

BUDDHISM IN ACTION: CHANGING PARADIGMS IN 21ST CENTURY

by Aditi Kumar*

ABSTRACT

This paper is neither a survey nor a comparison between the traditional monastic practices of Buddhism. Rather, this paper is more of an attempt to understand the growth of one particular school of thought of Buddhism in India- Nichiren Buddhism (practiced under the organisation titled Bharat Soka Gakkai – BSG).¹ While this paper draws on the tenets of ‘Engaged Buddhism’ to locate Nichiren Daishonin’s philosophy within its ambit, it is not a comparative scholarship of various forms of ‘Engaged Buddhism’. In particular, understanding the dynamics of the philosophy’s growth and membership in urban centres (of India) such as Delhi, especially during past two to three decades is the central focus of the paper.

As a young research scholar what caught my attention was this philosophy’s popularity and relatability among educated urban youth, especially women. This paper is also an initial attempt to understand the exponential growth of BSG members from a few hundred in 1980’s to 2,000,000 in 2017. Though the practice can be traced back to 13th century Japan, it is only during post world war-II that it gained popularity among the Japanese people. The eastward transmission to

*. Senior Research Fellow, School of Arts & Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi, India.

1. Bharat Soka Gakkai (BSG) is the Indian affiliate to the global organization of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) that promotes values of peace, education and respect for all people. It has a network of 12 million people that are spread across 192 countries around the world. The humanistic philosophy of SGI is based on the teachings of 13th century Buddhist monk, Nichiren Daishonin. The other two schools that follow Nichiren’s teachings and came into existence during post world war II in Japan are Rissho Koseikai and Myohoji.

the Indian sub- continent happened during 1980's. Since, the primary mode of propagation is English language, it has gained more popularity in urban cities, catering pre-dominantly to the middle class population of India.

1. ENGAGED BUDDHISM

The dawn of 21th century witnessed the emergence of new forms of Buddhism. This movement gained momentum in both western and eastern parts of the world. The 'socially engaged' Buddhists work towards applying the key concepts of Buddhism such as *Karma* (law of cause & effect), interdependence, four noble truths, compassion, non-violence among others to the world's social, political, economic and environmental problems.

The term Engaged Buddhism is attributed to Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (b.1926-). During 1960's for the first time he spoke about socially engaged Buddhism at various international platforms. He was also instrumental in bringing the plight of victims of the Vietnamese war to world's attention. There are various other popular Asian Engaged Buddhists such as Dalai Lama, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, P. A. Payutto, Sulak Sivaraksa and B.R Ambedkar (founder of Navayana school or Neo-Buddhism in India) to name a few. Engaged Buddhism also gained popularity in the west such as Zen Peacemakers led by Roshi Bernard Glassman, Buddhist Global Relief, Sokai Gakkai International.

Prof. Christopher S. Queen in his work *Engaged Buddhism in the West* argues that Engaged Buddhism is endowed not only with various key concepts and techniques of the traditional Buddhist schools such as compassion, justice, mindfulness, interdependence, chanting, walking meditation but also addresses issues that have not been central to Buddhist analysis in the past such as social injustice, political oppression (resulting to human suffering), institutional evil and collective empathy towards social injustice. Of course there also have been few exceptions in the past such as the Mauryan ruler Asoka, however, the concept of Engaged Buddhism is a new territory to be chartered by conventional Buddhist practices. He says that,

It is a sustained reflection on social action as a form of spirituality expressed in acts of compassion, grassroots empowerment, non-

judgementalism and non-violence. It offers an inspiring example of how one might work for solution to the troubles that threaten the peace and well-being of our planet and its people.²

Through his work Queen also tries to elucidate the inter connectedness between social actions that are driven by spiritual underpinnings and deep philosophical understanding. This trail of thinking resonates with the tenets of Nichiren Buddhism that believes in the interconnectedness of an individual with his/her environment.

2. ENGAGED BUDDHISM THROUGH HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM

While philosophers above have theorized what Engaged Buddhism is, I would like to contend that the concept of Engaged Buddhism finds its true bearing only when Humanistic Buddhism underpins it. While a lot of Buddhist philosophies propound humanistic Buddhism, the Nichiren Buddhism institutionalized through Soka Gakkai International provides an active platform that propels Humanistic Buddhism towards Engaged Buddhism.

The humanistic Buddhism according to Temple Nan Tien means integrating Buddhist practices into everyday life based on the attaining Buddhahood in the human form, just as Shakyamuni Buddha achieved during his lifetime. Humanistic Buddhism is based on six core concepts: humanism, altruism, spiritual practices as part of daily life, joyfulness, timeliness, and the universality of saving all beings. The aim of humanistic Buddhism is to reconnect the Buddhist practices and concepts to the everyday life.³

In a similar parlance, the tenets of Soka Gakkai are built upon a strong foundation of humanistic Buddhism. The philosophy and structure through which Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism operates, foregrounds the tenets of Humanistic Buddhism. According to the head of Soka Gakkai (new religious movement in Japan), Dr Daisaku Ikeda "the essence of Buddhist humanism lies in the insistence that human beings exercise their spiritual capacities to the limit, or more accurately, without limit, coupled with an unshakable belief in their

2. Christopher B. Queen, "Socially Engaged Buddhism in the West".

3. <http://www.nantien.org.au/>

ability to do this. In this way, faith in humanity is absolutely central to Buddhism.”⁴ Humanistic Buddhism also emphasis on inter faith dialog and study of common tenets of non-violence.

3. FORMATION OF SOKA GAKKAI INTERNATIONAL (SGI) AND ITS THREE PRESIDENTS

Soka Gakkai (Society for creation of Value)⁵ is an organisation that draws inspiration from Nichiren Buddhism. This sect of Buddhism is named after the teachings of a 13th century Japanese Saint Nichiren Daishonin⁶, whose philosophy of social transformation through a single individual found resonance in post – World War II Japan.

In 1930, educator and reformist, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi along with his protégé Josei Toda founded a small group of educators and named it Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (Society for value creating education), that gradually developed into an organisation with diverse range of members. He propagated humanistic and student centred education, while applying the Buddhist concepts to the war affected Japanese society. This movement began with empowering the people of Japan and enabling them to reform the Japanese society. During this time, the Japanese government implemented

4. Daisaku Ikeda, “Towards a World of Dignity for All: The Triumph of the Creative Life, SGI President Ikeda’s 2011 Peace Proposal”.

5. The SGI was registered as a non-governmental organization (NGO) associated with the UN Department of Public Information in 1981 and was granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Council in 1983. It was also listed as an NGO in cooperation with UNHCR in 1997. SGI maintains offices in New York and Geneva. The SGI was an early proponent of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-14) and played an active role in the UN process for the realization of the World Programme for Human Rights Education that was launched in 2005 as a follow-up to the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004). It launched the People’s Decade for Nuclear Abolition initiative in 2007 to rouse public opinion and help create a global grassroots network of people on the issue. The SGI actively participates in networks including the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CoNGO) and NGO committees on specific themes such as peace and disarmament, human rights education and gender equality in New York, Geneva and Vienna. SGI President Daisaku Ikeda has been issuing his peace proposal annually since 1983 to bring the voices and perspectives of civil society into the work of the UN, suggesting broad themes for the SGI’s activities as an NGO.

6. Nichiren Daishonin translated the excerpts from Lotus Sutra (known as the Sadharm Pundrika) into Japanese text.

the religion of State Shinto that emphasised emperor worship.⁷ The government was also intolerant of any form of dissent. Makiguchi and Josei Toda (the 2nd President of SGI) were arrested and imprisoned in 1943 for opposing the state's actions. Refusing to compromise, Makiguchi died in state prison in 1944. During his time in prison Toda grasped the concepts of Nichiren Buddhism and understood that 'Buddhahood is a potential inherent in all life', and deepened his confidence that all people could manifest this enlightened life condition through practicing Nichiren's teachings'.⁸

After Josei Toda got released from prison he actively promoted the human form of Buddhism based on humanistic philosophy as a means of self-empowerment- a way to overcome obstacles in life and activate inner storehouse of hope, confidence, courage and wisdom. He was the 2nd President of SGI. He was able to translate the profound Buddhist concepts into practical everyday guidance's that struck a chord with the people in Japan. He coined the term 'Human Revolution' that became the central idea of Nichiren Buddhism, which emphasises that all people irrespective of caste, creed, gender and deeds are capable of attaining enlightenment in this lifetime. In 1957, he made declaration for the abolition of nuclear weapons. He urged the young members of SGI to work for this initiative, which became one of the core peace initiatives of SGI in the following years. Till the time of his death, in 1958, Toda was successful to spread the practice among one million members and laid the foundation for Nichiren Buddhism to spread in Japan and rest of the world.

After Toda's death, Daisaku Ikeda further propagated the movement of Soka Gakkai as a movement of socially engaged Buddhists. He became the 3rd President of Soka Gakkai in the year of 1960. "Soka Gakkai International (SGI) was founded on January 26, 1975, as a worldwide network of Buddhists dedicated to a common vision of a better world through the empowerment of the individual and the promotion of peace, culture and education."⁹ Under his leadership SGI became one of the largest Buddhist

7. Daisaku Ikeda, "The Human Revolution".

8. SGI, "Josei Toda," <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/gohonzon.html>

9. SGI, "History," <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/founding-presidents/josei-toda.html>

organisations in the world, promoting world peace and dignity of human life through grass root activities of sustainable development, abolition of nuclear weapons, basic human rights and right to education.

One of the key aims of SGI is promotion of “global peace, the ideal of education and culture for global citizenship. It aims at fostering awareness for social and environmental responsibilities. It seeks to advance the search for common values, such as tolerance and existence despite differences and to strengthen our sense of common humanity”¹⁰. Thus, from the very inception of Soka Gakkai, the idea of engaging Buddhist practice with one’s immediate surrounding has been central to the philosophy. The proposition to practice for ‘oneself and others’ plays a potent role in the everyday practice of this philosophy.

In India¹¹ Nichiren Buddhism is not an organised religion. One does not need to convert to practice it; one may be born in a family that practices Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity or Islam. A person is not asked to leave his/her faith. Thus, in a country where religion finds a dominant presence in the everyday life, Nichiren Buddhism provides a secular and liberal avenue, welcoming people of all faiths to practice it as a ‘life philosophy’ and not as a religion.

10. Daisaku Ikeda, “Soka Education”.

11. According to Nichiren Daishonin by chanting the five Characters – title of the lotus sutra- Nam Myo Ho Renge kyo – a person can attain Buddhahood in his/her current life state. Since, people were used to chant to an external deity, he inscribed the five characters on a scroll – known as the Gohonzon. According to Nichiren it is the physical representation of a scroll containing Chinese and Sanskrit characters that helps the practitioners to bring forth their highest potential – life state of Buddhahood from within their lives. It is a physical representation of the fundamental law that permeates all life. Shakyamuni’s revelation of this law is mentioned in the lotus sutra, the Japanese title of which is MyoHo Renge Kyo.

Nichiren has represented this in its graphic form as the Gohonzon establishing a way for the people to connect. This philosophy believes that while chanting Daimoku (Japanese word for the five characters) in front of the scroll –people come to a realization that they are the manifestation of the universal power– ‘Gohonzon is the blueprint of the limitless blueprint of the limitless potential of our inner lives. It mirrors the qualities of our inherent Buddha nature, such as wisdom, courage, compassion and life force. It is not a representation of something we lack or must acquire from a source outside ourselves.’ Nichiren stressed repeatedly is to believe that we are “perfectly endowed” beings—that we can reveal our Buddha nature in our present form, at any place and at any time. He says, “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself.” <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/gohonzon.html>.

4. 21ST CENTURY, ITS CHALLENGES AND ROLE OF BUDDHISM

Since the middle of 19th century several sociologists, philosophers, writers and various thinkers such as Emile Durkheim, Paul Ricouer, Amartya Sen and others have engaged in a moral quest to find meaning in life and society at large. Engaging with the question “how do we live together when there is heightened sense of individuation, specialization and occupational differentiation?” helped Durkheim to give a sociological meaning to religion. “His significance lies in the fact that he puts emphasis on sort of ‘civil religion’, and on the need for reverence and humility without which secular reasoning might lead to narcissism and aggression.”¹² A modern society cannot run on the basis of selfishness or utilitarian notion of ‘self-centred atomized individual’ because that will lead to ‘anomic disorder’.¹³

Taking the idea of justice in society, I would like to bring in the work of another scholar, Amartya Sen. He while explaining the Sanskrit terms *niti* (ethics) and *nyaya* (jurisprudence) says that, *niti* relates to the rules, institutions and organizations, whereas *nyaya* concerns what emerges and how, and “the lives that people are actually able to lead.”¹⁴ He emphasizes that “the roles of institutions, rules and organization, important as they are, have to be assessed in the broader and more inclusive perspective of *nyaya*, which is inescapably linked with the world that actually emerges, not just the institutions or rules we happen to have.”¹⁵ While quoting Mauryan ruler Asoka’s example, he says, his deepening faith in Buddhism made him believe that, “social enrichment could be achieved through the voluntary good behaviour of the citizens themselves, without being compelled through force.”¹⁶

The idea of the Middle Way is foundational to Buddhism. If we think of this in relation to the concept of *nyaya*, it indicates a constant and conscientious attention to the impact of one’s actions on others, with the question of human happiness or

12. Avijit Pathak, “Recalling the Forgotten Education and Moral Quest”, 42.

13. *Ibid.*, 35.

14. Amartya Sen, “The idea of justice”, 25.

15. *Ibid.*, 26.

16. *Ibid.*, 31.

misery serving as the overarching criterion.¹⁷ This trail of thinking resonates with the tenets of Nichiren Buddhism that believes in the interconnectedness of an individual with his/her environment. This practice emphasises on the fact that the prism of religion or ethnicity should not judge individuals instead; one should develop a deep appreciation through individual friendships of each other's unique value, differences of ethnicity or religion.

5. ROLE OF NICHIREN BUDDHISM IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL CHALLENGES

This philosophy believes in the inter connectedness of the individual and the universe. It makes an individual believe in his/her innate potential. It enables an individual to take responsibility for their past and present circumstances. At the same time, sensitizing them to become empathetic to the condition of people around them.

The law is also referred as the law of causality or the law of cause and effect. Causality in Buddhism also refers to things that are not visible such as misery, cruelty, happiness etc. The accumulation of our past and present causes is referred as 'karma' which is also referred to the pattern and behaviour we repeat or react to in situations of our lives. This law or practice believes that individuals are the creators of their own present as well as future. Thus, taking responsibility for the causes that are created that further lead to creation of a better society for us as well as others.¹⁸

The members refer to people as bodhisattvas of the earth. In Mahayana Buddhist tradition, Bodhisattva term is used to describe an individual who is dedicated to the realization of happiness for oneself and others. "As described in the Vimalakirti Sutra:

17. *Ibid.*

18. Within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the teaching that deluded impulses, or earthly desires and sufferings, are essential to enlightenment suggests the kind of dynamism that is required here. It calls for reorienting our understanding of the nature of human happiness. Happiness is not the outcome of eliminating or distancing us from the desires and impulses that give rise to suffering. It is instead vital that we grasp the reality that enlightenment—the strength and wisdom to forge a path to a better life—continues to exist within us even in the midst of anguish and pain. The problem is not simply one of suffering but of how we face that suffering and the kinds of action we take in response. Ikeda, "The Global Solidarity of youth: Ushering in a New Era of Hope SGI President Ikeda's 2017 Peace Proposal," 40.

*'During the short aeons of maladies,
 They become the best holy medicine;
 They make beings well and happy,
 And bring about their liberation.
 During the short aeons of famine,
 They become food and drink.
 Having first alleviated thirst and anger,
 They teach the Dharma to living beings.
 During the short aeons of swords,
 They meditate on love,
 Introducing to nonviolence
 Hundreds of millions of living beings'*

This means extending people encouragement and support when they undergo the inevitable four sufferings of life that is birth, ageing, sickness and death. As referred in the Vilamkirti Sutra – because living beings are ill, I also am ill- to be a bodhisattva means to be motivated by the spirit of empathy to respond to grave social crisis wherever you are and whether or not you are directly impacted.¹⁹ The concept of dependent origination and interconnectedness with all life forms, find roots of its conception in the premise of 'Bodhisattva of the Earth'.

This spirit of bodhisattva is foundational to the growth and sustained efforts of SGI. It has led to the spread of this faith-based organisation to 192 countries and territories globally. It is considered to be one of the fastest growing and diverse lay Buddhist movement, having more than 12 million practitioners across the globe.²⁰ For example, in India there are 2,00,000 practicing members in BSG. During the past four decades BSG has spearheaded several peace initiatives such travelling exhibitions on peace & non-violence, educational initiatives for under privileged children, peace symposiums and several humanitarian activities such as rescuing of people during natural disasters and delivery them with basic survival necessities.

19. *Ibid.*,” 18.

20. SGI, “Timeline,” <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/goonzon.html>

Extending beyond the philosophical and theoretical engagements, the SGI unleashes into action by supporting the efforts of UN and over the years has been working on global challenges such as refugee crisis, educational reforms, abolition of nuclear weapons and environmental crisis. The third President of SGI, Daisaku Ikeda has been writing peace proposals to UN since 1983. These proposals explore both, the Buddhist concepts and their social relevance in globally challenging times. For example: 2018 proposal reads “Towards an era of Human Right: Building a People’s Movement”. The adoption of the ‘The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons’ in 2017 was a breakthrough in the field of nuclear disarmament. Mr Ikeda’s peace proposal “Building Global Solidarity Toward Nuclear Abolition” written in 2009 significantly shaped and augmented the efforts of the UN towards Nuclear abolition. SGI is also the international partner of ICAN (the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons)²¹ that won a Nobel Prize in 2017 for its efforts towards a world free from nuclear weapons.

One of the main monthly activities in SGI is its Discussion Meeting. These meetings serve as an active platform that reinstate Humanistic Buddhism among members and pushes them towards

21. Since the launch of ICAN in 2007, the SGI has been proud to work as one of the movement’s international partners toward the realization of a world free from nuclear weapons.

In particular, the SGI has collaborated with ICAN to produce educational materials including “Testimonies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: women Speak out for Peace”(2009), the awareness-raising exhibition “Everything You Treasure—For a World Free From Nuclear Weapons” (2012), which has been shown in 79 cities in 19 countries around the world, and in September this year, a short anime film highlighting the importance of the Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons.

The SGI is committed to continuing the long struggle towards abolition of these most inhumane of weapons. Mr. Ikeda continues: “The adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and today’s award mark the opening of a new phase in the effort to abolish nuclear weapons, a rising tide of energy and commitment.”

ICAN Executive Director Beatrice Fihn commented in an interview at the time of the adoption of the treaty: “SGI has been one of our greatest partners in this fight. Faith-based perspectives are extremely important, because there is a moral reason to why we are doing this.”

The SGI has been working toward the abolition of nuclear weapons for 60 years, since the ‘Declaration Calling for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons’ issued by second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda on September 8, 1957. World Tribune Voice of Courage and Hope <https://www.worldtribune.org/2017/10/ican-the-sgi/>

Engaged Buddhism. Such as discussing & promoting dialogues on equality, diversity, peace, education and culture. Discussion Meetings serve as structures of spiritual and emotional support, whereby they help in overcoming the challenges of the 21st century like anomie, disenchantment, social exclusion and a heightened sense of aloneness and depression. Through reinstating the spirit of humanistic Buddhism, which connects the philosophical aspect of the religion to the everydayness of the individual, it empowers the practitioners to become agents of change who begin to embody a spirit of 'Engaged Buddhism' in their respective workplaces, environment, communities and society at large. Thus, from a private, individuated practice of spirituality, this philosophy transforms into an action driven engagement with the others and our public life.

6. THE ROLE OF YOUTH AND WOMEN IN SGI: SGI AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Dr Ikeda in his peace proposal for the year 2018 attributes a key role in women empowerment will pay in resolving global challenges. The Preamble of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear weapons (TPNW) states that to attain sustainable peace and security globally, equal participation of both men and women is necessary. The proposal further elucidates how women participation is not only limited to peace and conflict resolution but has been acknowledged and adopted as Gender Action Plan both at 3rd UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (2015) and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (2017) with its roots in the Buddhist Concept of 'Dignity of all people'. The SGI has consistently supported the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), sending delegates since 2011 to the UN Headquarters and collaborated with UN Human Rights Council by co-sponsoring events focussing on the role of faith and culture in promoting women rights and gender equality.

Citing an example closer to home, while interacting with different BSG age groups coming from different religious, economic and professional backgrounds in Delhi, one realises that all of them took this philosophy, not because of the religious freedom it offers but a sense of empowerment and equality it instils. Mrs. Savita

Thakur, who is a 40-year old homemaker, was caught in a financial crisis, wherein her husband suffered huge financial losses. In spite of this turbulent period, she didn't lose her internal strength. This undefeatable spirit she attributes to her Buddhist practice and consistent encouragement by co-practioners. Her family not only sailed through testing times but she was also able to overcome her lifelong phobia of English language. She shared that the strength provided by her Buddhist practice and non-judgemental nature of other members enabled her to recite her struggle entirely in English language for the first time in her life, in front of a huge gathering.

Talking to other Indian women members, one realises that in a society that is plagued with Gender Inequality, biases and prejudices, this practice has given urban women a hope to believe in their innate potential, which is faith based on action that propels them to work as a positive driving force not only in their homes but also in their immediate environment and communities.

7. THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN SGI

Since the time of Second President Josei Toda, who declared the abolishment of nuclear weapons, youth has been the heart of SGIs peace initiatives. As President Ikeda believes that young people in particular are “blessed with a fresh sensitivity and a passionate seeking for ideals. Their energy can catalyse chain reactions of positive change as they forge bonds of trust among people.”²² Young people who are practicing this philosophy across the globe are somewhere convinced that the sense of powerlessness that inflicts the contemporary society can be transformed by collective actions of people around them. They actively engage in action rooted with absolute faith that the current circumstances are the reason that will enable them to fulfil their unique mission.²³ Thus, the action drive agenda of the BSG finds its momentum by keeping the youth in the center stage of its activities and campaigns.

22. *Ibid.*, 38.

23. *Ibid.*39.

8. ROLE OF YOUNG BHARAT SOKA GAKKAI(BSG) MEMBERS IN INDIAN SOCIETY

In India, BSG youth volunteers have been instrumental in reaching out to people and communities, especially those who have been deeply affected and devastated by natural disasters such, as the Gujrat cyclone (1998), Chamoli Earthquake (1999), Orissa Cyclone (1999), Gujrat Earthquake (2001), Tsunami in Tamil Naidu (2004), Chennai Floods (2015) among others. While posing a question to one of BSG's Young Male Division member, Raghav Sharma, currently studying in DU, I asked, what propelled him to help people during Chennai floods in 2015, he said, "even before I joined BSG, I was sympathetic to people who were either suffering due to man-made or natural disasters. But I was unable to offer any help. Practicing this humanistic philosophy in particular and reading about the suffering and experiences of people across India and globally has made me 'empathetic' towards their suffering and enabled me to offer my skills to people in distress. I have also come to a realisation that acquiring knowledge and degrees is futile until unless I can help and serve people around me." His thoughts found resonance among other young members who believed that this faith based practice has provided them with a sense of purpose and is purely driven by action in ones own life as well as others.

Though 21st century is witnessing the pinnacle of technological advancement but at the same time it is one of the most violent centuries, where global issues of migration, displacement, war caused deaths and other global crisis have reached a new high point. Coming back to the ailments of modern society, human population across the globe is undergoing personal and societal challenges. For example, U.K in 2017 has set up a Ministry of Loneliness. Taking into consideration the data provided by the Jo Cox Commission, almost nine million people in U.K have acknowledged of being lonely. This has serious effect on their personal and professional lives. The data further adds, that it costs British Employers 2.5 billion a year.²⁴

It is estimated that in 2020 India will become world's youngest country, with its 64 per cent population will be in working age

24. <https://www.jocoxloneliness.org/>

group.²⁵ With growing numbers in youth population, there are also growing problems that need to be urgently addressed as a society. While, conducting interviews with college students from both Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University, one realises that 25-35% of student population is undergoing serious mental health issues. Such issues are mainly a result of social isolation, virtual reality taking over physical human interactions, a sense of cutthroat competition, performance anxiety, heightened sense of low self-esteem and existential crisis. Interviewing practicing young members of Nichiren Buddhism one realises the impact it has on them. Quoting from a young college going practitioner P. Chettri “One of my classmate invited me to attend the monthly discussion meeting at one of the homes of a practicing member in South Delhi. During that time I was suffering from clinical depression. Those days especially, I was haunted by thoughts of self-harm and a deep sense of worthlessness. Due to one of my friends persistent request, I thought, let me attend this last social meeting, after which I will take the desired step of self-harm. While attending the meeting, I was completely distracted, but what caught my attention, were few lines that one of the young member shared, on self- forgiveness and compassion. The member said, “if the universe never gives up on you, and has infinite compassion, how can you give up on your own self. These spoken lines and the positive energy of the members present, proved to be a lifesaver for me. Thus, the brief message that one could conjures through these interactions is, that the change one desires to witness in the outer environment, needs to start from within one own self. Quoting Dr Daisaku Ikeda, P. Chettri says, “A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation, and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind’.

It thus becomes evident that the BSG works not only as a support system for its members, providing safe space to escape alienation and disenchantment from the real world but also as a fertile ground to inspire youth to take initiatives and orient the philosophy towards ‘action’ in their respective lives and local communities.

25. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-is-set-to-become-the-youngest-country-by-2020/article4624347.ece>

9. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper traces the historical trajectory of the SGI, its inception and growth in India and the nexus it provides between spirituality and an action-oriented living. My engagement with the practitioners of Bharat Soka Gakkai has been located within the urban pockets of India. This paper is a part of an ongoing research work. Out of several questions that I posed while interacting with various practicing members in Delhi, if not all, few got answered.

From a sociological perspective, it is interesting to observe that in Japan, Nichiren Buddhism cuts across various class binaries; people belonging to various class strata from fishermen to farmers practice it. But ironically in India, the socio-economic demographic of BSG is mainly an urban middle class population, perhaps because of the English language that restricts it to people belonging to this particular class strata.
