Skill India Mission: Challenges and Opportunities

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B Chandrasekaran

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and slowdown of the economy, the prospects for millions of graduating youth, labourers and migrant workers who returned to their home states seem to be gloom for the near future, although any economy is cyclical. The increased demand, efficiency and productivity of factor markets are considered a boon for the recovery of an economy.

According to the India Skills Report 2019–20, millennials contribute nearly half (47 per cent) of the country's working population and are expected to continue to remain the largest chunk of the Indian workforce till 2030. However, as per NSSO 2011–12 report, only 2.2 per cent aged between 15–59 years have received formal vocational training and 8.6 per cent have received non-formal vocational training. Thus, only 10.8 per cent of the labour force was trained in some or other forms of vocational training in India.

There are reports that white-collar employees who are now back in their villages and towns are engaging in family businesses, agriculture activities, small trade, services, etc. with vocational skills to fulfil their basic livelihood due to the loss of income from regular jobs. Also, most experts seem to be promoting the imperative to accelerate efforts towards vocational training and skill development for youth and labourers to improve their prospects for employability in the labour market and also help them to venture into self-employment opportunities.

India's one of the greatest statesmen C Rajagopalachari (1878–1972) had envisioned in 1953 that besides mainstream education, every child or youth has to learn some or other form of crafts which would help them to become self-confident and resourceful when they join the labour force. However, Rajaji's vision was then rejected as caste-based because he had asked children to learn their family occupations. Now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, vocational skills are helping people to fulfil their basic livelihood till they get regular job opportunities in a normal course of time.

However, bringing vocational education, training and skill development for youth into the mainstream is still considered stereotypic and riddled with the social stigma in the Indian education system. Besides, the technical and higher educational institutions also seem to be reluctant to take up short-term vocational and skill development courses for the enhancement of quality manpower. Hitherto, the approach to skill development and vocational training pursued by the Union and State governments was completely a top-down approach. This model has been proven time and again far less effective in a vast country like India.

During the last decade, there were two National Policies for Skill Development (2009 and 2015) reiterating almost the same decades-old vision, mission and objectives of making youth and labourers productive by imparting industry-relevant skills and vocational training which are equalised to any other mainstream degrees and diplomas awarded by the schools, colleges, institutions and universities.

Unfortunately, these aspects are not progressing well especially at district levels, tier II or tier III cities level at a pace with how the dynamics of labour markets demand to take advantage. The National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF) that paves the way for a seamless nexus between the mainstream education and vocational education, training and skills development is yet to break the social stigma prevailing in the country's education and training system.

Recently, a few State governments have initiated skill mapping of migrant labourers and people returned from abroad due to COVID-19. Surely, these steps are piecemeal exercises to satisfy short-term criticisms arising from a few quarters. At national level, there were more than 20 sectoral skill gap study reports prepared by private consultancies and research and academic institutions funded by National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) in 2012.

Also, there were state-wise skill gap study reports which included district-wise analyses prepared by private consultancy firms and research and academic institutions funded by NSDC. The recommendations and suggestions from these reports were not taken up for further updates and continuous monitoring both by the Union government's Ministries/Departments and the State /UT governments.

However, States like Tamil Nadu have been continuously updating the emerging skill gaps in key sectors to initiate appropriate policy actions to train the labour force and thereby effectively increasing efficiency and productivity to achieve higher economic growth. A skill gap study of December 2019 in Tamil Nadu found that the State requires 3.2 million additional skilled and semiskilled workers in areas like manufacturing, education, health and construction. But the current training capacity to fulfil the demand is only 52 per cent and thus there is a huge scope for further acceleration of the vocational sector in the State.

Indeed, it was strange to note that the Union Government did not bother to bring out a comprehensive report on the achievements and challenges faced by the implementations of the Skills India Mission during the last five years. On July 15, 2020, the Union Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MoSDE) reported that *"more than one crore youth joining the Skill India Mission every year, to meet demand of Skilled Workforce"*. The Prime Minister in his speech also mentioned that *"skill development of more than 5 crore people has been done"* since the launch of Skill India Mission on July 15, 2015.

However, the above numbers are just enrolment in different short-term courses and some are recognition of prior learning by providing certificates. The total number of candidates who completed the short-term courses and successfully got job placement is much less than the target set five years ago. Under the Skill India Mission, the flagship scheme is Pradhan Mantri Kaushal VikasYojana (PMKVY) which aims to provide skill training and job placement to one crore people within four years, i.e., 2016–2020. Also, the National Policy aims to create institutional capacity to train at least 300 million skilled people by 2022.

On February 2, 2020, MoSDE had reported in the LokSabha that since 2015 only 73.47 lakh persons were provided skill training in the country as on January 17, 2020. Out of these 73.47 lakh, only 32.34 lakh (44 percent) were given certificates for successful completion of short-term skill training and only 16.61 lakh (22.60 percent) were provided with job placements. The total

expenditure incurred for skill training was `5900 crore out of the total allocation of `12,000 crore. Though the Ministry has announced that till July 15, 2020, a total of 92 lakh people were trained across 37 sectors with 250 job roles, it did not provide how many were given certificates and received job placements in the industry.

When the current Prime Minister was the Chief Minister of the State of Gujarat he had a decentralised model with the vision and leadership for skill training for more than eight lakhs people in a short period and also provided employment opportunities including self-employment, especially for women in villages and small towns. He had a mission mode approach with clearly defined objectives to map the demand and potential opportunities in a decentralised manner to fulfil the aspirations of people. For this, Gujarat received the PM's Excellence Award for Skill Development in India during the UPA Government.

One of the systemic challenges for India's vocational education, training and skill development initiatives since 1988 has been the lack of synergy and synchronisation between the public policymakers in social sectors. The mainstream education and skill training were always looked at in silos by more than 20 Union Government Ministries and State government departments.

Nevertheless, with the avid for revolutionary communication technologies, children and youth need to be effectively sensitised at the school and community level so that we could get rid of the biases prevailing against learning of vocational skills. Some experts even suggest that we need to make vocational courses more attractive by adding glamour to it. If the technologies are used like the way they have been in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic, the vision to achieve skilled manpower would be feasible in the near future even with a bigger scale of quantity, quality and equity.

We need to break away from the structured perpetuating silos in social sector policies and focus on the web of skills through a decentralised manner in every sphere from kindergarten to university, thus enabling children and youth to get equipped and find opportunities anywhere in the world.

Chandrasekaran Balakrishnan is Research Fellow (Urban Eco-system and Skill Development) with CPPR. Views expressed are personal and need not reflect or represent the views of Centre for Public Policy Research.

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