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PAKISTAN’S youth dominated the discourse on the Feb 8 general elections and has stayed at the centre of the debate pre- and post-ballot counts. Some analysts attribute the poll upset to the new voters. However, rhetoric often outstrips tangible solutions when it comes to Gen Z driving national development. As a result, the millennials find themselves marginalised in the grand scheme of growth plans, struggling for recognition and space to contribute meaningfully.

The young in this country are often considered to be one of the greatest national assets, but how do we channel this energy and develop this resource to bring prosperity to our struggling nation of 240 million? This question mostly remains unanswered.

Some propose vocational training, while others think providing employment opportunities should be the priority. Successive governments in the past two decades have come up with programmes like the Prime Minister’s Laptop Scheme, E-Rozgar, Ehsaas Scholarship Pakistan, Prime Minister’s Youth Business & Agriculture Loan Scheme, Prime Minister’s Youth Skill Development Programme, etc.

But despite such initiatives, Pakistan has not witnessed a significant growth in national productivity. Where is the magic then? Let’s look at our neighbour, India (yes, let’s compete outside the cricket ground and battlefield). From 2003 to 2016, India was busy establishing 1,000 colleges annually, ie, on an average three colleges a day, or one every eight hours! American higher education institutes are at least considered to be among the top, if not the best, places for creativity and advancement. The US has led with the unicorns (start-ups valued at over $1 billion) for many years, owing to its top-quality higher education, robust venture capital ecosystem, entrepreneurial culture, and strong innovation hubs.

Pakistan needs to field its young in the global grounds of innovation.

In 2023 alone, India sent a total of 131,338 young men and women to American colleges and universities on F-1 student visas, while Pakistan managed to send only 3,353 students in the same year. F-1 visas issued to Pakistanis account for less than one per cent of all F-1 visas, whereas for Indians, the figure is roughly 30pc. The result at the highest level? The heads of two of the world’s top five tech companies — Microsoft and Google — came to the US after completing their undergraduate studies in India.

Satya Nadella, Microsoft’s executive chairman and CEO, completed his Bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from the Manipal Institute of Technology in Karnataka before coming to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and subsequently joined the Windows-maker in 1992. Sundar Pichai, the CEO of Alphabet and Google, graduated from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, with a B.Tech degree, and went on to complete a Master’s degree from Stanford University. Following a short spell at McKinsey & Co, a management consulting firm, Pichai joined Google in 2004.

Most American schools require standardised tests for admission in undergraduate and graduate programmes. Last year, 137,884 Indian college graduates took the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), compared to 3,485 Pakistani graduate school applicants who took the test in 2023. Similarly, a large number of Indian students take the Scholastic Assess­ment Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) compared to a relatively small number of Pakistani test-takers.

The Higher Education Commission recognises close to 350 universities and degree-awarding institutions across Pak­istan, with an en­­rolment of close to 1m students and virtually no public university schedules for gra­­duate school admissions in the US. Single-digit private academic institutions do have some awa­r­eness series to help their graduates secure admissions in American higher education institutes. Most of the HEC’s study-abroad programmes are flawed in design and are not bringing the intellectual capital that could drive the knowledge economy at home.

For Pakistan to come out of its current (and future) financial crisis, it needs to logically invest in top-quality higher education by fielding our young in the global grounds of innovation and knowledge. Some Pakistanis — mostly US business school graduates — are working hard to help fellow Pakistani men and women navigate their academic and professional journeys to the US. Their initiative, Sarzameen Pakistan, is being run and managed by volunteers at a very small scale. However, a larger programme to increase the number of Pakistani students in universities in the US, and hence the number of professionals in the American market, would provide a strong foundation for the nation to prepare for future crises and global challenges.

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