

Youthquake

Harnessing the Young Demographic Dividend

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A bstract

Bangladesh is a country of a conservative estimate of 180 million people, a nation bigger than Russian Federation in terms of a pullulating population and a nation 66 times smaller than the United States in terms of its land mass. As things stand, Bangladesh is tiny but strong and robust. This small country boasts the power of a youthquake, celebrates the strength of a young demographic and harnesses the potential of the youth workforce. The government stands ready to utilise the power of the nation's youth to reap this demographic dividend. Again, the world is about to live in the "Society 5.0" which is fast approaching with all its boom and bust. The world has entered into the age of the rapid march of artificial intelligence (AI), big data, internet of things (IoT) and robotics, also known as Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The world is currently standing on the brink of this neo-technological revolution that will fundamentally alter how people live. The youth of today is the power of tomorrow. They will be able to cruise through this revolution successfully and keep abreast of the 4IR race only if they adapt.

Keywords

Youthquake, Bangladesh, Demographic Dividend, 4IR, 4AR, 5G

Introduction

A little over a half-century into its independence now, Bangladesh is no more a Kissinger's Bangladesh. Today's Bangladesh has witnessed a miraculous development boom on socio-cultural and economic fronts. It is no hyperbole, but it has yet to exploit the full potential of more than 180 million people, mostly a young demographic. Strategic location, natural resources and the youthquake make Bangladesh one of the most alluring hubs of all things Bangladeshi. Even the country's graduation to a developed one needs digital transformation marked by breakthroughs like 5G, AI, robotics, nanotechnology, biotechnology, cloud and quantum computing, and fully unmanned, autonomous vehicles. The nation's youth must be made ready to unlock the world of prospects, possibilities and potentialities. This opinion piece is a humble tribute to the celebration of the demographic dividend as well as a call for making today's youth ready to brace for challenges and predilections on offer.

Bangladesh—Yesterday and Today

Bangladesh has been on the right track as a growth engine in many sectors, but it is still to ensure that the promised living standard that people need not bother about their lives and livelihoods. Yet, it is a matter of pride that the country has long

Youthquake

Harnessing the Young Demographic Dividend



shed Henry Kissinger's proverbial "bottomless basket" parlance in the 1970s, soon after Bangladesh came into being as a sovereign state through a sanguinary war against its long-distance enemy Pakistan. At 99, Mr Kissinger may be embarrassed to see the ribbon development of Bangladesh and also for the trademark comment he made 50 years ago. The changes came for everyone's part in the making of Bangladesh's development amid a partly turmoil-tattered political landscape of 53 years, including 15-plus years of dictatorial rule.

Ageing vs Youth: A Japan-Bangladesh Study

Bangladesh and Japan are time-tested, tried, trusted and true friends. But they are undergoing two different demographic problems, with Japan having a declining working population and a fastest-growing elderly population. On the other hand,

Bangladesh has an increasingly young demographic and it is on the up and up. Demographers and social scientists have rightly called it a youthquake. Bangladesh must find effective and pragmatic ways to harness this youthquake and must utilise this young force. Unlike Japan that suffers a setback with some significant social issues like a declining working population, low birth rate and an increasingly ageing population, Bangladesh is at an advantageous edge. Japan has been facing a demographic crisis for decades as the number of its elderly population is growing on the one hand, but the birth rate is declining on the other. As a result, the number of working people there is shrinking alarmingly. Japanese society is currently called a super-ageing society as 20 per cent of the population grew older than 65 years in 2022 and the figure is estimated to increase to more than 35 per cent by 2049. On the other hand, the population between 0

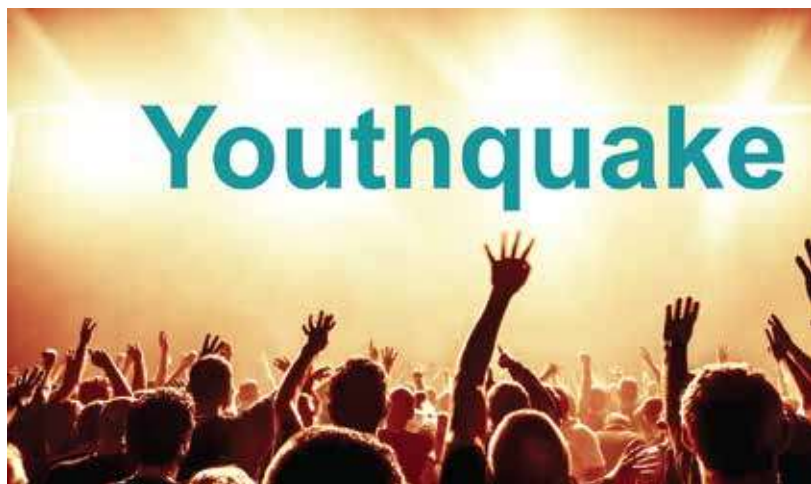
and 19 years old is projected to decrease by 15 per cent by 2049.

Labour Shortages

A significant reason for this decline in the working population is the low fertility rate and the decline of a young demographic in Japan. Labour shortages in Japanese companies are having a significant negative impact on the country's economy. Due to a protracted economic downturn and labour shortages in health care, construction, agriculture and multiple other sectors, Japan has been compelled to abandon its long-standing conservative immigration policy. Earlier, immigration was always discouraged in Japan. But this stringent immigration system worked wonders for Japan to establish its unique culture during the Tokugawa era. In another development, women and the elderly in Japan find it hard to manage jobs despite a high level of enthusiasm and energy for work. In order to arrest this faster depletion of the working population, it is essential to create a working environment where people, who want to work and maximise their productivity, can choose various ways of working that match their lifestyles and fully demonstrate their abilities.

Challenges Ahead

The challenges ahead are daunting. The challenges ahead are harder. But a pragmatic approach to face them would be



the best possible answer amid competitiveness. It is indeed a matter of admiration that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has recently announced a 'smart Bangladesh' programme, a follow-up to her 'digital Bangladesh' campaign, apparently to march ahead with newer and cutting-edge technologies. In order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals-2030 set by the United Nations and also Sheikh Hasina's much-trumpeted bandwagon for a prosperous Bangladesh by 2041, the country needs to put its focus on a few vital areas that include an ideal doing-business climate. The government must arrest political instability and eliminate endemic corruption and red tape that demotivate foreign investors. Investment in building new highways, ports and airports can improve connectivity within and outside the country, thus easing business here.

Unleashing Demographic

Dividend

Bangladesh should have no worries to go ahead as the brave nation is out to capitalise on the power of its demography. Demographers have dubbed this sprawling population on a small land size as 'density dividend'. The country can easily benefit from this so-called density dividend. An estimated 69 per cent of the population falls under the 15-64 age band in this South Asian country. It should give them proper education and skills, especially in the area of ICT and digitalisation so that they can be more productive and contribute to the economy. This nation belongs to the youth, so they need to work accordingly to help foster its faster growth on socio-political and economic fronts. To materialise this, a youthquake can alter the landscape of Bangladesh through unleashing the transformative power of youth. The country can bring about a

significant cultural, political or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people. But skills and education are immediate concerns because the imperatives of economic diversification and uplift in the value chain will require higher levels of education and diversification of skills.

Development of Diverse Skills

Bangladesh is one of the countries having a large unskilled population base. We have to address the shortage of skilled human labour force through turning them into a human capital in order to make Bangladesh a country with a manpower surplus, food-surplus country. Time is opportune to use this army of cheap labour and labour-intensive methods. The government should take a youth-focused approach, upskill and reskill them with industry-first initiatives to unleash the potential of the demographic dividend into future drivers of economic progress and tap into 4IR opportunities. In this digital era, it is crucially important for Bangladesh to collectively equip the burgeoning youth populace with future-ready skills to truly become a knowledge-based high-income nation by 2041. By the same token, it is vital to upskill public servants, including the female workforce, with intent to expand their capabilities and raise their creativity. Young people need to

Youthquake

Harnessing the Young Demographic Dividend



acquire social skills allied with technical as well as technological know-how, dedication and management skills to compete with peers in the workplace at home and abroad. Practical skills and tenacity are an absolute must in today's world of work.

Digital Innovations in Youth's Way

Innovation holds the master key. Innovation makes life easy. It is imperative for the youth to travel to new worlds of digital technology through discovering the frontiers of their knowledge and expanding the horizons of their wisdom. The 4IR is the outcome of the previous three similar revolutions and their core technological innovations. The first industrial revolution was about the mechanisation of factories using water and steam engines in the late 18th century, the second about mass production using electricity in

the early 20th century and the third about further automation using electronic and information technology in the 1970s. In such a social transition to the 4IR, innovation as well as increased productivity is the key to achieving sustained economic growth. It is necessary to address problems through developing and using new, compatible technologies and innovations to do so.

Action Plan for Youth

Youth against famine: Our Prime Minister at a 2022 National Youth Day programme called upon the youth to get involved in food production and processing with an eye to combat possible global food shortages and famine as predicted by various international organisations due to the coronavirus epidemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. To keep Bangladesh free from these perils, we must cultivate every

inch of our fertile land and take special measures in the production and processing of food products. In that situation, our youth should take more initiatives. If we can produce and process food products, we will be able to meet our own needs and also help many famine-stricken countries.

Youth leadership: Putting the incumbent government's focus on increasing the social status of the youth, the head of government said the qualities and talents of leadership should be developed among them. Sheikh Hasina said youth councils were being formed in every district and upazila (sub-district) to train young people so that they can work and contribute to the country's socio-economic development.

Job creation: The process of creating a database of how many trained youths there are now in the country is well under way to ascertain who is getting an employment opportunity and who is out of the benefit. Successive governments have made adequate endeavours to bring the unemployed young population under the workfare system.

Youth power: Our greatest strength is our youth. So many countries in the world today have become countries of the elderly. Bangladesh still has a large working youth. 'Youth power is the prosperity of Bangladesh' is the slogan put in the 2018 election manifesto of the current government to utilise this power of the youth.

Concluding Remarks

Keeping the thoroughgoing development, Bangladesh is now flying towards space and reaching sea in blue economy aspects and it has now the prospect of harnessing opportunities from sky to sea with intent to touch the blue. Henry Kissinger's "basket case" is now a "South Asia's economic bull case". Bangladesh is now an economic success story with an impressive track record for growth and development, despite problems like food crisis, inflation and unemployment. In this case, youth can be better utilised as change-maker or game-changer. The fastest-growing youth is the key tool to help the country cruise through so many inhospitable terrains to raise their heads high and carry the national flag on the global stage. The state must train our youth properly to exploit their full potential in all possible domains of development, be it agriculture, technology, business, trade and technical. Before that, it is imperative to close the digital divide and get the most out of the digital revolution, dividend, innovation and expansion.

Bangladesh must leverage its young demographic and bank on its record population density as the 'density dividend'. Concerned Government divisions and departments need to better manage our young people to make Bangladesh hunger-free and poverty-free and a better place for the generations to come. In this era of automation push, the government is working tirelessly to equip the youth with up-to-date knowledge of science and technology so that they are competitive in the rapidly changing world. The government's youth and sports ministry should take further initiatives for imparting training to youths in all 64 districts to make them entrepreneurs in startups and thereby self-employed.

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- (Facts and figures garnered from the information superhighway have also contributed to making this opinion piece more analytical, insightful and illustrative.)