

Challenges the youth face

Social Problems

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Ahmed Saleem

In most of the developing countries young people are growing up without opportunities, information and services they need to reach their full potential. There is mounting evidence to prove that lack of investment and an indifference to the needs of youth incur a high cost in terms of lost development opportunities, ill health and social, physical, mental disruption. And it means failure to fully support our present "asset" as well as next generation of parents and leaders. There is no doubt that the youth have been at the centre of socio-economic and socio-political changes taking place in Pakistan and elsewhere. The period of the life under which the youth fall, is the most productive and energetic. If their energies are not channelled they fail to captivate opportunities that come their way.

At this moment, the youth in Pakistan find themselves in a far better position than many of their peers in other countries because of the demographic advantage they enjoy in Pakistan. As a matter of fact Pakistani population is very young. The census of 1998 counted 56 million children under the age of 15. There were another 13 million adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19, and 11 million youth aged between 20 to 24 years. In other words, in 1998 children, the very young and the youth accounted for 62 million of the total population. (Census Report of Pakistan 1998, Table 5, Population by Selected Age Group)

Of the 15 largest countries in the world in terms of population size Pakistan has by far the youngest people. Should such a young population be regarded as a burden or an asset? I believe that our demographic situation provides our young with an extraordinary opportunity to compete in whatever sphere they chose. We have an opportunity to turn our very large and very young people into a productive asset. That could contribute significantly to the economic growth and poverty alleviation. Both the government and society must join their hands or this nation-building task and concentrate on protecting the emotional and physical health of the youth, their skill-based education, provision of recreational facilities, employment, and above all incorporation of self-confidence, motivation and courage to move forward.

The challenges, constraints and opportunities the young people face vary from region to region and culture to culture — from forced early marriages to increased poverty resulting from adjustment policies, from armed conflicts to a lack of opportunities. For many, bread and butter is a problem, for others it is HIV/AIDS, lack of education or poverty are major constraints in life. But nobody

denies that the youth, wherever they are, need to be redirected for a larger well-being and prosperity of societies, countries and nations.

The youth of Pakistan, despite a multitude of problems like unemployment, poverty, remorselessness, social taboos, drugs, guns and politics, have always been in the forefront of movements and political changes, for instance from Pakistan Movement to Independence of Pakistan and Indo-Pak wars, to Fall of Dhaka and Pakistan emerging as "something" on the map of the world to Pakistan becoming the first Islamic nuclear power. They have never let the nation down at any point of time. It is unfortunate that the youth, despite their contributions to national developments, find themselves trapped in a culture marked by guns, violence and drugs. All this has resulted in an unstable economy, a shattered confidence of foreign investors, lawlessness, and a break-up of the social fabric.

Pakistan at the moment houses the largest number of youth in its history. This is the best time for Pakistan to invest in youth and reactivate and relocate their disfranchised energies if there is any need for economic growth and social development in Pakistan. If we glance through the history of the world, it stands clear that the countries with the fastest economic growth over the past 50 years are those which heavily invested in their youth.

The most impounding problem our youth is facing at present is frustration. This monster is eating up our youth slowly and gradually. The youth in Pakistan don't have jobs, means of healthy entertainment, health resources and awareness. They say the youth is like running water. It makes it own ways. The frustration as a result of multitude of problems is increasing day by day. This is the right time to look into the problems of youth and give them viable solutions otherwise it will be too late in the day. We need to bear in mind that the "destiny of nations is in the hands of youth".

As for education of our youth, there is a feeling that it should be more productive and progressive in terms of its application and usage. There is no formal guidance for students in logical selection of a specific course of study. There is no unified, single education system in the country. We have three to four education systems running at parallel levels. Education does not mean enrolment at universities and colleges. Rather it means evaluating the skills and knowledge of those individuals who acquired it, and the adequacy of this education in fulfilling their needs. Education means exploring alternate routes, both formal and informal, to knowledge and skill building. In Pakistan particularly it means putting the right persons to the right tracks. Most of our employed youth are misfits in their present positions and

employment. They have been yoked to these unwanted engagements either by society, parents or their circumstances. Somebody who wanted to become a lawyer and was sent to a medical college against his wish, cannot give the best output as a doctor at all. We need proper education counselling system in the country if we require a maximum output from our youth.

Unemployment is another problem being faced by our youths. We don't have latest official figures but almost 12 percent (Labour Force Survey, Government of Pakistan, 1997) of our youth is unemployed. Unemployment is a multi-dimensional and complex issue which starts a vicious cycle of associated problems like involvement of youth in politics, bank-household burglaries, social insecurity, lawlessness, use of drugs, etc. Though every government has done something for the youth with regards to eradication of unemployment but the problem is sustainability of these programmes. One government launches a couple of youth promotion and youth investment schemes, the next one slates all the previous programmes and starts anew. The ultimate sufferers in this exercise are the youth.

The role of media in upbringing of our youth has been minimum throughout the history of Pakistan. Most of the youth find our TV programmes non-entertaining and unattractive. Every body is interested in watching other South Asian and western channels. As a consequence we came to know what is called "cultural invasion". The term is very old but we experienced its magic in Pakistan only from 1990s onward. As to radio and newspaper, both of these media don't target youth as one of their potential audiences. With the start of public-private partnership, the government should pay extra attention to using them in education, welfare and development of the youth.

Our youth has lost its identity and importance. We need to enable our youth to rediscover their identity which they were made to loose over the last 50 years. There must be remedial measures at government, social and individual levels to restore the confidence of the youth in their potential qualities.

The most important step to be taken by the Government of Pakistan, in this regard, is revision and revival of a national youth policy which must be to aspire to create situations whereby youth stand educated, employed and free from drug abuse, frustration, parochialism, sectarianism and other numerous evils which have jolted the foundations of our society like involvement of youth in politics, terrorism and lawlessness. We have to prepare our youth to face the challenges of the time with unshakable courage and youthful confidence.

The writer is a freelance journalist
eepest@yahoo.com