

## Mission Possible

### A matter of concern

It is 2011, the sensex is zooming, economic growth rate is 8.3% and India has become a success story! A country of more than one billion citizens, with almost 50% of them in the productive age group, should result in an energetic and vibrant India on its march toward development. India has the second largest pool of scientific and technical manpower in the world, and is today sought out in the global marketplace as an important stop for technical and software support and services.

But can numbers truly be our strength when as many as 35% of Indians are illiterate, when one in 4 children are not enrolled in schools and only 60% of those who enroll reach standard 5?

Though India has achieved a “green revolution” that brought self sufficiency in food and a similar “white revolution” in milk production, yet even today in India 300 women die every single day due to pregnancy and childbirth, and one out of nine children born dies before his first birthday! India has its problems but as **President APJ Abdul Kalam says “Nations consist of people and with their effort a nation can accomplish all it could ever want”.**

His vision is to see India as a developed nation by the year 2020 and he has used his Book “Ignited Minds – unleashing the power within India” to ignite the minds of the youth in whose potential and power he has great confidence.

Whenever someone makes a passing reference about India being a young and dynamic country, it makes us hold our heads high and feel indisputably proud. It’s true; our young Indians are capturing attention everywhere and in every field! Politics, science, business, medicine, entertainment, sports; everywhere you look there’s a young Indian standing tall. It is good health, which allows them to march ahead. Unfortunately the youth take their health for granted.

Very few young people are aware of issues related to health or the dangers of AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, unsafe abortions, unwanted pregnancies or unnatural sex. Many young people choose to sidestep the issue very often until it’s too late. On one hand one speaks of a vibrant young India, on the other hand the cold and bitter truth is that millions of our young people have no concept about their reproductive and sexual health!

We as a society have failed in caring for our young. The youth of today are the future of India. India’s very survival depends on the social, physical and emotional health of our youth. As an exceedingly concerned Indian first and a doctor later, I feel it is extremely important to address this issue.

**Michael Carter from the World Bank** had said:

**“While nations are rapidly graying, India’s youth – set to grow in numbers for many decades to come – can be a unique asset. But, before these young people can become productive citizens in the world of tomorrow, they must be fully empowered today. A good education and good health would**

**be the most powerful tools to empower them today”.**

**The question is - Why focus on the Youth?**

Demographics and economic opportunities have combined to drastically change India's social equation. The figures tell the story. The number of Indians between the ages of 15-34 years is currently 936 million, almost 70% of the population!

The numbers in the 15-24 age group is 300 million plus! Never in our history have the youth constituted such a large and powerful demographical entity. It can be easily said that in their hands lies the future of India!

Youth are seen as the prime contributors who will propel India with the “Asian Century” as the third largest economy by 2030 with a GDP growth rate of at least over 5% for the next 45 years.

The importance of focusing on the youth arrives from the facts that those under 25 years account for 50% of HIV infections in India (Joint United National Project on HIV/AIDS). 30% of girls in the 15-19 years age group have their first child before the age of 19 years (NFHS-2). Pregnancy before 18 years carries many health risks. Teenagers are more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth before 20-24 years. 14% of abortions occur in adolescents (IPPF). Raising the mother's age and most important of all at marriage from 18-23 years will reduce population momentum by 40% (UNPF).

**The issue of Contraception**

How best to start? Youth being the starting point where reproduction and sexual activity begins, it becomes imperative to educate them on these issues.

Early marriages and early childbearing result in faster replacement of generations, impeding population stabilization even when the couples opt for only one or two children. If we have to deliver results, we need to achieve the net reproductive rate of one which is equivalent to achieving a 2 child norm. This target can be achieved only if more than 60% of couples use a contraceptive. We have reached a rate of 58% in urban areas and 35 % in the rural areas with an average of 48%. The current unmet need for contraceptive use is 16%. If these 16% couples were to use contraceptive methods, the current contraceptive use of 48% would increase to 64% which is the need of the hour in India. Hence creating awareness on contraceptive use amongst youth needs to be one of the prime targets of the country.

Failure to provide appropriate information to our youth, on contraceptive use **“misses the opportunity of reducing the unwanted outcomes of unintended pregnancy and is therefore a disservice to the Youth.**

The most effective yardstick of empowerment is the willingness of people to take responsibility. We need to move away from the blame culture. Instead of blaming the elected government, religious leaders, police and even the weather, people like us, need to take responsibility for the health of the women in our

country. Mahatma Gandhi has said: “Men often become what they believe themselves to be. If I believe I cannot do something, it makes me incapable of doing it. But when I believe I can, then I acquire the ability to do it even if I didn’t have it in the beginning.” So, however difficult the problem may seem, lets not permit our problems to become our captain. We should be the captains of our problems.

If all of us join hands together and request the Government to give us what we need, I am sure they will comply. Let us take this on as our agenda, let us be proud of our statistics, let us hold our heads high! Let us start at the very beginning, let us make the majority ie. our youth, our priority!

Submitted for Sindhian Magazine, May 2011