

A Roadmap for the Young

Written by Amrut Bang

How can we tell if India's youth are flourishing? Policymakers and society must have a framework in place to make the best use of the demographic dividend

India's aspiration to become a world leader must resonate more with its youth more than anyone else. Unless the country's youth take to nation-building, why only India, no country can hope for the development that befits its ambitions. There is no better day than to begin that journey than January 12, observed as National Youth Day.

The youth (18-29 years) constitute 22 per cent of India's population, which is more than 261 million people — larger than the population of Pakistan. But this advantage, often termed as demographic dividend, will remain only a numerical strength unless India proactively and consciously focuses on their overall development.

India has only 10 years beginning 2021 to hold on to this demographic dividend. The Youth in India report by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation of the Government of India states that the median age of Indian population is around 28 years in 2021 and will become 31 years by 2031.

Unfortunately, as of now we don't seem to be capitalizing on this advantage. The government and industry look at the youth as a vote bank or as potential customers. Even in the social sector, youth development is on the fringes. Apart from the fact that we don't have many robust interventions targeted at grooming the youth, a major problem is that India does not even have a theory or framework about the healthy growth of this group. What do we mean by a flourishing youth? What are the various aspects to it? How would we know one when we see one?

In the absence of any solid framework related to their flourishing, only the more visible and easily measurable markers like marks, employment, salary, a house, etc. take precedence and qualify as parameters on which to assess how well young people are doing in their lives. While these factors are also important, they are by no means complete. What could be the other elements and features of knowing if a young person is really doing well in her/his life, to know if s/he is in an optimal state of well-being?

The NIRMAN programme that I work with at Shodhgram in Gadchiroli aims to facilitate a pro-social purpose of life among the youth and nurture them as social changemakers. Approaching youth development beyond conversations around suicide, unemployment, road traffic accidents, sexual assault, alcohol and drug abuse, we have developed a comprehensive and first-of-its-kind framework for India's youth.

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This framework is based on our observations and learnings from active engagement with thousands of youth over the last 14 years and utilises key aspects of scientific literature on emerging adulthood and positive psychology.

The framework has an expansive scope and consists of seven major domains with a total of 50 diverse parameters that are important and relevant from the perspective of overall well-being of young people and is substantiated by our own experience and the science of youth development.

The seven domains are physical health, psychological well-being, character development, social relationships, professional development, life skills and social contribution.

Physical health is about balanced nutrition, adequate exercise, no harmful substance dependence, safe sexual behaviour, etc while psychological well-being looks at awareness and expression of feelings, positive self-esteem, emotional independence, ownership of views and taking a stand, mental health, etc.

The youth needs not just physical and mental health but also a sound character. Hence, the domain of character development – healthy identity, values, finding a purpose, having role models, cultivating aesthetic and artistic sensibilities — also needs focused effort.

We also need to check on the social relationships parameter to see how a young person needs to relate with various people including parents, partner, friends, mentors, in social groups, at the workplace, to be able to forge ahead in life.

What, of course, is of paramount importance is professional development. For example, understanding of various career options, cultivating professional knowledge, hard skills and competencies, soft skills, workplace ethics and attitude, being constructively engaged and continued capacity building, etc.

Developing life skills, like managing household and financial responsibilities, coordinating multiple life roles, intra and interpersonal skills, exercising autonomy, environment-friendly living, etc is important for the youth's attainment of their life goals.

And while the youth gain in the above parameters of overall self development, a natural extension of it should also be an inspiration for social contribution, including understanding various social challenges and engaging with civic responsibilities.

We have four types of audiences in mind who might find this framework useful:

One, the youth themselves can now have a solid road map to look at, assess and chart their own growth plan in this light. They should feel empowered to take charge of their flourishing along the various facets.

Two, practitioners of youth development may want to see where do their existing interventions fit in and create new interventions pertaining to other aspects of the framework that they find important.

Three, academicians and policymakers may want to debate, discuss various facets of this framework, add to it, conduct research on specific aspects of it, and include some of these in the literature and policies revolving around the youth in India.

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And four, any conscious Indian citizen who engages with the youth, whether as a parent, an uncle or aunt, an elder sibling, a team leader or a boss, a teacher, a friend or a life partner, can make use of this framework to contribute in any possible way towards the development of the young people who come in one's contact.

We look forward to a future where young people's growth and progress in life is gauged and facilitated, by themselves and others, on such a diverse framework and does not remain restricted to exam scores, package figures, vehicles owned and square feet of purchased property.

Absence of mental or physical illness does not automatically mean presence of good health. It merely means that we are not on the negative side of the axis but at the zero point. There are myriad possibilities of growing on the positive side of the axis. We hope this framework will serve as a useful guide to the youth of the country.

This Article was published in Indian Express, dated 11 January 2021.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-youth-world-leader-soft-skills-jobs-7142263/>

