

The world is your oyster

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Powered by technology, youth today are more aware of the plethora of choices available to them across the globe. They want to try new things and follow their instincts. They understand the hurdles that are in the way of our progress and are not hesitant to work towards bringing about critical changes — from fighting corruption to saving the environment and teaching the poor. It's a whole new world out there, writes Shefali Tripathi Mehta.



I chat up kids in the park. What do you want to be when you grow up? A regular question.

Teacher, pilot and doctor have long been dethroned by software engineer, Superman and astronaut, but the latest coup is by chef, farmer (organic, the little girl adds quickly) and marine biologist.

What do you know of a marine biologist? I ask the nine-year-old, sure he has it confused with the glamorous new career introduced through a recent Hindi film, that of a deep-sea diver. "It's about the plants and animals that live in the ocean." And he continues to tell me of marine organisms, their food chains, and the threats they face. And where did he learn all this? "On National Geographic. Then, I looked up more stuff on the Internet," he is astoundingly nonchalant.

The average age in which children of this Net Generation start using a computer is three. Their wired and tech-savvy world is far removed from ours. We entered a sanitised room taking off our shoes religiously to slip on black rubber slippers and were told to learn typing first, if we wanted to go anywhere near the computer! We spent hours learning MS Word and felt triumphant when our manual tabulations matched the ones the Excel Sheet threw up.

The national newspaper reached us by train in the afternoon in the city I grew up. There was no sign in that life to indicate that one day I could be reading and watching live news, as it was unfolding at any time of the day, anywhere in the world. When father returned from his trips abroad, we waited eagerly to hear his accounts; watch fascinating pictures of sunny piazzas, loaded supermarket shelves, exotic fruit; and hear local radio recorded by him on cassettes.

The world — wondrous and vast — reached us in bits. Now a click of the mouse tells us where to eat, what to buy, what to see, and what not to miss while visiting a foreign country; take a virtual tour or watch video clips of places around the world. Technology has blurred all geographical and cultural boundaries. We're not just programming software for international clients or collaborating with foreign artists, but the Net Generation is growing up familiar and at ease with world trends — fashion, music, films, art, cuisine and lingo. Their ideas go viral. In our times, only flu went viral.

Information, ideas, news and entertainment at fingertips; fast and simple communication; and a globalised, open and competitive economy have led to innumerable new life choices for the Net Generation.

Choice is freedom

“Choosing to live your life by your own choice is the greatest freedom you will ever have.” I was the first Arts student in a very large family. I caught aunts' raised eyebrows as they whispered conspiratorially to others during weddings, “She's taken Arts.” Some kind people said, “But you can still teach in a school. School teaching is a good option for girls.” For the older generation, I had closed all other doors to a career. Commerce was still largely used in the derogatory sense of the mammon and not taken up as a subject to build a career upon and almost never as early as in school.

That was then. Three decades later, a smaller, more connected, more familiar world; easy, accessible information; and non-conforming icons galore, the Net Generation has been given wings. The exposure to technology and its uses have made them more aware of the plethora of choices available to them across the globe. They want to try new things and follow their instincts. The older generation too is more open and encouraging of the youngsters pursuing the career of their dreams as against their own 'safe' choices. More children are making unusual career choices or taking a couple of years off to devote to their hobbies; learn new languages, travel; and then getting back to the workplace with renewed confidence and worldview.

Font design, blogging, online teaching, fruit and vegetable carving, pottery... Kids these days are taking up these as careers and not just hobbies. Though I guess, studying to be a Hand Writing expert wouldn't be a good career choice anymore. Professions have become super specialised — one can make a living out of capping the left tooth of a blue whale! A fence-sitter who could not decide whether to take up Science or Arts, decides to be a prosthodontist — one who makes replacement teeth — a perfect combination of Arts and Science.

Though necessity is believed to be the mother of invention, the spirit of innovation, risk-taking and adventure thrives in a climate of freedom, opportunity and economic prosperity. It is because of their relative prosperity that many parents today are sending their kids to new age, experimental schools and encouraging them into sports and arts that can become fulfilling careers. This spirit of risk-taking, fostered and amply supported by technology and the availability of information, encourages young people to seek new

and better ways of doing things. There is a rise in leadership and enterprise. Gender inequality has disappeared as far as the use of technology goes with girls being equally tech-savvy and networked.

Choices confound

I wanted to gift my teen and offered to buy her music. “Actually, I have everything I want on my iPod.” “Okay, then let’s buy a book?” “I’ll get it on Kindle.” “Then let’s go clothes shopping!” I was sure this would be the clincher, the perfect ploy for a mother-daughter outing. “I’ll order online when I’m done planning this event,” she said, not looking up from the three IM windows that she was furiously typing into.

Is more choice, freedom? It is believed that too many ideas, too many options, lead to lack of focus. With all the gadgets and the aid from technology, the Net Generation is often thought of as restless and distracted, unable to focus on anything. They grow up with a lot of organised activity and feel restless and disoriented when faced with free time or activity-less-ness. They are multitaskers who while doing homework listen to music, watch TV, eat, talk on phone and text too. With their need to have everything faster than it is, they seek immediate gratification. They are easily bored and change jobs and careers often.

Boredom in our times came as a blessing. When we had nothing to do, we tried new things. These were considered ‘pastimes’ and no one read too much into it to create pressures. Such as, if I enjoyed listening to the soothing and unhurried voices of All India Radio, no one wondered if I would grow up to be an RJ. There was enough time to do nothing, to daydream and to smell the flowers (read that as steal the neighbour’s guavas).

The multitude of material choices this generation has, has lead to consumerism and overconsumption, which is often based on credit. The compunctions about living on credit belonged to their elders. “Just do it”, “You deserve it”, “Because you’re worth it” — kind of advertising messages seem to talk to them one on one. Also, their emotional bonds may not be as strong and as steady as ours. Social media communities often create a false sense of connection and familiarity, leaving the young people at the core sometimes very isolated. With 2,000 friends online, their people-need still remains unfulfilled. Though I did not know what my best friend had for breakfast I would be sitting with her if she wanted to talk, every time.

The demands of a connected life, of keeping pace, fitting in everything possible, being ‘virtually’ available 24x7 can be an immense strain. If we were not home to receive a phone call, the caller called again; if we sent letters, we accounted for postal delays. No stress. Now if someone does not answer the phone, respond to emails, one may get worried or take offence. Phones have to be answered in temples, hospitals, bathrooms and while driving. Simple, everyday goings on turn complex and stressful. Holidays and time offs are not insulated from up-to-the-second outside news.

“Learning what to choose, and how to choose, may be the most important education you will ever receive.” With choices come responsibilities. To make informed choices, one needs to know and understand all its aspects. A friend tells of a choice he made as an 18-year-old. The engineering seat he was offered was available at Srinagar and at Tiruchirappalli. Knowing no other difference between the two except that being a Punjabi, South Indian food may pose a problem, he chose Srinagar. He forewent one that had better claim to academic excellence for lack of information.

Are choices for all?

Does this environment of immense possibilities and abundant choices percolate down to the other India? To the majority that lives to earn so they may eat? What choices does the car cleaning boy who could never go to school have? He was busy earning his roti. How does technology help all those young boys who work in restaurants cleaning tables and carrying away dirty plates?

When the house help’s daughter, after her good results in Grade 10, said she wanted to be a software engineer, I was worried. What if the parents who appeared so encouraging now, gave in to societal or financial pressures and pulled her out midway through her studies? Then she would be left with no skill to earn. Her dreams stymied.

Also, as the first-generation educated, she carried the burden of being the role model. Most often, economic status will steer kids into careers. The world may be full of possibilities, yet social and economic circumstances may remain major barriers. RD, a brilliant student with visual impairment, idolised Dr Abdul Kalam, the former president of India, and like him dreamt of being a missile scientist from a very young age.

As he came to higher classes, continuing in the Science stream became tough with no special aids for experiments, drawings or calculations. By Grade 10, he had to relinquish his dream and opt for Humanities. He simply had no choice.

A few generations back, very few persons with physical or mental disability could cross life barriers to become a part of the mainstream. Most were alienated in special schools and stereotypical jobs. A visually-impaired person today knows he can do more than weave cane chairs. Technology can and must obliterate all differences so that the economically and other disadvantaged sections of the people too can make better life choices.

Social change takes time. Technology, and the choices it offers, is changing lives in the hinterland too, although at a slower rate due to illiteracy, lack of infrastructure and poverty. A study puts the number of women in India using mobile phones to 300 million. Women in remote areas are using mobile and community radios for their empowerment — health issues and services; market and career information; trainings, self-employment; safety and finance.

ITC's e-Chaupal provides internet kiosks in villages managed by farmers where they access information on the weather, market prices, and agricultural practices in their local language. Fair prices and direct marketing without intermediaries are big benefits to farmers. Mobile banking service for remote places where there are no banks, M-Pesa, and the use of satellite maps and GPS to track the reach of the Polio vaccine are some of the major revolutions technology is making in the villages.

Back to roots

Modern technology and communication have put the youngsters back and more closely in touch with issues of national importance. They understand the hurdles that are in the way of our progress and are not hesitant to work towards bringing about critical changes — from fighting corruption to saving the environment and teaching the poor.

They are not hesitant to enter politics, the proverbial 'dirty' field. Chavi Rajawat, an MBA who gave up her cushy corporate job to work in her village, is a shining example. As Sarpanch of her village in Rajasthan, it is her calling to see that every last paisa of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) which guarantees 100 days of wage employment for rural, unskilled, manual worker, reaches those who are entitled to it.

If one hundred enthusiasts decide to organise a Tomatina fest, there are two hundred who stand up against the insensitivity of it in our country where five die every minute due to hunger. The Net Generation makes good use of the knowledge and awareness they are exposed to. They have been the loudest propagators of ecological and environmental conservation among other issues.

As I finish this piece, I remember and tell my daughter that in my days I would have had to type this out and send it by post along with a self-addressed stamped envelope. She laughs when I tell her that the 'self-addressed, stamped envelope' was necessary if I wanted my rejected piece returned. Am I glad for email?

Yes! I'm glad for having sailed through the transition. From being happy in my childhood with wound-up toys, to looking at remote controlled toy cars with wonderment, then absolutely hating the lost-in-video-games generation, today, I do not grudge the three-year-olds their iPads for I understand what power it puts into their little hands and blooming minds. At the same time, I cannot help but think of Robert Frost's dilemma if he were to write his famous poem now, it would probably be something like — Twenty-nine roads diverged in a yellow wood...