

# A digital thrust for youth policy

With the proliferation of digital revolution, the 21st century is all set to be dominated by connected and information society

How old is India? How youthful is this country and what is in store for the next generation? How youth-focused are our policies? These thoughts emerged in light of the draft National Youth Policy, 2012, that has been opened for public consultation. The last time India had such a policy was in 2003.

India's youth population is 550 million, or about 42% of the total population. People in the age group of 16-30 years are expected to increase further. The average age is expected to be one of the lowest by 2020, at 29 years, with China at 37 years and Japan at 48 years. There are more than 40 million people unemployed, with an unemployment rate of 9.4%. As of April, more than 2 million youths were enrolled into various programmes in more than 32,000 universities and colleges. In the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, only 79, or 10.2%, of the parliamentarians are below the age of 42.

The contradictions are true, clear and alarming. The draft policy proposes a strategic policy and programme interventions vis-à-vis this country's capability towards a global economic force in tune with rapid technological advancement. All good, but specificity is missing explicitly.



Photo 1 : Bloomberg

The draft highlights the need to ensure appropriate representation and meaningful contribution of youth in policy formulation and the decision-making processes. "Wide-ranging opportunities should be provided to the youth for constructive participation in the larger arena of community life," the draft policy says. The fear is that these tall dictions may be too hard to believe in and actualize.

The draft puts a large onus on the department of education and the ministry of human resource development to play a predominant role. The

point that youth-development programmes should be integrated into the mainstream of all policies and programmes is welcome.

With the proliferation of digital revolution, the 21st century is all set to be dominated by connected and information society. For many countries like India, whose assets are the youth in the next few decades, it is imperative to digitally enable the youth en masse as our entire communication medium is totally dependent on digital tools. Can we think of devising a national youth information portal that collates all sorts of relevant local, state and national programme content and information as a one-stop platform to network and connect youth power? And that too enabled in all languages and delivered through mobile phones also?

Most of those unemployed surely lack functional information and communications technology (ICT) skills and literacy, especially in tribal and rural areas. Can we think of devising a national information technology (IT) mission for youth programme? One major focus could be in specific programmes like skilling and setting up rural business process outsourcing units in all major clusters dominated by the youth. The success of the idea to have a youth information resource centre in every block will seek continuously that information, services and content is readily made available and accessible.

The optimism laid on the national skill development mission to generate 500 million skilled people by 2022 can have challenges threadbare. Can the ministry of youth affairs devise a special policy and action component to train a certain number of youths in identified skill areas embedded in this skill mission by 2022?

Youth and innovations go together. The idea to have a national youth innovation fund or a national youth incubation unit can be timely with IT innovations as a core programme. Here, the proposed India inclusive innovation fund by the National Innovation Council could have a provision embedded in it. Considering the youth energy reserves the country has, it is apt that youth, technology, innovation and development find a common ground with contemporary national ethos, aspirations and ambitions. Let technology for youth be one of the hallmarks of the youth policy. One overlaying recommendation I would like to insist on is to give unlimited access to the Internet to all the targeted youth the new policy lists.

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