

SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Paucity of skilled workers is a major roadblock in India becoming a global economic powerhouse. This lack is instantly obvious when we compare the workmanship of our craftsmen and their commitment to work with their compatriots in a city like say New York or London. Be it a plumber or electrician or any other trade, the difference in the quality of work and the attitude towards work is distinctly visible. I remember a friend once telling me that if a plumber installs a faucet here (London) there would not be any complaint for 5 years but the same would not be the case in India. We can often hear people lamenting about 'Politics' as being the mother of all problems. Fortunately for us, 'Politics' also provides solutions to problems. This paper is an attempt to look at the problem of inadequacy of skilled workers in India from a political perspective. It analyses the situation to identify the factors which contribute to the problem of scarcity of skilled workers and what role politics has to play in this. Thereafter, it looks at the possibilities of finding solutions to the problems which have hampered the emergence of a base of skilled workers in our country.

Keywords: Skilled workers, Global Economy, Skill Development, Political Prospective.

Introduction

To explain how politics works, David Easton developed a model of a political system. Easton defined politics as 'authoritative allocation of values' which broadly constitutes the political process. This does not take place in a closed circuit; its ends are connected with the social process. This political system works on the basis of demand and supply. Allocation of values is made because there are corresponding demands from the society. The political system receives inputs from the environment in the form of demands and support; it produces outputs in the form of policies and decisions. The outputs flow back into the environment through a feedback mechanism, giving rise to fresh demands. Demands are the raw materials out of which finished products called decisions are manufactured.

In this paper, an effort is made to understand the problem of lack of skilled professionals in our country by exploring how our political system works. There are two aspects in this analysis. Firstly, we take a look at the nature of demands made in our political system and their relationship to skill development. Secondly, we try to decipher the attitudes of the decision

makers in our political system and how they affect the scenario of skill development in our country.

We have had a great tradition of skilled craftsmen in our country and there was a huge demand for the products made by them in the world market. According to various estimates, India had a share of roughly thirty percent of world trade at the time of beginning of colonial rule. During colonial rule, various crafts practiced in India declined for various reasons produced by the peculiar nature of the colonial economy. As a result people flocked to agriculture which became overburdened and led to the subsequent ruin and impoverishment of our country.

The British government in India had no incentive of changing this situation. Their only motive was to enrich themselves by exploitation of Indian economy and they limited their scope of activity only to the extent that it would aid and abet this process. Thus it was no surprise that even the education system which they developed was geared at producing clerks to facilitate the running of the colonial administration. Skill development was nowhere in their list of priorities. Thus the only respectable source of employment which emerged was the few government jobs which were open to Indians.

Unfortunately for us, the long shadow of the British colonial state continues to haunt us even after we became independent. Some critics even go to the extent of saying that what happened at independence was 'brown sahibs' taking over from 'whites sahibs' and essential nature of the state remained unchanged. The neglect towards development of human resources witnessed displayed by the colonial state has continued into independent India with some minor changes. Minor because some great institutions such as IIM's and IIT's did come up but it was too little to make a major impact considering the size and population of our country. Further the continued preference of people for a secure government job is also derived from the colonial experience.

The process of economic liberalization started to make a change in this situation, but so far success has been limited. Infact, the most serious factor limiting Indian economy from achieving its full potential is the lack of skilled professionals to drive forward the process of growth.

Due to the conditioning of our mindsets during the colonial rule, the only job worth doing and respected in society was when you were exercising government power. Even today, a Sub Inspector of Police would get more

respect among his village folks than a professor in a University. So deeply ingrained is this mindset that it has almost become a cultural thing. It is something like preference for a son in Indian society. We all know that it is absurd but changing it is not going to be an easy task.

As a result of this mindset, right from the time of getting independence from colonial rule, there was no demand from the general public on the political system to train and skill people and make them employable. Instead the focus was on capturing the maximum number of existing government jobs for your community. If you are unable to secure a government job then you are doomed and will have live the hard lowly life of a farmer. The demands for reservation in government jobs and more recently the clamour displayed by some communities to get themselves declared as backward castes to get benefit of caste based reservation are reflective of this mindset. Since there was no demand to skill people there was no pressure on the political system to do anything about the matter. Infact the quality of existing government infrastructure in the education sector has declined across the board. There was a time when a child from a poor family having studied in a government school could have hoped to do well in life but the same is no longer the case. On the other hand, the growing ambit of reservation in government sector employment and services points in the direction of a demand from the general public to which the political system is responding. Skill development is a requirement but it is not a priority for politicians and political parties because it would not win them elections.

This brings us to the second part of the problem, the politicians who wield power. What role do they have to play in this problem of lack of skill development in India.

Our political system is based on the model of a patron-client relationship. This again has its roots in our colonial history. Colonial State was structured as a 'mai-baap' state which would take care of the needs of people provided they recognized British sovereignty. Upon independence this role was taken over by the elites who took over power from the Britishers. Along with it came

the British mindset of ruling over people and the 'mai-baap' mentality. The notion of India becoming independent and establishing a government of the people for the people and by the people remained a notion only.

This patron client relationship is surviving and thriving even after almost seven decades of existence as a free country. How does this patron-client relationship operates. A politician comes to power by building a base of supporters by promising them benefits. He also has to establish that only he is capable of providing these benefits. Once in power, he has to maintain this base of support if he wants to continue in power. This is done by obliging people, who are significant for his objective of keeping his powerbase intact, by providing them with benefits derived from his position in power. Most of these benefits are in the form of financial incentives and subsidies doled out by the state. So if Modi is in power then Adani will benefit-and so goes the assumption. Another key element is depriving non-supporters of these benefits which are derived from his position in power. So JayPee would suffer now that Mayawati is out of power. And that is how political system works.

Now in this kind of a system, there is no incentive for the political class for doing something like enhancing skills of people to make them more employable. Apart from the fact that it is not going to win elections, there is another reason which strongly limits such kind of activity. If people become capable and skilled as in this case, then their dependency of the political master would end. With that would end the reign of the political class which is clinging to power by distributing benefits. Status quo suits the political elites and their cronies. It is another matter that the whole country would benefit if human resources are developed in a comprehensive manner. So it is a question of choosing between immediate gains and long term benefits for the political class.

To sum up, real movement in the direction of skill development will take place when the mindsets of people are changed. We need to create an environment where all kinds of work are respected and people start taking pride

in their work and the quality of work they are doing. Today, a farmers son would not want to become a farmer. This situation need to be changed by making, in this case, farming both respected and remunerative. Once this attitude shift takes place, it would lead to a demand on the political system to devote resources towards skill development and improving the quality of human resources. Politicians are focused on what would win them power, and not what is good for the people. Also the people themselves do not know what is good for them. They are happy with the crumbs thrown at them and really do not know how their lives would be transformed if their full potential is developed.

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