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The young face

When I was still in college, a friend who had joined the workforce recounted that when he refused to take a favour from a customer, the older colleagues in office mocked him and said that they were all like that when young and that everyone 'learns' with time.

It is true that everyone learns the ways of the world, and with time the shine of integrity and hard work may begin to dull, but there is always hope that the young will bring fresh energy and ideas into a system controlled by people set in their ways.

The Economic Survey of 2013-14 estimated that India will become the youngest country by 2021, with 64% of its working population in the working age group of 20-35 years. The millennials, as they are referred to, are just not separated by years but by the unique setting of the environment they grew up in. These are first generation digital natives whose knowledge and awareness of social, political, human, environment and world affairs has made them self-assured, assertive, with a mind of their own, and clear life and career aspirations. They are also somewhat entitled, vocal and impatient because growing up in a world connected through the internet, much of what they need has been at their fingertips.

At the cusp of this demographic transition, there is an immense expectation, a promise of the change, development and progress that previous generations too dreamed of but could not completely effectuate. How will a country with 29 as the median age take it forward? What can we expect?

Fair & equal

Their learning, which has been more participatory with discussions, interactions, and hands-on experiences, is more equipping and empowering. The youth expect and will demand a more participatory role in society, politics and governance of the nation. Social, religious and economic hierarchies cannot be magically obliterated but are increasingly frowned upon among the urban, educated. Families walk into restaurants with their domestic help and eat together. This was rare a decade ago. Most urban schools are now co-educational, and more students with disability are studying in mainstream schools. The millennials are, therefore, expected to be more gender- and disability-sensitised.

Civic-minded and aware, Generation X have been assisted and encouraged to transition mindsets and drive social changes. They are aware of matters such as global climate change, conservation, waste management, traffic congestion. This past Diwali, there was a significant decrease in fireworks and crackers — a movement driven primarily by school children. At individual levels too, school kids are involving themselves in social causes. Schoolchildren in a Bengaluru school started a drive to collect old school books and stationery for students from poor families. Social media, for all its apparent flaws, has been a powerful platform for the propagation of ideas, for support of good work.

A country of 1.2 billion people faces immense challenges on all fronts, and the growing awareness of social discrepancies and problems are driving children as young as eight to innovate. Ceiling fans powered by windmill on the roof; spray-on gloves for garbage collectors and labourers; cushioned helmets for construction workers; movable traffic dividers for traffic congestion; wheelchair that converts into crutches; and a low-cost Braille printer — these are all innovations by school students.

Helped by education and awareness of the world they live in, young people are rejecting the politics of vote banks and appeasement. For too long the educated middle classes have been accused of apathy towards the electoral process, but this is changing. There were 10 million first-time voters in our general elections two years ago.

Women & family

Twenty-six-year-old Chanda lives in a rented room with another girl. She cooks in seven homes, earning Rs 3,000 per home. A gutsy girl who commutes on a bicycle and rattles off the names of dishes she can prepare, she confides that her husband left her and their six-year-old daughter for another woman, so she moved from Kolkata to Bengaluru to work. When Nasreen's husband began to demand her earnings from the odd jobs with which she sent her two children to a private school, she refused. He left her. When asked her how she would manage on her own, she showed no sign of worry and replied matter-of-factly that she would just need to work harder. The story of these women is the story of thousands determined to turn gender bias on its head.

The taboos of women living alone, being unmarried, remarried, divorced, single will perish as more women seeking their rightful place in society stop caring. Aware of their rights, girls are eager to study, earn and be independent. More and more girls are caring for and supporting their aged parents. With women getting into top jobs and involving themselves in advocacy and decision-making, there will be greater pay equity and safeguards of their rights. Recently, women bus conductors in Kerala quit en masse over disparity in pay — the men were being paid almost double the salary for the same work. More millennials were born to liberal parents, mixed marriages, and have parents who are relatively more accepting of their lifestyle changes.

More relaxed societal norms also mean there is a healthy mixing of the genders and there is no rush to marry, which has been the only acceptable man-woman relationship in our society. At the age the previous generation began to feel the heat of ‘settling down’, the millennials continue to focus on career, travel, taking sabbaticals to try new things, study or pursue a new calling. Long-distance relationships and marriages, late marriage and childbearing are common. Clearly, we are a less intrusive society and with more and more youngsters moving out of their parents’ home as early as after school to study or to work, the generation has more freedom to make their marital choices. Relocation within the country and abroad for work or education is also a non-issue.

Work is play

More students are opting to work after graduation to finance their higher education. Many are taking a year off to figure out what they want to do; to travel, or to gain work experience for better university prospects. Treasa M, who was unclear about her future, took up a job with a multinational immediately after graduation, so while the paychecks keep coming, she has time to figure out what she wants to do.

We have seen generations of men and women sitting uneasy in their jobs — careers that were thrust upon them because some careers were considered more stable and respectable. Many among these, especially women, unable to balance work and family responsibilities, could never have fulfilling careers. Six months into her Chemical Engineering degree, Mansi A decided it wasn’t what she wanted to do with her life and quit to study Environmental Science.

Her parents supported her decision and the six months she was between courses, she utilised in learning a foreign language. Apoorv S, who secured a well-paying, cushy job with a finance company immediately after his post graduation, is preparing to move to the social sector for more gratifying work and use of his education.

Many students are bypassing corporate jobs, where the burnout is quick, for a career in the social sector. There is a definite inclination towards the social sector with volunteer training and social entrepreneurship programmes becoming more popular.

‘Best fit’ is what one hears repeatedly from Generation X. They are unwilling to compromise. The start-up generation is following their heart over the security of salaried jobs. Though the IT industry is still a big draw for youngsters, students are rejecting

seats in poorly-equipped private colleges.

The millennials are up for risks and challenges. They live in the moment and choose experience over assets. They are in no hurry to buy the first car or house. Challenging work and excitement are their driving forces. They grew up knowing their rights, pursuing their interests and hobbies; parents and teachers gave them the freedom to take decisions and find their own solutions — they want this from their careers.

A two-way street

Even as we try and sound upbeat about this young face of India, we must realise that they will turn out only as good or as bad as their education and upbringing. The New Year eve's blot of shame on the face of a very cosmopolitan and urban-liberal Bengaluru cannot be pushed out of our recall. Have we done enough in terms of providing this generation with direction, gender sensitivity, civic and social awareness?

Are the benefits of education and financial security reaching all sections in all parts of the country? The rise in caste-based agitations and demands for reservations is a warning that the youth is angry and frustrated. If the employment rate looks okay, it is because a large part of the population is working in the informal sector. The growing demand for education indicates that the youth will demand jobs in the formal or service sector. Despite increased wealth and a burgeoning urban middle class, a vast majority of India's population remains illiterate and impoverished.

Millennials live in the villages too. Will there be enough income-generating activities that keep people interested in agriculture? The average earning in urban areas is still better than in rural areas, and education and training are by and large oriented towards urban life. What are the living conditions the few big cities with their infrastructure and resources already stretched offer to the growing numbers constantly migrating for work and a better life?