organizations, donors, government and other stakeholders

- Building the capacity for youth active citizenship through greater training and learning opportunities and the creation of greater opportunities for young people and civil society to be involved in social and political/policymaking processes. It is important for young people and civil society to be more significantly involved in policy making and implementation.

- Development of appropriate evaluation tools to assess and highlight the impact of youth active citizenship programs.

- Greater visibility for and investment in youth active citizenship. This includes encouraging greater media coverage of youth active citizenship and establishing resources and funds for supporting innovative active citizenship programs.

- Ensure that young women are supported to participate in programs and that program design takes into account power dynamics between young men and women.

CONCLUSIONS

It is crystal clear from the above that youth have to play a catalytic role in accelerating the process of national development. Their boundless energy and innate idealism could introduce into the various development activities a direction which could bring about the social transformation needed to make it suitable for their own future. Involvement of youth is particularly relevant because of the resolve of the country to progress in the direction of building up an egalitarian society, emphasizing not only economic and technological development but also improvements in the quality of life of the common man. In this millennium when we look at the issues like education, employment/self-employment, vocational training, the health of the youth for optimum use of their potential.

Our focus should be to provide gainful engagement to all youth, based on access to information, technological adjustment, awareness of the environment, and opportunities for economic activities and development of the youth personalities.

Fulfilling the commitment to provide gainful engagement to all youth requires a concerted effort on the part of different players, like the teachers, the government, especially, Ministries/Departments of Education and Human Resource Management and Non-Governmental organizations. Over a period, the Government of India has developed schemes, programmes, and infrastructure through its various Ministries and Departments for the overall development of young people and society. However, the benefits of these schemes have not reached the youth. A mechanism needs to be created to fill this gaping gap. For this to happen, the youth have to be properly informed and equipped so as to enable them to have access to development schemes being implemented by the government. The need is to establish an Information Technology Center, which could act as a medium to provide opportunities for youth to address different issues that affect their daily lives.

We have take steps based on the consultation designed and facilitated by Innovations in Civic Participation and Pravah in New Delhi in March 2009, entitled "Nurturing Active Citizenship among Youth in India". We have to turn the spotlight on active citizenship as a catalyst for integrating young people into the social, economic and political mainstream. We need to identify the benefits that would accrue to India by mainstreaming young people as active citizens involve a conscious effort across civil society, private and public spaces. We have to improve the health services at the village level, finding solutions to climate change and building social cohesion within communities that have faced religious conflict. We have to place active citizenship at the center of efforts to position young people as key players for the future. We have to produce a strong commitment to fostering a more supportive environment for youth active citizenship and integrating them

in the political domain and the many other spheres in which young people can actively work for social justice, human rights, democracy, and transformation.

The challenge for government is to ensure that sufficient investments are made in this large youth segment: shiksha, swasthay aur rozgar (education, health. and employment) are the three pillars around which every development activity revolves. Mrs. Khullar says that "the first change is to start looking at young people". Today youth have to set the agenda and civil society must push that agenda so that it is acted upon. Together we need to work for the active engagement of the young in their own societies and communities, in the fields of, according to Mrs. Khullar, community service, volunteerism and active citizenship (civic engagement).

Building active citizenship depends on young people having the opportunities to lead. For example, in one case a panchayat is now being led by two very young people, showing that it is possible, even in rural areas, for youth to be recognized as leaders. This raises a challenge for organizations that work with young people, as well as development organizations across a variety of sectors, to give meaning to the concept of 'youth-led' organizations and to provide young people with opportunities to gain leadership experience.

Thus by recognizing the power of youth and providing the guidance, empowerment, opportunities, we would be able to channelize the youth power for ushering in sustainable development in India in all spheres and make the nation a great force to reckon with among the comity of nations.

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