YOUTH INCLUSIVITY IN THE COMMONWEALTH: A VIEW FROM INDIA

“The world now has the largest generation of young people in history. I place great hope in their power to shape our future.”
- UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon.

Youth has always been regarded as the finest period of human life. The Commonwealth defines ‘youth’ as those persons between the ages of 15 and 30 years, without prejudice to other definitions by the Member States. The total youth population of the world is 1.8 billion, out of which 1.3 billion young people belong to Commonwealth nations.

Literacy rates among youth and adults are the tests of an educational system, and the overall trend is positive, owing to the expansion of educational opportunities. Globally, the youth literacy rate increased from 83% to 91% over two decades, while the number of illiterate youth declined from 170 million to 115 million.

The role of youth in nation building is unique. Nations just don’t happen by historical accident; rather they are built by men and women with vision and resolve. Nation-building is always work-in-progress; a dynamic process in constant need of nurturing and re-invention. It means the development of human rights - political, civil, economic and social - and the rule of law. Nation-building never stops and the true nation-builder never rests because all nations are constantly facing up to new challenges.

Nations are a product of the human will and imagination and the institutions that sustain their collective efforts. Therefore, we must find these resources in ourselves if we are to succeed in building our nation; otherwise, to paraphrase Shakespeare, “default would be not in our styles but in ourselves.”

The term nation-building is often used simultaneously with state-building, democratisation, modernisation, political development, post-conflict reconstruction and peace building. But each concept is different, though their evolution is intertwined. The concept of nation-building came to be used especially among American Political Scientists a decade or so after World War II, to describe the greater integration of state and society, as citizenship brought loyalty to the modern nation state with it.

The task of nation-building is herculean and can be divided into phases. Everyone can contribute towards the same, but youth especially brings in new ideas and energy, enthusiasm and vitality which will lead to new discoveries and developments that contribute to the development of a nation. The youth of a nation shapes and moulds its present and paves the way for its future.

Nation-building is like building a house. You start with the foundation before you build the structure. The foundation comprises security, peace, and stability. Therefore, the youth of the Commonwealth nations, only, can decide the tomorrow of their nations.

The Commonwealth is made up of 52 independent countries, with an estimated population of 2.2 billion, of which more than 60% is aged less than 30 years. The Commonwealth is one of the world’s oldest political associations of states. Its roots go back to the British Empire when some countries were ruled directly or indirectly by Britain. Some of these countries became self-governing while retaining Britain’s monarch as Head of State. They formed the British Commonwealth of Nations, with the objectives of promoting democracy, human rights, and to promote mutual understanding and cooperation among member states. There are 1.32 billion young people in the Commonwealth of Nations today, representing a staggering amount of human potential, yet too many of them are trapped in poverty, with fewer opportunities to learn or to earn a decent living, and if these youth are not allowed to realise their full potential, the nations could see a better and brighter tomorrow.

The younger generation shoulders a huge chunk of the responsibility of nation building;
not the politicians or the policy makers alone. It would be more accurate to say that the youth, working in tandem with the government, decide the fate of a nation and its coming generations. It is, therefore, important that the voices of the youth get the right platform. It is necessary that the youth get to exercise their freedom of speech, their opinion and their ideas.

Today, a majority of Commonwealth nations are challenged to alleviate poverty and ignorance and to bridge the technological gap necessary for sustainable development and to fight terrorism and extremism. Where this responsibility is not taken seriously, the world sees weak states and failure in nation building.

There are many challenges faced by the youth in the Commonwealth nations, which makes it difficult for them to contribute in the nation building process. The youth in the Commonwealth nations face problems such as poverty, hunger, unemployment, poor education system, lack of entrepreneurial infrastructure, improper law and order, etc.

Youths are unemployed. Approximately 70 million young people are unemployed worldwide.

Youth are susceptible to disease. Young people aged between 15-30 have the highest infection rates from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

According to the United Nations, youth are under-educated. In the developing world, nearly one-third of youth are illiterate. In the least-developed countries, only 13% of girls and 22% of boys enrol in secondary education.

At this juncture, it is essential for me to make a mention of my constituency Araku, which is in the state of Andhra Pradesh, which is the only tribal constituency of the state and is affected largely by left wing extremism. Recently in an encounter around 30 people were killed, wherein 22 of them are youth between 20 to 30 years of age which is an astonishing factor.

We need to emphasise the fact that the existing huge demographic dividend should be advantageous to the nations rather than being a disadvantage. The young energies, if not driven through positive approaches, pose a threat to the nations both externally and internally.

Youth are the most important assets for the economic, political and social life of their communities. Addressing key global threats - like the spread of HIV/AIDS, growing poverty and political stability in Commonwealth nations - depends on protecting the rights of youth and providing them with the support they need to contribute to the health and well-being of society.

There can be a large number of schemes, projects
and programmes wherein involvement of the youth would bring quicker and better results. Youth should be imparted with skills and spirited young men and women can play a pivotal role in the socio-economic reconstruction of the society.

The youth of Commonwealth nations needs to be multi-faceted with education remaining at the core of everything. Education empowers them with the ability to think, to tell the right from the wrong and good from the bad. Initiatives should be taken by the government to eradicate poverty and unemployment in youth. The youth also has to shoulder the responsibility along with the state to promote initiatives ranging from poverty alleviation to peace-building, promoting and enhancing development and fighting against all the evils that hamper nation building.

The classic example of nation building is Singapore, transforming itself from a developing country to a modern industrial economy in one generation. With a small limited domestic market, Singapore has had to become highly integrated into the global economy. Education was seen, from the beginning, as central to building both the economy and the nation. In five decades, after independence, modern Singapore has grown from a sleepy, malaria-infested swamp into an economic powerhouse, unprecedented in the history of the world.

When the new government came into power, they were struck with many problems like unemployment, poverty and the lack of education. The government of Singapore gathered the people together, with its calls of national loyalty, and the need to achieve economic progress and racial harmony. It created an identity of the ideology of pragmatism which was consistent with its survival as a small nation with limited resources, and the Singaporean identity was built by persuading Singaporeans to look towards the future together. The attitude of Singaporeans played a major role in building Singapore which is exemplary to all of us. They were fighters and strivers and Singapore was able to harness a generation of such people in the common purpose of building and protecting the home that they wanted to live in. It was this never say die attitude that really allowed the government of the day to push tough policies and make the hard choices that a lot of governments and even their people try to avoid making.

The nation building efforts were the vision of the government, formulated on behalf of all the Singaporeans from all walks of life, reflecting a diversity of viewpoints and over decades transformed Singapore from a small town to a financial hub.

As an old saying goes: “the youth are not only the leaders of tomorrow but also the partners of today.” The youth, as the energetic ambitious and highly capable people, have the responsibility, passion and power of being at the forefront of developing the nation in a democratic and constructive way. Youth, as the powerful pressure groups and guardians of transparency, will enable themselves to query government policies and performance for corrective action to be taken for the development of their nation.

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It is to be noted that the youth possess energy, skills, hope and dreams of nation-building, but sometimes they lack proper critical thinking. Therefore, the youth which could have been a pioneer of some world-changing act may become world-destroying terrorists. Thus, here lies the role of the nation and the government to empower the youth with education and power and guide them in the development of a better nation.

The role that youth play in nation building cannot be ignored. Youth could be a source of labour inputs as well as human capital in production, which would improve total factor productivity in a region of the world where capital formation is limited.

The youth of the Commonwealth nations could be critical for the development of a new class of entrepreneurs that these countries need to prosper. To encourage youths to participate actively in nation-building, their accessibility to education and training should be further enhanced while leadership and skills training, entrepreneurial development and healthy lifestyle programmes should be carried out more extensively.

Youth, in order to make his/her country develop, has to sacrifice not only their lives by protecting their country at the borders but also has to protect from internal threats and make the society a healthy place to live. It is possible only if the youth realise to stay healthy by sacrificing selfishness, laziness, evilness etc., and by thinking dedicatedly about the growth of a nation. The central purpose of advocating youth leadership is to support youth in taking the initiative to engage in civic and community activities in order to build on their strengths and self-esteem and to work together as a team in building leadership skills.

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“This world demands the qualities of youth: not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease.” - Robert Kennedy.