

Instilling Democratic practices through Civic Awareness Programmes - By Mahalakshmi.

"Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies."

-- Kofi Annan

Democracy is seen as an ideal form of governance across world over. There are certain features that are essential to democracy, such as the presence of a legitimate government, Equality in citizenship, the rule of the law, free and fair elections, enhancing accountability to citizen by ensuring transparency and right to opinions and express them openly.

To upkeep these core features of democracy, it rests on the government in power, as well as the citizenry who are guaranteed rights and responsibilities towards it. It is each and every citizen's duty to contribute for the larger good.

Youth are the backbone for the success of the democratic nation. It is not magical that one turns to become eligible citizens at 18 years and know all, when they turn legally eligible voters. Good citizens are moulded and imparted with essential knowledge right from the beginning.

Right values and attitudes instilled at an early age will reap greater benefits from the very beginning. Today's youth have greater opportunities, various means and support then before to work and contribute towards their community. Every sphere of one's life right from home to the community/city contributes to the growth of active citizens.

This can be achieved thru civic education. Civic education is meant to help children develop as socially acceptable beings who incorporate notions of civic duty and moral standards.

Home is the first school –

The first and basic lessons start from home. It is the responsibility of parents and elders at home to demonstrate rights action and thoughts, building self-confidence, instilling hope and be role models to their children. Children are observant to what you say and to what you do.

We teach the children right from the start to put things in place and to keep the surrounding clean at home. How many of us teach them that world is our larger family and it is in our hands to keep it clean?

We can inculcate and nurture the spirit of oneness, rather than “I, me and myself” we can show them the path of “We, Us, and ours”.

At home we can allow children to make simple decisions, discuss with them on the issues happening in and around their society. The best way to do this is take a particular issue in the paper and check their thought process and guide them towards positive thinking. One should within the comfort of four walls instil in them the value of acceptance, appreciation, cooperation and oneness for the overall welfare of the members in a family eventually larger family. For healthy families leads to healthy communities and in turn strong and healthy nation.

Encourage them to actively participate in the community service and be with them. Now with apartments mushrooming up in every corner, educating the youth on Civic got lot more easier.

Apartment living requires high degree of interdependence. It is necessary that each and every member work towards the common good and everyone participates and has the opportunity to voice their opinion on the issues pertaining to their small community.

School is the stepping stone –

Onus lies on school to sensitize students on civic issues and make them aware of the same. To help them contribute to whatever extent possible. Significant part of children’s growing years is spent in school.

Major transformation in a child's thought process happens to what he is directed in school. Teachers should be able to kindle the spirit of team work, endurance, patience, empathy and confidence in oneself and which further moulds the child to be a good citizen.

In fact, action speaks louder than words, the schools that best teach students the skills to participate actively in democracy are themselves institutions that reflect democratic principles!

The classroom acts as an arena in which the teachers reinforce models and practices what is delivered. Teachers can introduce character into the classroom by creating a sense of community. They can foster positive interactions among their students and by teaming up to work together on projects. Empathetically listening to them and give them a ray of hope and to make them see things in lighter vein. Give all the students equal opportunity to be involved in the class room discussions.

Well most of the schools do impart the civic education but the need of the hour is to show them how they can make a difference and be actively engaged on regular basis in Local governance level.

There are various NGO's like Janaagraha thru their programme Bala Janaagraha impart Civic education to 8th graders across partnered schools in India. The main goal of the programme is to transform children of today (of Urban India) into informed, responsible and active citizens by empowering them with good citizenships values and knowledge of local civic, an integral part of every child's education.

End of the term the children are encouraged to take up the theme based practical project, during the course of the project if required they get to meet the civic representatives of their area and put forth the problems with due explanations. We have students exhibiting great vigour and urge to fix our city. This shows that if they are directed thru proper channel with adequate tools to voice their concern, they wholeheartedly involve themselves.

Role of Society –

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children" –

By Nelson Mandela

Democracy is about freedom and freedom comes with lot of responsibility. We has the part of society, have immense responsibility of creating the future and paving the path for our youth and children to tread, for what we sow we reap. Representatives in the power should be able to give the youth bare essentials to grow in a healthy and encouraging atmosphere. Youth should be able to emulate their qualities and they have to be role models for future citizens. The environment where they grow should be conducive for them to participate actively in matters related to social and political affairs.

Democracy doesn't mean we as a citizen can only demand for our rights but we as a citizen have some responsibilities towards the society.

There are so many avenues for Youth to actively participate in their community, one such programme is Community Policing.

The rate at which the crimes are going up, Safety and security has become a major issue. To check the growing Crime rates Bangalore City Police in partnership with Janaagraha has launched a pilot project "Community Policing" initiative across 7 Police stations in Bangalore, wherein the citizens can actively work alongside the Police to curtail the growing crime rate.

Active participation of the Citizens will reduce the Crime and it bridges the gap between Police and Public.

There is overwhelming response from the Youth to participate in this initiative. Hence this kind of different mechanisms can attract the youth to get involved in democracy and its promotion.

Innovative means should be constantly tried to attract youth to democratic process and to encourage them. New technology such as the internet and mobile communications can be used to promote the values of democracy.

In this fast paced life, Media and Technology plays a very influential role and Youth can relate better to audio/video contents.

Though India has the highest number of voters under youth category, there participation is very low,

Thru Janaagraha's Jaagte Raho! Campaign for urging the citizens' to vote in the recent Assembly election as a pilot in Shantinagar Assembly constituency saw the increase in youth participation and with the sustained effort for the past three years the voter turnout increased by 14% from the previous 2008 Assembly elections.

This was possible because of involving the youth also to volunteer, also known as Area voter Mitra's for cleaning the voter's list in their constituency, using technology for efficient work and role of Media in general during the Campaign.

To unleash the potential of social media, Janaagraha has launched <http://www.ichangemycity.com> platform this is currently Bangalore specific, this platform assist people to address civic issues locally, connect with their elected representatives and Civic agencies. With just few clicks on the mobile, you get to fix your city.

You have the power –

Finally, for democracy to flourish participation of youth is essential to bring about the change. As mentioned above youth can participate actively in so many avenues and areas of their interest, they have the potential like never before to be part of the real change we want to achieve.