

Repositioning National Cadet Corps to Drive Youth Development and Social Change



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"A nation is great not by its size alone. It is the will, the cohesion, the stamina, the discipline (of its people) and the quality of their leaders which ensure it an honourable place in history."*

– Lee Kuan Yeeⁱ in 1963.

Abstract

The emerging global scenario and strategic equations between nations are undergoing some major realignments. Talibanization of Afghanistan, Sino-Pak proximity, SCO, Quad, AKUS, etc, are prominent indicators of the future course of world order. These developments have key implications for India's internal and external security. To face these challenges and catapult India into a higher plane in global order, she also needs to galvanise her demographic advantage into a national asset and usher social change through the guidance of youth in the right direction. NCC by virtue of its unique position is the most appropriate platform to undertake this national responsibility. With some revamping, not only can NCC's full potential be realised, but also capitalised to undertake vast capacity expansion at an affordable economic cost to state.

Promulgation of NEP 2020 followed by acceptance of NCC as General Elective Credit Course by UGC and AICTE are game changers of sorts in this direction. The article discusses how this one development can now be harnessed to strengthen NCC training and increase the coverage of NCC exponentially, and recommends adopting a three phased plan. First, to introduce concept of private candidate, second, to allow NCC to be offered as a credit course by any college in India and third to commence NCC Board of Training akin to CBSE and ICSC.

i Lee Kuan Yee was the first and longest service Prime Minister of Singapore. He is considered as the architect and father of modern Singapore.

The Emerging Global Scenario

“Highly educated young people are tutored, taught and monitored in all aspects of lives, except the most important, which is character building. When it comes to this, most universities leave them alone. – David Brooks, Author, columnist NYT

The growing stature of India in the comity of nations is more evident now than ever before. India is repositioning itself in the emerging world order by creating new geo-strategic equations with USA, European nations, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Australia, etc. Quad is possibly a harbinger of more power-dynamics to follow. Her new found ability to deal firmly with the dominant northern neighbour and exposing the threat to the world peace from her diminishing western neighbour, is a manifestation of India's assertiveness in safeguarding her national security interests. Her ability to steadfastly bear the brunt of Coronavirus pandemic despite being the most densely populated nation, coupled with serious scarcity of healthcare resources, is drawing positive responses from world leaders. The booming stock market, breaching new thresholds every week, is a strong indicator of growing international investor confidence in India story.

While these developments auger well for the nation, certain recent developments also impose caution on her ability to sustain lasting peace on both external and internal fronts, the most impactful one being the Talibanisation of Afghanistan, which can be expected to create unfavourable and unpredictable outcomes for the peace and stability in the Indian sub-continent, if not the whole of Asia and rest of the World. The expanding influence of China over Pakistan and Pakistan's apparent sinking of relations with US and Europe can also be expected to make matters worse in the context of regional stability.

Aspirations of Youth and Social Change

As the fastest growing economy today, India is home to a fifth of the world's youth. Half of its population of 1.3 billion is below the age of 25, and a quarter is below the age of 14. India's young population is its most valuable asset and also the most pressing challenge. It provides India with a unique demographic advantage. However, this demographic dividend is not going to last for ever. India's median age is expected to rise from current 25 to 30 years in 2025 to 39 by 2050. Hence, this opportunity will be lost without proportionate and timely investment in human capital development¹.

Contrast to 20 years ago, the changes in the aspirations of youth, is phenomenal. Thanks to information technology where the world is accessible at fingertips, it has helped the youth to keep themselves abreast with what is happening around the world and thereby develop their own outlook towards life. The idea of 'being successful' has undergone a drastic transformation. Youth today are courageous, ready to take action, condemn, criticise openly, know what is right for them, etc². Unlike in the past, the youth are going to be the drivers of social change. The social change will in turn influence the political, societal, economic and security environment in the next decade and beyond.

Hence, it is vitally important to ensure that this youth driven social change is well guided by value system, character building and pride for the nation. The National Cadet Corps (NCC), with its mass appeal and universal acceptance cutting across party lines, social stratum, economic divisions, as well as, regional and ethnic diversity, makes the ideal platform for nurturing the youth.

Galvanising Youth Power

While India's external and internal security apparatus is being strengthened and prepared to face these likely adverse situations, there is an urgent need for her to create mechanisms to harness the vast youth power she boasts of. Eighteen plus months of pandemic conditions have taken a heavy toll on the mental, physical and psychological state of the youth. Forced by the pandemic into physical inactivity by closure of schools and colleges, coupled with constant influence of social media and confined indoor life, these factors have caused anxiety, pessimism and lack of motivation, among youth³ and therefore are driving the youth into a restless and directionless state of mind⁴.

A UN study titled *State of Youth Volunteering in India (2017)* shows that volunteerism for social work among youth is on the rise. Yet, these activities are not often perceived as legitimate career options, especially when pitted against the pay scale of the corporate sector, or the status and security afforded by government jobs. There is a lot more that India needs to do to pull young people towards volunteering, change-making and social entrepreneurship⁵. Owing to its population dynamics, India may take comparatively much longer to recover from the pandemic to its full potential. While she may not be at par with developed nations in terms of economic might and technological superiority; her youth power, now the largest in the world, is a low hanging fruit for her to capitalise on.

India must have definitive plans and purpose for providing meaningful direction to this enormously potential asset, in order to arise taller and stronger from the emerging post-pandemic scenario of global uncertainty and fractured power equation, and also, from the increasing threat to her internal security. If there is one organisation which is ideally suited to garner and galvanise the youth in the right direction, it is the National

Cadet Corps⁶.

Unique Position of NCC

Amongst the likes of National Service Scheme (NSS), Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS), Scouts and Guides, National Youth Club, etc, NCC is very uniquely placed, as the only youth development organisation that has been created by an Act of Parliament in 1948⁷, which gives NCC the mandate to provide limited military training, albeit with no military service liability to the cadets. Raised with a strength of just 20,000⁸ cadets in 1948, NCC has grown in size and stature to 15 lakh volunteer cadets, and has presence across the length and breadth of the country. The recent increase of one lakh cadets in border and coastal areas, takes NCC to the remotest parts of the country and adds strength to her border dwelling citizens.

Functioning under the umbrella of Ministry of Defence and manned by key personnel from the armed forces and civilian support cadre of centre and state govts, NCC has a dual administration and control mechanism and is exceptionally placed to synergise the efforts of Centre and State Govts in youth development. It is in this context that the circular issued by the University Grants Commission on April 12, 2021 approving introduction of NCC as General elective Credit Course is relevant. And the formation of High Level Expert Committee by the Govt on September 09, 2021, to conduct an objective, independent and thorough review of NCC, is apt and timely.

NCC's Untapped Strength and Influence

By virtue of their training and moulding, there is little disagreement on the fact that NCC cadets stand out amongst their peer group. Equipped with both hard and soft skills, the cadets are trained to develop good character,

leadership, self-discipline, unity and are encouraged to imbibe the spirit of selfless-sacrifice, national pride and are expected to promote national integration. Each cadet can potentially influence at least 10 individuals⁹ of his peer group directly and over 20 to 30 of his family and community members indirectly. Aggregated at national level, 15 Lakh NCC cadets can potentially influence nearly 1.5 crore of India's youth population directly and a much larger number indirectly to become responsible, productive and contributing citizens.

Secondly, over six lakhs NCC cadets pass out every year. But barring a few thousands who successfully join govt service, armed forces, and private sector at officer or executive level, the rest go into anonymity. Their vast potential in influencing India's national integration and pride, apart from becoming highly contributing citizens, and provide supporting role in NCC training, remains untapped. The reason for this is three-fold. First, there are economic and logistic challenges in capacity building and quantum increase in coverage of NCC. Second, there is some systemic dissonance between the roles and responsibility of various stake holders of NCC resulting in under realisation of its full potential. Third and most importantly, is the absence of an institutional mechanism to tap the latent potential of millions of NCC alumni and cadets passing out of NCC every year.

Recent Measures to Reinforce NCC

In the past decade or so NCC has adopted a few incremental makeovers. Some of the major ones are:-

- Enlarging the scope of NCC's aims¹⁰, from preparing youth to join armed forces, to developing character, comradeship, discipline, a secular outlook, the spirit of adventure and ideals of selfless service amongst young citizens. Further, NCC aims at creating a pool of

organized, trained and motivated youth with leadership qualities in all walks of life, who will serve the Nation regardless of which career they choose.

- Training syllabus of NCC now espouses community development and service as an important component.
- Introduction of Fully Self-Financed Scheme (FSFS) and allocation of one lakh vacancies each to both junior and senior categories. Under this scheme any private institute can seek out of turn allocation of NCC sub-unit by meeting certain minimal infrastructure, financial and personnel criteria, rather than await its turn which in most cases run into 4 to 5 years.
- One lakh expansion of NCC cadets to specifically cover border and coastal areas of the country as announced by The Prime Minister of India, on August 15, 2020. This was fully implemented in 2020-21¹¹.
- Limited technology adaptation through introduction of online NCC syllabus and induction of training simulators for firing and flying.
- **Repositioning NCC as Elective Credit Course.** Ongoing efforts at repositioning of NCC from an extra-curricular activity to a curricular activity, by adopting NCC as a General Elective Credit Course (GECC) in colleges and as an elective subject in schools and colleges that have not migrated to choice based Semester System, thus also aligning NCC training to the New Education Policy 2020.

A Game Changer Initiative

Of all the above steps, the one that has the potential to usher comprehensive transformation in NCC and youth development is the last one, i.e. repositioning NCC from an extra-curricular activity to a General Elective Credit Course under Choice Based Credit System aligned to New Education Policy 2021. This one initiative, if implemented in true spirit, depth and range can achieve far more transformation than many other incremental changes so far implemented or are in the offing. In the past few months, taking a proactive approach, the DG NCC has successfully elicited endorsement of this initiative from the Department of Higher Education Govt of India, University grants Commission, All India Council of Technical Education, Indian Council of Agricultural Research and the Veterinary Council of India as also some State Govts.

This was followed by a strong push, through the State NCC Directorates, to take the initiative to the universities and colleges for implementation. Resultantly, in just past six months, of the 5825 plus colleges sanctioned with NCC sub-units across India, already 2030 colleges have either introduced NCC as elective subject/credit course from current academic year or have given commitment to introduce from the ensuing academic year. Sustained and rigorous effort will be necessary to encourage the remaining 50 percent to join the ranks. However, majority of the State Govts are also yet to endorse the initiative, in the absence of which State Universities and colleges will remain on the side-lines of implementation. Notwithstanding these challenges, DGNCC has achieved encouraging results that has put to rest some scepticism and can now drive the process further. Time and circumstances are ripe and favourable for pressing on with full and comprehensive implementation of this initiative.

So, what can be achieved through this sole initiative? Mainly fivefold: First, stimulating attractiveness of NCC; second, strengthening NCC Training; third, provide employment and volunteer opportunity to former cadets and ex-servicemen; fourth, reduce financial burden of sustaining regular military personnel in NCC; and fifth, cumulatively enable vast expansion of NCC coverage at low economic cost.

Stimulating NCC Attractiveness. A paradigm shift in NCC's positioning from extra-curricular to mainstream activity finds favour with large majority of student population and cadets. An informal survey has given clear indications to this effect:-

- a. It will result in cadets deriving direct academic credits from NCC training, including absence for camps, Social Service and Community Development (SSCD), etc., which was missing hitherto fore, thus making NCC more popular among student community.
- b. Effort spent by Associate NCC Officers (ANO) on NCC training will get recognised as academic work load – currently a grievance among committed ANOs. Controller of examinations will take interest in ensuring proper conduct of NCC subject examinations.
- c. Analysis identify the employer's perception of skill as leadership skills, positive attitude, critical thinking, communication skills, dedication, time management, commitment, honesty, flexibility and adaptability, safety needs, good habits, personality and appearance, basic understanding, teamwork, and social interaction¹². All these skills are inculcated into NCC cadets through mostly unstructured syllabus. The NCC credit course design can attempt to give these intangibles a structure for deriving academic credits and enhancing credibility and appeal of NCC 'B' & 'C' Certificates to leading

educational institutes and Private Sector.

- d. The most effective way of stimulating attractive for NCC would be simply incentivising NCC 'B' & 'C' Certificates holders for entry into Central Govt jobs.

Strengthening NCC Training. As an outcome it will promote more accountability and expectation of students and ANOs. Likewise, military trainers and college faculty will become more accountable to student community. Further, the educational institutes and department of education in state govts will take ownership of NCC training, as opposed to the current indifference. All this will eventually result in ensuring much higher training levels and inclusion of a much larger population of cadets into the ambit of quality training, rather than limiting it to a small percentage of cadets who are selected for Republic Day (RD) Camps and Centrally Organised Camps (COCs).

Employment and Volunteering Opportunity for Former Cadets and Ex-Servicemen. When NCC was started way back in 1948 under NCC Act the country had no pool of NCC trained manpower. Today there are more than 2 Crore former cadets in the country, of which nearly 20 percent are 'C' Certificate holders. Therefore:-

- a. These former cadets and alumni can become the support training cadre for NCC, e.g., Girl Cadet Administrators (GCAs) who are hired on contract in lieu of permanent Girl Cadet Instructors (GCIs) are apparently equally effective but a lesser burden on exchequer. Similar concept can be introduced by contractual hiring of Boy Cadet Administrators (BCAs) to make up shortfall of Permanent Instructors Staff (PI Staff), who are regular military cadre persons with much larger salary package.

- b. Likewise, these former cadets with a bachelor degree can also be employed as Care-taker Officers at a comparatively much smaller salary to replace the ANOs. Former cadets who are already well employed may even volunteer to take up these assignments for a small honorarium. Similarly, a large No of retired military personnel can be hired as ANOs and PI staff in their native place for a small honorarium. Such measures will relieve a large pool of deficient regular military manpower employed in NCC. This experiment has been attempted at a small level through the Fully Self-Financed Scheme (FSFS) for private colleges and for Border Area Expansion of NCC. The initial inputs on their performance are very encouraging. Expanding this experiment to full scale is highly desirable for both the NCC and the military, and would need some amendments to NCC Act.

Capacity Expansion of NCC. While the above mention outcomes can be the short to medium term objectives of making NCC an curricular activity, the long term intent of the nation of expanding the reach of NCC training to a much larger percentage of youth across India to drive social change through mentored mechanism of youth development, can only be achieved by taking the benefits and NCC Credit Course to all colleges and schools willing to offer these at minimal cost to exchequer well beyond the sanctioned strength of NCC. The obvious question is, is this viable? If the early success of FSFS scheme is any indicator, then massive expansion of NCC at limited economic burden is well within the realm of viability. It requires a three phased approach:-

- a. In Phase 1, accelerate the implementation of NCC Elective/Credit Course in all colleges already sanctioned to offer NCC training.
- b. In Phase 2, NCC is offered as a purely academic elective credit course by any college to any student wanting to pursue NCC as

an academic course as a private candidate not necessarily enrolled as cadet, subject to he/she meeting certain criteria. Such private cadets/institutions will be expected to hire requisite trained staff and providing necessary infrastructure and bear the expenses towards training and follow certain norms regulated by DGNCC/MoD.

- c. In Phase 3, create an NCC Training Board (NCCTB) under aegis of MoD, akin to CBSE, ICSE, IGCSE etc which will act as the apex body to lay down the rules, regulations and standards for conduct of NCC training in education institutes. And whereupon, any higher secondary or higher education institute willing to meet the expenses can seek the license to run NCC training with the approval of the NCCTB subject to meeting laid down conditions and regulations.

What Makes the Expansion Now Viable? Three factors make the expansion of NCC viable:-

- a. First, unlike the situation in 1948 when NCC was at nascent stage, today a large pool of well trained former NCC cadets with C certificate are available as a low-cost option to educational institutes to be employed as volunteers or on part time engagements to replace the legacy mechanism of appointing ANOs from teaching faculty and the PI Staff. Similarly, an infinite pool of former military personnel is now available to be employed as key PI Staff in NCC units undergoing expansion. Thus, the burden of the govt in sustaining regular military personnel currently serving in NCC can be reduced to a fraction and the saving can be used for expansion as suggested above.
- b. Second, there is a huge latent and unfulfilled demand for NCC existing in terms of waiting list with NCC units. This demand will

only grow with shifting of NCC from extra-curricular to curricular activity and specifically as elective credit course. By making simple modifications to NCC Act and Rules and adopting the above suggested model, it would be possible to meet this unfulfilled demand.

- c. Thirdly, the exploitation of digital technology for scaling up operations and reach of training, enrolment process, online certificate examinations, economising wasteful expenditure, time sharing of resources and improving satisfaction levels will all act as a force multiplier in the expansion drive. Of course, the caveat is that, the digitisation effort has to be comprehensive and must penetrate the length and breadth.

Mandate for High Level Review Committee

The mandate and the constitutions of the High-Level Review Committee reflects the honest intent of the government to usher transformation in NCC. There are a fair number of transformational and a plethora of incremental changes that are long overdue. Thereafter, the time and national resources deployed for mentoring and guiding the present generation of youth through the revamped NCC's stables will definitely start yielding much larger outcomes.

And when that happens, the people of India will witness a sea change in her internal self-confidence and her social fabric, that is unifying and equitable, manifesting through the hands of the largest and most dynamic section of population - the youth. Needless to say, that the NCC fraternity in particular and the nation in general, will rightfully shelter high if not lofty expectations from the High Level Review Committee, which has an exhaustive canvas cut out.

“Most people say it is the intellect which makes a great scientist. They are wrong: It is the character” – Albert Einstein

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