



Youth

 Sarath Fernando

Youth

Who are youth?

Youth is often seen as a problem. Thus, many of the youth programmes design themselves to keep the youth busy, preventing them from creating problems. Some others see youth as a tool to get things done according to their plans. Thus it is very important to decide who youth are and who youth should be.

If we look at nature the role of youth is to renew nature. Trees begin to grow, when they come of some age they become youth, they produce flowers, fruits and seeds to renew nature, and then they grow old, die and decay. Every day is born anew and it comes to an end nature survives due to this ability of renewal and regeneration. In this process of renewal the youth create something new, while they adjust themselves to their surroundings.

Youth therefore play this essential role of renewal and regeneration. In doing this they look at society to which they enter and judge what is good in it and try to retain them while they look at what is bad and has to be rejected. Discarding what has to be rejected and promoting what has to be maintained is an essential task of youth. Therefore it is essential for the elders to recognize this task of youth and assist them to do this effectively.

However, what we see happening is often quite the opposite. The adults often want their ways to continue and want the youth to continue the same. This is why youth are often seen as trouble makers since they do not agree with this thinking.

Experiences of Youth in Sri Lanka

Introducing the system of free education the then Minister of Education Hon. C.W.W. Kannangara said that rural youth in Sri Lanka are like the flowers that grow in the forest. Education should be given to all so that they come out of forest and enlighten our society. But Sri Lanka is a country where the opposite is quite visible. Sri Lanka has experienced two serious youth uprisings and a long drawn out war that lasted for 30 years all of which were led by youth. Studying the reasons for these youth rebellions should teach us many valuable lessons. What were the reasons that led to these youth rebellions?

Reasons for Youth uprisings

The first was in 1971. In this uprising the youth realized that there were many defects in the political, economic and social systems in the country. They wanted to change this. They recognized that those in power would not willingly change the systems of power. So they thought of taking over state power and this had to be done by force. So, they organized themselves to take over state power by force. This was categorized as “terrorism” and was violently suppressed, killing about 10,000 and imprisoning about 25,000 for years. The next youth uprising in the South between 1988 - 1990 was similar. This time about 60,000 disappeared. The war in the North lasted for around 30 years and number killed was several hundred thousand. Millions were displaced.

However, the lessons learnt from these happenings seem to be few. Youth today are looked upon as cheap labour to attract foreign investment. Armed forces of the state have been tremendously strengthened and the state is now more prepared to suppress any resistance. The causes of resistance have hardly been addressed. In response to the two youth uprisings the response has been to try and rehabilitate youth, meaning they had to be reeducated and trained to live according to the prevailing systems and have been guided not to resist the systems. In the case of the Northern uprising the advice given by LLRC (Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission) has not yet been taken seriously.

The reasons that led to rebellion are still continuing and are getting worse. The inability of youth to be absorbed meaningfully into society is still a big problem.

System of education in crisis

The present systems of education and higher education are in serious crisis. Over 4 million children attend schools in Sri Lanka. All parents and the children aspire to get them into higher education in universities. Many drop out of schools in their early years and about 300,000 sit for GCE advance level exams. Around 120,000 pass with sufficient marks to enter universities. However, universities admit only around 20,000. Thus, over a hundred thousand most qualified and hardworking students are annually rejected. There was a IFAD study done in 1992 on "State of World Rural Poverty" this study identified Sri Lanka as the country with the sharpest increase in rural poverty among 114 countries that were studied. Sri Lanka has a very high rate of suicide. Looking at the killings that took place during the rebellions and the war Sri Lanka was identified as the most violent country by the UN Committee for Involuntary Disappearances, visiting Sri Lanka in 1991.

Sri Lanka has an exceptionally high rate of malnutrition among children and anemia among mothers. The rate of low birth weight babies is high too.

All these were results of the changes in economic policies towards neo liberalism since 1977, introduced after the first youth uprising.

Role and responsibility of youth

What are the aspirations of youth and what are their roles and responsibilities. We the adult society should first try to understand what the genuine aspirations of the youth are and then see how they could be assisted in achieving them. If we look at young people today many of them would want to go to Middle East or some other foreign country to get jobs with good salaries. They would like to learn English and to learn computer sciences etc. This is because this is where they see good job opportunities with recognized dignity. These are aspirations that have been forced upon them by the prevailing conditions. Their genuine aspirations are different and are created by our cultural background.

In Sri Lanka all four major religions are present and alive. Children practice religion and are given a religious orientation from their early years.

In Buddhism we offer flowers and the meditation behind offering flowers is that everything is impermanent and attachment leads to suffering, Therefore accumulation is

foolish.. In our homes the religious stories recited are about King Sirisangabo who donated his head to a beggar and about Wessanthara who donated his two children to fulfill his vows of donation.

In Christianity we learn about Jesus Christ who accepted death on the cross to save humankind. We are very familiar with ideologies such as Marxism having the same values. We learn about heroes such as Mahathma Gandhi, Che Guevara, Mao Tse Thung Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King and so on. When youth come of age they would like to see these values fulfilled in society.

When they see the whole systems designed and functioning in an opposite direction and the very teachers of these values accepting them, they lose faith and tend to get angry. They begin to consider their teachers hypocrites and would aspire to achieve these values on their own. They resort to the ways possible for them and then they are considered "terrorists". The teachers of values do not stand by them and defend them. The elders, the teachers and the preachers get frightened and are pacified when the rebellious youth are suppressed. Thus, it is necessary to see that preachers try to practice what they preach. So, one of the biggest challenges facing youth and the rest of society is to ensure that the values we preach are put into practice. This is a task in designing the type of society that we want to create.

In doing this some of the ancient traditions that still prevail should be renewed and regenerated. Giving alms is one such tradition that prevails very widely in our society. Teachings of religions have to guide our economic practices. How do we produce, how do we exchange what we produce these are practices that should guide our daily lives. The tradition of giving alms and sharing it the opposite of the practice we have in trading for highest profit.

Restoring nature's ability for regeneration

One big challenge the whole world is facing is about how we should relate to nature and how we should relate to each other. In nature it is now evident that nature cannot be and should not be exploited as we like. Nature had been imagined to be a limitless resource and it was thought that humans could exploit nature as aggressively and destructively as possible. The more we improve our capacity to exploit nature more and more aggressively it was though that we were improving and advancing. Now it has become clear that nature cannot be exploited limitlessly. Nature has begun to react to this form of limitless and aggressive exploitation. Global warming and climate change disasters have clearly shown that we cannot do so. Nature functions when it has the regenerative ability.

Human activity can destroy this ability of nature to regenerate. So for future survival of humans and other life forms it is necessary that we take sufficient measures to restore the ability of nature to regenerate itself. This is one place where we could make a start.

How nature regenerates

Let us look at the way nature regenerates itself. A seed is borne when it has the necessary moisture and warmth. When the plant begins to grow the first leaves begin to absorb sun light, moisture and CO-2 from the atmosphere and this is converted into food, carbohydrates in the leaves. This is food for the plant. The plant grows and puts out more leaves which absorb more sunlight and throws out more leaves and branches that reach out to absorb more sunlight and produce more food. The tree grows bigger and bigger. When it comes of age it produces flowers and later fruits that contain seeds.

Fruits are eaten by birds and they throw seeds in the surroundings, which give birth to new trees. When the tree grows old it sheds the leaves that fall on the ground, they die and decay. The decaying process is assisted by microbes and earth worms. Thus soil and humus soil is created which becomes nutrition to other plants. The insects help pollination which assists in the growth process. If we look at the weather we have rainfall and sunlight which helps in the growth of plants and animals. The dying plants and animals add to fertility of the soil.

If we look at the geological cycle, the soil, the top soil gets washed off and sediments the water ways and finally they flow into the sea. Layers and layer of sediment press the bottom of the sea and this pressure pushes up the ground which rises up as hills, then they get washed down. The hard rocks expand due to heat and shrinks due to cold in this process they get broken up into smaller pieces finally sand is formed. This sand is converted in to soil by microbial activity, which helps in the growth process of trees. If we look at the flow of a river we see the same cycle. As long as the cycle continues the flow of the river continues. Everything in the world moves in circles and this process is regeneration. Human beings are a part of this process of regeneration and can survive only to the extent this process survives.

We have tried to go beyond this process of natural regeneration. When we began to extract fossil fuel, coal and so on we tried to extract these resources that are nonrenewable. Thus they are now becoming extinct. Thus the processes that depend on these nonrenewable resources are endangered. Burning of fossil fuel adds too much CO-2 into atmosphere and a greenhouse effect has been created.

The additional global warming has now resulted in unhelpful and dangerous climate changes which have begun to create disasters around the globe.

Similar crises have been created in the processes of production, marketing and in consumption. The efforts made so far by the big powers of the world to solve these crises have not succeeded. This is because these attempted solutions have not been designed to change the reasons for these crises. Without overcoming the reasons for crises solutions cannot succeed. Therefore it is up to the victims of crises to find solutions and not to allow the creators of crises to design solutions.

The market led economy does not include two thirds of the world population. It expects them to disappear. So, it is up to this two third to create a world where they are

allowed to survive. This task is largely upon the shoulders of youth since they are the inheritors of the future world.

Politics of youth should be one of creating this future survival of the world. The economies, the systems of production, sharing and consumption have to be redesigned. Political process and systems have to be redesigned to achieve this recovery of regeneration. Educating children and youth to have a full understanding of this situation and the processes that led to these situations is essential for them to create new systems and plans.

A new approach to youth education is necessary

In this new approach all the above aspects have to be covered systematically. The serious error that has existed so far in science and technology has to be corrected. Science and technology so far has been utilized to develop the ability of humans to exploit nature and its resources. More aggressively this is done it is seen as advancement. However it is now clear that nature cannot be and should not be so exploited. What humans should do and could do is to understand how nature works and adjust our work in accordance to how nature works. It is foolish to try to go beyond nature's ability of regeneration. Task of science and technology today is to see how we should help restoration of nature's ability of regeneration; the damage we have caused so far has to be remedied. Serious mistakes made so far in trying to improve yields and to improve soil fertility using artificial seeds and artificial fertilizers have destroyed the ability of nature to naturally restore soil fertility. Artificial ways of controlling pests have destroyed the natural ability to keep pests under control. Artificial ways of destroying forests have destroyed the necessary forest cover to keep the climate in balance. We have cut down forests to have and expand villages. Now it is necessary to bring forest back to villages. This is possible and it would make villages and life healthier. Artificial burning of fossil fuel has increased global warming beyond healthy limits. All these have to be corrected. It is the task of youth and the task of science and technology to do these. This should be essentially included in the education for youth. It should influence new thinking and new policies of political parties.



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