Catch Them Young!

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India has set itself an ambitious target - to turn out 500 million skilled, employable young people by 2022. The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) has been proactive in working towards this target and has already helped in skilling over 1.3 million and leveraging public-private partnerships with experienced training enterprises.

Ironically, the real hurdle in vocational skill-building, has more to do with mind-sets than money. 21st century India inherited an ideological baggage traceable to her colonial past: a perceived divide between white collar and blue collar jobs;
which invests professions like engineering and medicine with some sort of glamorous aura. This has skewed the entire job market. According to an Ernst and Young report for ASSOCHAM, 75 per cent of IT graduates turned out by Indian universities are deemed 'unemployable'. Leading technology employers in India confirm that they need to spend almost six months on retraining fresh engineering graduates before they can be usefully deployed.

The experience in some other countries has led them to put in place educational practices that better reflect the realities of the job market. In Sweden, upper secondary education is divided into 13 vocational and just four academic programmes. In Switzerland, nearly two-thirds of those entering upper secondary education enter a 'dual' vocational education and training system, where students spend some time in a vocational school, then undergo apprenticeship at a host company. The UK has a long history of vocational and trade-based 'guilds'. Such bodies still set examinations for technical subjects, for which a number of private institutions provide tuition.

The Indian government recognises that India's youth is her biggest asset, making her, by 2030, possibly the youngest nation in the world. It is building upon the NSQF in schools, setting a target of five million students with a vocational qualification every year.

The skilling sector can be developed by the following initiatives:
* Institution-based skill development including ITIs/ITCs/vocational schools/technical schools/polytechnics/professional colleges, etc.;
* Formal and informal apprenticeships and other types of training by enterprises;
* Training for self-employment / entrepreneurial development;
* Adult learning, retraining of retired or retiring employees and lifelong learning;
* Non-formal training including training by civil society organisations;
* E-learning, web-based learning and distance learning.

The Central Board of Secondary Education already offers over 40 vocational courses in different sectors at the senior secondary level. It makes sense to make CBSE the fulcrum to catch them young and train them early, in the skill sets that are essential drivers for the nation's economy. But why stop with government schools? We need to get over the elite mind set of privately-funded schools, that vocational courses are not for them -- beyond the obligatory hour or two of SUPW - 'socially useful and productive work'. Many of what these institutions relegate to the realm of hobbies, have in them the makings of useful, even critical skills.

Sometimes, adults can profit by listening to what the young are saying. Look at a hundred startups in rural health, retail trade, energy or food distribution, that innovative Indians in their teens and twenties, have created, many of them examples of jugad or frugal innovation at its best. Almost all of these startups, harness technologies like the Internet and the mobile phone to reach their clients and customers - technologies that the young pick up almost casually. The core skills of their chosen business, they learn the hard, often disruptive way.

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Tags assigned to this article:
- skill development
- vocational training
- government
- schools

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