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From the ringside

The vision of the young

ZERMATT: Located at the southern tip of Switzerland, Zermatt is one of the best preserved ski resorts and a summer paradise for hikers and mountaineers. It enables a spectacular view of the Matterhorn glacier, which at 12529 feet is perhaps the highest accessible point in Europe by cable car. This year, Zermatt has an additional attraction. It hosts the inaugural summit of the Forum of Young Global Leaders. It also hosts the first meeting of the Foundation Board of the Forum of Young Global Leaders of which, I am a member.

The initiative for creating a special Forum for Young Global Leaders commenced two years ago. Klaus Schwab, the chairman of the World Economic Forum, held intensive interactions with business, academia and policymakers. It arose out of recognising the limitation of the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos. Over the years, while Davos provided a unique opportunity for global networking and policy interactions, participants bore no obligation to shape, much less implement, ideas which had persuaded them. The ideas dispersed with the event; follow-up was confined to bilateral contacts established at the meeting.

The Forum of Young Global Leaders is expected to be different. Those nominated as a global leader will be expected to act in concert with their colleagues to pursue and endeavor in creating wider awareness and seek implementation of themes around which consensus emerge. The global leaders are selected by a nomination committee for a period of five years. Every year, 200-300 candidates will be chosen to secure a total number of 1,111 members by 2009. The retirement of 20% each year ensure the nomination of their replacement by 250 new members.

The nomination committee headed by Queen Rania of Jordan has distinguished members of the media like Arthur Sulzberger, chairman and publisher of The New York Times, Tom Glocer, CEO of Reuters, Elizabeth Weymouth of Newsweek, the president of the NHK, Japan to name a few. Aroon Purie, Editor-in-Chief and CEO of India Today and Shekhar Gupta, Editor-in-Chief of The Indian Express are the two Indian members in the nomination committee. The Foundation Board headed by Prof. Klaus Schwab guides the management of the programme, monitors outcome and invests innovative strategies.

The global leaders (who must be below 40 on the date of their nomination) represent a broad spectrum of the social fabric, drawn as they are with 40% from business, 20% from politics, 20% from academia and the rest from media, civil society, art and culture. In the 200 leaders selected for the first year, the Indian group consists of Rahul Gandhi, Dayanidhi Maran, Kumar Mangalam Birla, Rajiv Bajaj, Malvinder Singh and Aditya Mittal.

The first congregation of this group is being held at Zermatt. Over three days, they have grappled with the broad theme of the "World in 2020". Apart from an

interactive sessions on the key challenges, discussions centered on trends, risks and opportunities which concern the world over the next 15 years. Within the broader context of the state of the world and its future, there was consensus on the priority themes where tangible action was urgently needed in the areas of: development and poverty; global governance; global security; environment; health and education.

The young considered the commonality of issues which need to be addressed on each of these concerns. Regional variations are large, concepts and ideas do not mean the same thing; poverty in North America and Europe is quite different in meaning and content than say in Asia as also healthcare challenges when it comes to say Sub-Saharan Africa.

A programme of action which imposes responsibilities and obligations on the young constitutes the final outcome of the conference. In the long run, the World Economic Forum in Davos will represent the venue for global networking while the Young Global Leaders Forum would represent formulation and implementation of an agreed programme of action and alter priorities, its nuances and implementation strategy. Cross-fertilisation of ideas between both the fora would help in broadening the “agenda for change” as well as retain focus on practical action necessary to implement the emerging consensus. A couple of issues are worth considering.

FIRST, the creation of a Forum for Young Global Leaders attempts to merge or at least synthesise numerous such bodies existing elsewhere. Attempts to harmonise what could be inter-generational conflict between “the old” and “the new” in allocation of global resources, social security systems, healthcare for the old and the extent to which environment can be degraded for improved quality of life in the short run are complex issues with no easy answers. Resolution of inter-generational conflicts will always be contentious but an interactive dialogue will enable more acceptable outcomes. The economic consequences of ageing imposes new burdens on social security systems, work ethics, healthcare and redefines the content of productive economic activity. It raises moral issues to which there are no easy answers.

SECOND, the obligation and responsibility of the “young leaders” is a new concept worth experimentation. Will it mean, for instance, that the young from USA would be active votaries, if not campaigners, on say environmental issues like emission control and Kyoto Protocol or become champions for increasing level of overseas development assistance to mitigate poverty. Or say delegates from many developing countries campaign for better governance and the adoption of more successful economic policies for faster growth and poverty redressal with higher allocation of public funds on human resource development and skill inculcation. These would need to be fine-tuned as the Forum gathers greater experience.

FINALLY, it is interesting that the global priorities selected by consensus by the young leaders concentrating on development and poverty, improved governance, environment, health and education reads like an Indian wishlist straight out of either the NDA manifesto or the Common Minimum Programme of UPA or the Mid-Term Review of the Tenth Plan.

Clearly, these are the dominant global concerns. No doubt, the content of these policies and implementation strategy has wide divergences across regions, and

within the regional framework only country-specific programme can be sensible. Global integration and seemlessness of transaction arising from what Thomas Friedman in his new book entitled *The World is Flat* creates new rights and responsibilities. It undercuts the traditional concept of sovereignty in multiple ways and invests new obligation on the young to work cohesively for a more secure, prosperous world. It is inspired by perhaps a sanguine belief that the young might succeed where the old have failed; acutely conscious of what the future has in store and discard the baggage of the past. Only time will tell if the pledges of the young at the giddy heights of the Matterhorn base yield tangible outcomes.

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