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Revisiting Skill Development in India

By: Juthika Patankar

India's skill development policy has struggled. Instead of spreading resources too thinly, public policy could achieve more by focusing on social upliftment, gender and caste equality, and regional balance in skill training.

A recent [report](#) published in *The Indian Express* newspaper cited the problems faced by skilled Indian construction workers exported to Israel in a government-to-government initiative to make up for the labour shortage in Israel because of the Palestine conflict. The workers were sent by the National Skill Development Corporation, which falls under the purview of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE).

The ministry's multi-pronged policy on skill development includes exporting Indian skills abroad. To facilitate a smooth transition, steps have been taken to align and benchmark skill qualifications in India with those in certain countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and a few others. The export policy has, however, met with very limited success and some of the reasons have been mentioned in the news report such as skills mismatch, problems in communicating with non-Indian supervisors, and the difficulty in adjusting to a different work culture abroad.

This should make us pause to consider whether a policy as multi-pronged and broad-based as that of the ministry might actually be short on focus and result in resources and efforts being too thinly spread across the whole range of skill development.

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Skills are merit goods that necessitate public funding and government intervention to create a skilled work force. The dual purpose of skill development is personal growth and securing employment. However, we need to examine what and how much the government can do in the sphere of skill development.

It would be neither feasible nor desirable for the government to attempt the wholesale skill training of youth in diverse trades across various regions of the country with the general aim of helping them secure a livelihood. Rather, public policy on this could achieve more by focusing on social upliftment, gender and caste equality, and regional balance in skill training.

Notwithstanding the progress (or the lack of it) in so many facets of skill development, including several initiatives launched by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, it would be useful for the government to concentrate on the following areas to take developing skills in the country forward:

a) Priority Sectors

To begin with, the government could identify the priority sectors for skill development in three broad categories.

- (i) Sectors in which India has a natural advantages or competitive edge.
- (ii) Sectors in which issues of caste or gender inequality are ingrained.
- (iii) Sectors those are currently not conducive to private or open-market interventions but which, after suitably directed government initiatives, could invite the entry of the private sector to promote better livelihoods and career growth opportunities.

What follows are examples to illustrate each of these three categories.

In the first category, one could include a case for focused intervention at the Alang Ship Breaking Yard in Bhavnagar district of Gujarat, which is said to be the world's largest ship-breaking yard. Now, the work here is entirely carried out by largely unskilled, unregulated, and hazardously deployed migrant labour. Given the imperative to adhere to international standards of labour safety, environment protection, and quality, skill training is urgently required here. Everything from preparing a training curriculum to the actual training has to be carried out.

There is also a need to identify linked skill opportunities and devise career growth paths for the labourers engaged in ship-breaking. That there is already an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) in the district could facilitate and spur the required interventions.

The second category could consider mechanising and digitising the work of garbage collection and management, sewer cleaning, and maintenance carried out by urban local governments across the country. Unfortunately, this activity is stigmatised as being the traditional preserve of the lowest castes on the social scale. The work is hazardous, no skills are noticeably required, imparted, or upgraded, and social mobility is nil.

Training the existing workforce to use mechanised equipment and digitised processes would transform these activities from unsavoury and stigmatised menial labour to work that involves using machines and computers. It would have different levels of supervision and opportunities for a career path. This could draw in other castes as well, making the work aspirational for all.

The third category could deal with managing drinking water and solid and liquid waste in gram panchayats and maintaining the systems and skills required for these. To maintain and manage these public utilities, gram panchayats require skilled workers to ensure all is in top working order all year round. If the availability of skilled workers is ensured and these utilities are properly maintained, user charges could be levied and collected.

Eventually, if high standards of service delivery can be expected and maintained, for both public as well as private utilities, users would be willing to pay and the market could open up to the private sector, thereby increasing employment. But first, local government bodies would need to deploy skilled labour for maintaining drinking water and sanitation facilities all through the year (and also collecting segregated wet and dry solid waste and managing liquid waste) to create interest and demand among users.

Skill upgradation activities in sectors where India has natural advantages and a competitive edge can be quickly identified and implemented, with the results being visible in three years or so. But action in sectors where caste and gender inequalities are deeply engrained and/or are not conducive to private or open-market interventions would have to be of a medium-term and long-term duration for the impact to be seen.

b) Skill Certification

A vital step is establishing the value and credibility of skill certification. This can be achieved by making the National Council of Vocational Education and Training (NCVET) a genuinely professional organisation with strict standards.

The principle of cooperative federalism needs to be kept in mind when negotiating and assigning the sphere of powers between the central and state skill-certifying authorities. Excessive centralisation can be counterproductive. As new and corrective interventions take place, their effect will be felt within the short term and beyond.

c) Quality Data

Data collection, enumeration, authenticated storage, and accessibility are very significant factors if evidence-based decision-making is to become the norm in both the public and private sectors. The need for quality data is being increasingly felt by both the government and private sector. If skill training in data collection and enumeration is provided to just 10 youths in each village, nearly seven million jobs can be created just for data collection. They can become the source for reliable, primary data, whether it is for census operations and/or collection and uploading of beneficiary data, or undertaking market surveys for private sector.

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These skilled data collectors and enumerators can relieve primary school teachers from the burden of carrying out miscellaneous work, which adversely affects their main work. Data collection would provide ongoing jobs, and also facilitate decisions and policymaking for the future of government intervention in skill development in an informed and purposeful way. Data is required for any and every activity and there is a huge gap that needs to be filled. This would need to be a sustained and ongoing process though it would begin yielding results in a relatively short term.

d) All Round Training

Providing skill training in different areas of competence to all government employees engaged in the implementation of schemes is important to make sure the bureaucracy is moving with the times. This would need a concerted and properly charted programme that specifies a time period in which it should be achieved and it should have in-built provisions for renewal and upgradation of training. This would be, like data collection, an ongoing process.

Skill training of government employees is not, of course, something that warrants mention in a policy paper on skill development. Yet, there is no escaping that if any skill development action by the government is to be effective, its own vast army of programme and policy implementers would need their skills refreshed and upgraded from time to time. This is conspicuous by its absence today, especially at the lower levels of bureaucracy.

Vocational education in schools and the introduction of multi-skill training to students are both necessary to underline the importance of skill development. However the initiative for this has to come from the ministry and departments of education at the union and state levels. Teachers of vocational education must be regular recruits on a full-time basis and must be an integral part of the teaching staff, not part-time contractual appointees.

Vocational education must have a syllabus, subject to revision from time to time to keep it up to date. The choice of trades would vary according to regional diversities in occupations, resources, traditional skills, and the potential for future growth. Vocational education cannot be an add-on to the curriculum—it has to be a part of the curriculum. Some schools could specialise in vocational education courses within the overall plan of the board to which the school is affiliated. Apprenticeship in trades could be linked to vocational education in schools. An analogy may be drawn with the Sainik Schools that orient students towards a career in the armed forces.

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An emphasis on the export of skills abroad is perhaps premature for India at this stage when even domestic demand is not fulfilled. Skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers have been going abroad to earn a living for long, independent of government efforts in this regard. It might be more fruitful in the long run to concentrate on a thrust in select sectors through specific measures in domestic policy, which would strengthen skill competency and address the issues that can be properly tackled by the government alone.

Demand for skilled labour in the construction, trade, healthcare, and social sectors in India are growing as the country's economy is growing fast. The health and education sectors are areas where there is huge unmet demand, and if local governments, both urban and rural, are strengthened and galvanised, it would open up new employment opportunities all across the country.

Skill development, as a policy or programme of governments in India, seems to have lacked such a direction and a clear-cut strategy. These suggestions are by way of indicating that a clear approach to the subject by governments could result in for more perceptible progressive outcomes.

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