

Skill Building & Employment in India: Interrogating an Uneasy Relationship

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The governments of the day have been focusing on skill building in a big way to create a workforce ready for employment. However, the ground reality shows that there is an uneasy relationship between skill building and employment in India. This paper interrogates the role of major participants in the process of skill building namely, the state, corporate, NGOs and the communities and identifies the challenges at the grassroots level in the process of skill building. The paper critiques the passive role which the communities are required to play in the process of skill building and identifies the larger and latent challenges which must be decoded to address the relationship between skill development and employment.

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Introduction

With the opening of Indian economy, employment generation is more often the outcome of market forces. The governments of the day now focus on easing the stress points in the conduct of business which are identified by the corporate. The governments are also moving towards building an eco-system which in the long run shall ensure a pool of skilled labor in the market. The establishment of National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) is a case in point. There is, thus, a major investment in the field of skill development by the government as well as the corporate through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. The government has in fact taken a lead in stitching a partnership amongst the corporate, NGOs/ training institutes and itself to meet the targets of skill development. In the process, the communities have been converted into passive recipients of these skill-based interventions. This paper interrogates the process of skill building as practiced at the grassroots by the corporate and NGOs with facilitation from the state. It also critically looks at the engagement of the communities in this process. The paper concludes by highlight-

ing the uneasy relationship between skill development and employment in India. The paper draws upon the field realities encountered by the author as social work educator, researcher in the area of CSR and evaluator of CSR initiatives of the corporate.

Understanding & Contextualizing Skill Development in India

Typically, training the individuals for a vocation provides them with skills for certain crafts or jobs. As per NSSO Report 2015: “the main objective of vocational education and training is to prepare persons, especially the youth, for the world of work and make them employable for a broad range of occupations in various industries and other economic sectors. It aims at imparting training to persons in very specific fields through providing significant ‘hands on’ experience in acquiring necessary skill in the specific vocation or trade, which make them employable or create for them opportunities of self-employment. A vocational training prepares an individual for a specific vocation or occupation”(NSSO 68th Round, 2015: 11).

Those familiar with the skill development initiatives in India are well aware of the flurry of activities in this area at the grass roots. A good representation of implementing partners enrolled with NSDC, monitoring of training targets by the state and corporate and consequent revisions of the skill targets indicate the seriousness with which skill building is being taken. At the same time, the engagement of communities; more specifi-

cally the youth;with skill development initiatives at the grass roots points towards the absence of their agency in the training process. This is substantiated by the data on youth employment post training which is not very encouraging (Hindu Business Line, Jan 14, 2019) and high job turnover within a few months of employment as witnessed by the author at the grass roots during evaluation of these skill-based projects.

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The increasing emphasis on skill development in India is the outcome of two related arguments which are presently available in the public domain. First is the economic argument which maintains that the continuous increase in GDP is leading towards skill shortage in India; a situation which is likely to worsen in the coming years (Mehrotra et al, 2013).The second argument pertains to the demographic shift which is expected to have huge social implications in future. This demographic shift which is also referred to as the demographic dividend is reflected through growth in population between the age group of 19-59 years. This shift provides enough justification for structural changes in Indian economy (Mehrotra et al, 2013) which in turn is expected to have far reaching implications for the skills requirements in the coming years.

The increasing focus on skill development by the governments of the day has its share of appreciation and criticism. Those critical of the increasing emphasis on skill building see it as a process of pacification of the working-class youth (Gleeson, 1989 & Sadgopal, 2016). For them, this pacification is necessitated by the fact that the manufacturing and service sectors in India have not been able to generate enough jobs to keep pace with the number of youth entering the labor market every year (Chandrasekhar & Ghosh, 2018; Kantha, 2017). Thus, training the youth on multiple skills in the absence of jobs serves the purpose of keeping them busy. Unemployment is, thus, projected as an outcome of the absence of required skills in the youth, a handicap which the youth needs to overcome. The critics, thus, maintain that the near collapse of youth labor market is managed through this mechanism (Gleeson, 1989). The failure of the economy to create sufficient jobs does not get highlighted due to the ongoing discourse on the inability of youth to encash on the opportunities available in the now open and expanding economy. Writers such as Claus Offe (1984) call it a case of “institutional storage”; a process which ensures that the youth is available for employment and is off the roads instead of protesting for jobs (Offe, 1984:99). We can therefore conclude that skill development is not purely a case of development of human resources or enhancement of a factor of production but it has political and ideological elements embedded into it (Burawoy, 1983). The political apparatus of the state plays an important role in the process of institutional storage by encouraging certifications and re-

certifications of the skills gained through training, by mandating the required number of hours to be spent on training and by enforcing the requirement of clearing proficiency tests. In the process, the state is able to regulate protests and struggles (Burawoy, 1983).

State & Skill Development in India

To understand and contextualize skill development in India, one may first look at the role of state in skill development. Numerous efforts towards skill development have been made by the governments of the day since Independence. However, it is pertinent to look at the role of state; post globalization, liberalization and privatization of the Indian economy as these do impact the labor market (Hahn & Narjoko, 2013; Bhorat & Lundall, 2004; Nanda & Kaur, 2008). In this context, the role of National Skill Development Corporation stands out. The National Skill Development Corporation was set up by Ministry of Finance in 2008 as a Public Private Partnership (PPP) Company with focus on strengthening skill building in India (National Skill Development Corporation, 2019). The aim of National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015 is to “empower the individual, by enabling her/him to realize their full potential through a process of lifelong learning where competencies are accumulated via instruments such as credible certifications, credit accumulation and transfer, etc. As individuals grow, the society and nation also benefit from their productivity and growth. This involves making quality vocational training aspirational for both

youth and employers where by youth sees it as a matter of choice and employer acknowledges the productivity linked to skilled workforce by paying the requisite premium” (NSDP, 2015:11-12).

The estimates of National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) and the NSSO Survey of 2011-2012 (Employment and Unemployment Situation in India, 2014) show a huge deficit between demand and supply of skills in India. The overall target of skilling and upskilling in India is 400 million by 2022 and NSDC aims to be a significant contributor towards skill building exercise (NSD Policy, 2015). It aims to create skills in India which are of the world class standards so that the persons equipped with these skills can compete for jobs even in the international market (NSD Policy, 2015).

The thrust of Government of India on skill development can also be gauged from the various statements of the Prime Ministers of India since the launch of NSDC in 2008. For instance, Dr. Manmohan Singh, the then Prime Minister of India while delivering a lecture at the Indian Labor Conference held in 2012 emphasized on the need to partner with the private sector and industries to work towards training the youth in India (Speech of then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at ILC on 04.02.2012). Further, Company’s Act, 2013 made CSR mandatory for the companies with specified revenue or profit for skill development has been specified as one area of CSR intervention in schedule VII of the Act (Companies Act, 2013). Similarly, Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi reit-

erated that the Skill India Mission would bring self confidence amongst the poor besides filling their pockets and would also address the need to formalize the informally learnt sector (Prime Minister Narednra Modi’s remarks on the launch of “Skill India”, 2015). In 2016, draft of New Education Policy (MHRD, 2016) was prepared with an aim to introduce vocational education in the schools; creating a split in the school education system which was now expected to build students who were meant for the world of books and those who were expected to take up vocational training. Thus, it can be concluded that from this public private partnership, the expectation has been to train the youth and formalize the learning of informally learnt sector. At the same time, the focus on skill development through CSR and the draft Education Policy, 2016 have aimed at ensuring a continuous supply of skilled labor in the market.

Positioning the Corporate and NGOs

With a push from the Government of India to contribute towards skill building, many corporate houses have started to get engaged in the area of skill development through CSR. At present, they use one of the following three models for development of skills. Many corporate houses work with implementing partners registered with NSDC for skill develop-

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ment. They are also directly engaging NGOs/ implementing partners for skill building in the communities. These NGOs may either have a set of trainers on their pay roll, who can provide training on the identified skills or else hire them from outside to train the youth. They may also have tie ups with certifying agencies to evaluate the proficiency of the trainees on completion of the course. In some instances, there has been no certifying agency to test the proficiency level of the trainees. It is the NGO which takes the test and declares the proficiency level of the trainees. In the third model of skill building, the corporate set up their own skill centers and tie up with the NGOs to run them as per the guidelines devised by the corporate. ICICI Foundation's skill academy is one such example (ICICI Foundation, 2019).

In this process of skill development, it is the corporate which decides the training and job placement targets as also the socio-economic profile of the targeted youth for skill building in a specific year. This is generally in line with the Government of India's focus on training the geographically disadvantaged people, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), minorities, persons with disability and women (Government of India's Skill Development Policy, 2015). The corporate, thus, largely focuses on the families which are below poverty line and youth from SC/ ST/ OBC background for the training. Additionally, it may also focus on women, minorities or persons with disability. It monitors the training as also the placements and may also get the

evaluation of training done through a third-party.

The data from the field shows that the implementing partners/NGOs mostly use NSDC approved course material for training. The NGOs or the implementing partners use their networking or conduct outreach programs at the grassroots to mobilize the youth for training program. On completion of training, the trainees are administered a test after which they are issued a certificate of proficiency. Since, the number of youth to be covered under training is defined by the corporate which funds the training and also because the NGOs are mostly paid by the number of candidates they train; they often focus on meeting the training targets. Consequently, there is many a time, no screening of the candidates to identify their interest, motivation or aptitude. The evaluation of these skill development programs undertaken by the author over the years shows that the recruitment drive for the candidates may be concentrated in certain pockets of the community and the NGOs at times may enroll those candidates for training who are already part of their other programs. Such approaches tend to restrict the reach of information about the training within the community and adversely impact effective mobilization. However, many NGOs do provide information to the candidates on the nature of training and future pros-

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pects during the orientation to the training program. The role of NGOs thus tends to be restricted to being implementers of the skill development goals of the corporate.

Communities: The Missing Link in Skill Building

In this entire exercise of skill building, communities as stakeholders are not visible. They are in fact passive recipients of these training programs. Often their cultural context, strengths as well as challenges are not taken cognizance of by the corporate and NGOs/ implementing partners while planning the training programs. However, the stereotypes about the groups in the communities do impact the decision on the kind of training courses that are run in a community. It is thus very common to find training for a beautician or tailoring courses specifically targeted for the girls in the communities. The outcome of the absence of communities in the discourse on training is elaborated later in the paper.

Skill Building: Challenges on the Surface

Since there is a big push towards training of youth in various skills, it is important to critically look at the outcomes of these skill building programs. Grassroots narratives from the youth indicate that the training provided to them is more aimed at imparting skills and not necessarily getting them gainfully employed. The number of youth who get employment on completion of training and then continue with the job is low.

Most corporate expect the implementing partners to develop backward and forward linkages for the skills being imparted to the trainees. This requires the implementing partner to scan the market to identify the skills which are in demand in the identified areas, locate employment avenues and organize placements for the trained youth.

Interestingly, most of the skills on which training is imparted especially through CSR are the ones which the corporate do not necessarily require. The organizations which undertake CSR are often big business houses which are either capital intensive or are part of the service sector. They use high end skills which are mostly procured from the management and technological institutions. The low-end skills which they require are often contracted or else, they outsource the jobs which require low end skills (Chen & Chi, 2010). In fact, a significant number of workers in the organized sector are now either on contract or are casual workers (Jha, 2017). The logical conclusion then is that these trainings are aimed at creating a labor pool for the small business organizations or the unorganized sector. This process can also be interpreted as formalization of training in the informal sector which shall eventually be to the advantage of the formal sector. While there may be no harm in

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formalizing the training in informal sector, however, the challenge comes from the exploitative nature of the unorganized sector in which most of these trained youth are likely to be employed.

Let us also have a look at the challenges of getting jobs with these skills. The first challenge is accessing the employment market. The skills that are being imparted are often in the area of retail, hospitality, geriatric care, beautician, plumber, carpenter, masonry, electrician, mobile repair, tailoring, book binding, computer literacy, data entry, toymaking etc. In rural areas, training on agro-farming, goatery, chickenry, piggery, vermi compost making and tractor repair may be given. In the hilly regions additional skills such as making jam and squash from the local fruits or training on making woolen products may also be given. As has been iterated, these skills are more often utilized in the unorganized sector or else can be used for self-employment by the illiterate and semi-literate youth. On account of the way the unorganised sector is structured, there is no source which shares specific skill demands of this sector. In the absence of placement through the implementing partner, the youth with these skills is constrained to search for jobs on their own through social capital, hit and trial, or start their own work. The youth which is targeted for these training often does not have the capacity to invest or take the risks associated with self-employment. Also, not all can be entrepreneurs for various reasons. So, at any point in time, there is likely to be skilled labor, floating in the market with very little information about market or

process of seeking employment. The employment data suggests that the employment rate after training is not optimistic. For instance, over 10.09 lakh people out of 33.93 lakh trained under Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) got placements in 2018. This makes the placement rate to about 33% (Hindu Business Line, Jan. 14, 2019). However, even this placement faces challenge of retention of these skilled youth on account of working conditions such as hours of work and salary. Also, it has been seen that the youth with apparel and other trainings such as that of beautician are often categorized into self-employed even though in reality, they may just be stitching their family's clothes or may be undertaking occasional work that comes to them from the neighborhood.

Gender divide in skill training as well as the cultural context of the communities are two factors which also have an impact on the outcome of the training for youth. Thus, classes for apparel training are often for the girls and nearly all the batches of beauty and wellness training comprise girls alone. Many girls on completion of their training are not permitted to work by their parents on account of the distance of place of work from home, erratic work timings and shift system. Jobs in hospitality as also in geriatric care where very often the work is home-based face these challenges. Thus, the structural barriers prevent girls from taking up jobs even if they are available.

The motivation to attend skill development courses varies amongst the trainees. For instance, one often finds train-

ees who admit to not having any intention to take up job after the training. This is more common in tailoring and beauty culture training. These trainings are also seen as hobby classes which are attended in free time. Another rationale given for attending tailoring classes is that the money saved by stitching clothes for self and family is money earned. This logic has often been put forth by the training partners as well when confronted with the poor employment rate amongst the girls trained in tailoring. In hilly terrains, in addition to the above, a major challenge as associated with self-employment or working through the Self-Help Groups is the identification of market for the products developed and creation of market linkages. In these regions, there is difficulty in getting linked to the market due to the topography and lack of infrastructure to move their products from the point of manufacture to the point of sale.

It has also been seen that the trainees are often reluctant to go to other cities to work even when offered such jobs. They find the cost of staying away from their home financially not beneficial, as being in the unorganized sector, many of these jobs do not fetch even minimum wages.

The major concern however is the responsibility bestowed on the NGOs or the training partners by the corporate or the government, to find suitable jobs for the unemployed, very often illiterate and school dropouts who are not linked with the market. The concern is on two counts. First, in this period of jobless growth (Mehrotra, 2018; Mohanty, 2018), it is

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inappropriate to expect the NGOs to identify job avenues for those whom they train. Secondly, doubling as placement agencies and being accountable to the corporate for the placements of youth does not bode well for the NGO sector as their expertise does not lie in running themselves as placement agencies. The training partners and the NGOs do not have robust placement cells. They mostly use their personal contacts to identify possible sources of employment. This reliance on personal contacts does not create a sustainable system through which youth can seek employment. In fact, it creates dependence of youth on these institutions for jobs and also creates an uncertainty about the future.

Some of the skills that are taught are basic and do not require training for three months or a minimum of mandated 210 hours. Retail jobs for instance do not require resource investment of this level since these jobs can be learnt within a shorter span of time. Also, there are other traits which are often given preference to the skill training in this area. For instance, with reference to the youth who got jobs in the shops or supermarkets after undergoing training in retail; the shop owners shared that honesty and hard work are the two criteria on which job is offered. The skill training or certification is not the criteria for selection for these jobs.

Decoding Skill Development

However, an understanding of the challenges in implementation of the skill development programs at the grassroots is not sufficient to address the problem. This section identifies the larger and latent challenges which also need to be addressed.

Education plays an important role in defining the job and career prospects of a person. However, the level of education of labor in India continues to be an area of concern. Without basic education, it may be difficult to impart the skills required for the present knowledge-based economy (Mehrotra et al, 2013). Venkatnarayan and Naik (2017), based on their analysis of the Census 2011 data, conclude that the states which have higher literacy rate have a better work participation rate of main worker category (main workers are those who work for more than six months in a year). In contrast, they conclude, that the states which have low literacy rates have higher work participation of the marginal worker category (marginal workers are those who work for less than six months in a year). The rate of growth of marginal workers in India is higher than that of the main workers (Venkatanarayana & Naik, 2017). This itself demonstrates the importance of education in the lives of the workers. However, the figures given by the Economic Survey of India 2017-2018 raise a huge concern about the education sector in India. The total expenditure of the state and central governments on education in 2017-2018 was a mere 2.7% of the GDP. Thus, merely impart-

ing skills to the youth without taking care of the education sector is likely to condemn them to a life of being a marginal worker with accompanying economic insecurity.

The reforms which were proposed in the education sector through New Education Policy, 2016 were another area of concern. The proposed compartmentalization of education and vocation in the education system came from the mindset which considers mental labor to be superior to physical labor thereby ensuring that masses are available to take on the physical work which they might not take up after education (Sadgopal, 2016). Quoting Phule and Gandhi, Sadgopal (2016) made a case against delinking physical skills from academic and intellectual pursuits as proposed under the education reforms. Focusing on certain sections of society for skill training has the danger of reinforcing the fault lines in the society along caste, class and gender. This is already visible in the skill building courses that are being offered. While the focus of government on the marginalized and vulnerable sections through skill building may be seen as a positive step in the short term, however, in the long run it is likely to have adverse impacts without investment in the field of education and lack of efforts to overhaul the education system. The draft National Education Policy, 2019, while not

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making this compartmentalization of education obvious, has once again not brought the interests of the marginalized to the centre of the policy debate on education (Draft National Education Policy, 2019)

The number of youth entering the labor market in India is much more than the jobs which are being available in the market (Jobless Growth, World Bank Group, 2018). Thus, there is a need to make changes in the way the economy is structured in India. The challenges arising out of the inability of the corporate to get skilled labor and the labor's inability to find jobs point towards the need for structural reforms in the economy.

While the governments of the day and the corporate in India have started to invest massively in skill building exercise, it is more an exercise in making the youth believe that they are being prepared for the world of work (Gleeson, 1989). Eventually when the youth does not get jobs, it is likely to blame itself rather than the way economy and society are structured.

Creation of skill development institutions for skill building exercise in India has, thus, performed the role of catchment areas (Offe, 1984: 97-98) which accommodate labor either permanently or temporarily. Through this the state has also tried to regulate the entry of workers in to the labor market since the jobs are not growing at the optimal rate (Chandrasekhar & Ghosh, 2018).

Thus, employment cannot be ensured through skill development in a society

which has structural barriers in economic and social domain. Skill building can only strengthen the labor or the industry if these structural issues are addressed.

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