

Publication: Economic Times Bangalore; Date: Sep 1, 2008; Section: Front Page; Page: 1



# Great leap forward in skill development

## Plan To Create 50 Cr Skilled Indians By '22

TK Arun NEW DELHI

INDIA Inc's talent crunch is a familiar story. So is India's large army of the unemployed and the unemployable. What is new is an ambitious scheme to give both stories a shared fairytale ending, by creating the world's single largest pool of skilled manpower — 50 crore skilled Indians by 2022. That number would be larger than the population of either Europe or the US that year.

Indian industry has been trying to enlarge the available pool of skills, with both CII and Ficci pitching in with varying degrees of vigour and efficacy. The Planning Commission came up with what it thought was a grand scheme, to set up 50,000 skill development centres over the Eleventh Five Year Plan 2007-12. The National Skill Development Council appointed by the prime minister, comprising experts like CK Prahalad, Nandan Nilekani, Rajendra Pawar, Teamlease's Manish Sabharwal, Sewa's Renana Jhabwala and Laila Tyabji, has come up with a game-changing proposal to create, within a short period of time, no less than two lakh skill development centres by making use of the existing stock of public educational institutions above the high school level as physical infrastructure, private enterprise, bank credit, budgetary outlays and tax breaks, besides philanthropy.

The boldness of the scheme's ambition parallels that of the Golden Quadrilateral national highways project and the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana announced by the previous NDA government.

When these schemes were launched, they looked like so much tall talk. Today, multi-axled trucks and tractors haul burgeoning Indian prosperity over these very real roads. **Potential to succeed**

THE skill development programme, too, has every potential to succeed, provided the political class buys into it, cutting across the federal divide, besides partisan ones.

Prime minister Manmohan Singh has written to all chief ministers, asking them to join in, doing two things. One, make available the buildings of higher educational institutions of the state for skill development programmes after regular class hours; two, form state level missions headed by the chief ministers themselves to co-ordinate the efforts of different government departments and agencies as well as involve local experts and representatives of different skill sectors. The letter went last Saturday.

High-minded exhortation goes only so far. The Centre knows this. So, out of the Rs 275,000 crore allocation for education in the 11th Plan (five times as much as in the Tenth Plan), Rs 31,000 crore has been allocated to skill development. States can hope to tap into these funds, to convert unemployable youth into productive workers. This is not all. The Union finance ministry has promoted a National Skill Development Corporation as a not-for-profit company. This, too, will channel funds to assorted skill development activities across the country.

But skill development is not a homogeneous activity. The shortage of a million nurses cannot be met by the efforts of those whose job is to train lathe operators or by computer-animators. Different sectors, different ministries, different companies and voluntary agencies must get involved, pool resources, dovetail activities into a shared operating infrastructure. Hence the importance of the third skills body set up by the Centre, in addition to the PM's council and the corporation: the National Skill Development Co-ordination Board, to be co-ordinated by the Planning Commission, and the proposed missions at the state level. Myriad ways of promoting skills have to be innovated, to meet the requirements of each sector, each state, each region's degree of development. These cannot be laid down in any central blueprint. But commitment of the political class, when combined with private initiative and administrative skills of the bureaucracy, can make skill development actually happen on the scale envisaged.

The skills development council has proposed two key principles that would ensure that the skills training undertaken would, indeed, be effective.

One is to funnel the funding to the trainee, rather than to the training institution. Training institutions would have to compete to attract would-be trainees endowed with scholarships/loans/vouchers/com pany sponsorships. Such competition would ensure quality of delivery. The other idea is bankability of the training. Various other ideas yet to be crystallised into policy include giving tax breaks for sponsoring skills training — much like those available now for one's own children's education.

The scheme is getting launched at the fag end of the present government's term. It can succeed only if the political class understands the urgent imperative of upgrading skills of India's large and growing young population, the largest for any country in the world. If they are empowered with knowledge and skills, they will power not just the Indian economy but the entire world.

[tk.arun@timesgroup.com](mailto:tk.arun@timesgroup.com)

