

## BACK OF THE BOOK

# Portal Of Hope



**Writing a new chapter:** Laxmi B., a LABS "graduate", now trains other underprivileged youngsters in Hyderabad

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**I**N AUGUST 2001, WHEN LAXMI B. (she wouldn't spell out the initial) turned 18, there was little to cheer. Daughter of modestly-employed parents (her father worked at a printing press and her mother packed cartons in a pharmaceuticals company), Laxmi had just been forced to drop out of high school and help make

ends meet. But what kind of a job could a high-school dropout hope to get? A little bit of seeking and asking led her to the Hyderabad-based Dr Reddy's Foundation, which was running a Livelihood Advancement Business School (LABS). She applied to the school, took the aptitude test, and got selected for training in customer relationship and sales.

After three months of training, Laxmi found herself a job with Ion Exchange as a sales trainee for direct marketing of the company's water purification system. By the end of eight months, she was already one of the top performers and winner of the Chairman's medal. Today, Laxmi is back at LABS, not to train but as a centre coordinator



In the six years since it was set up, Dr Reddy's Foundations' Livelihood Advancement Business School has helped prepare some 35,000 underprivileged youngsters for entry-level jobs. BY E. KUMAR SHARMA

### LABS' MENTOR STRATEGY

Central to the school's operations is its strategy of involving volunteer mentors. They are of four types:

- **Student Volunteer Mentors:** Normally para-professionals, management and social work students who can spend significant periods of time on a regular basis to work with the students and mentor them through their individual career learning curves.
- **Faculty Vounteer Mentors:** Usually professionals (could be from various companies or government) who can participate in curriculum development, design, quality delivery and monitoring.
- **Network Mentors:** Typically very senior officials in business, NGOs and government bodies.
- **Resource Mentors:** People with social and professional network connections whose opinions and references could open doors for potential resources.

responsible for one of LABS' six centres in Hyderabad. Apart from her administrative responsibilities, Laxmi finds time to teach and train many other underprivileged youngsters like herself. It's a job that fetches her between Rs 7,000 and Rs 10,000 a month, but countless more by way of satisfaction.

Laxmi, needless to say, isn't the

only one to have walked through the portals of LABS and find her life changed. There's Madhavi, a carpenter's daughter, who today is a data entry operator at Bodhtree, a Hyderabad-based IT consulting and product development company; Subhashini, a 10th-grade pass whose troubled marriage forced her to stand on her own feet, who is a "data entry specialist". Then, there's Hashamul Hafiz, son of a daily wage labourer, who runs his own electrical repairs shop, making

women across a wide variety of industries, ranging from financial services to retail to ITES to marketing. K. Anji Reddy, Chairman of city-based Dr Reddy's Labs and chief patron of the eponymous foundation, has set an ambitious target for the school: To create one million livelihoods by 2010. Says Satish Reddy, MD and COO of Dr Reddy's Labs and the Chairman's son: "We are investing in the future and now want to take it to the next level."

LABS, which calls itself a

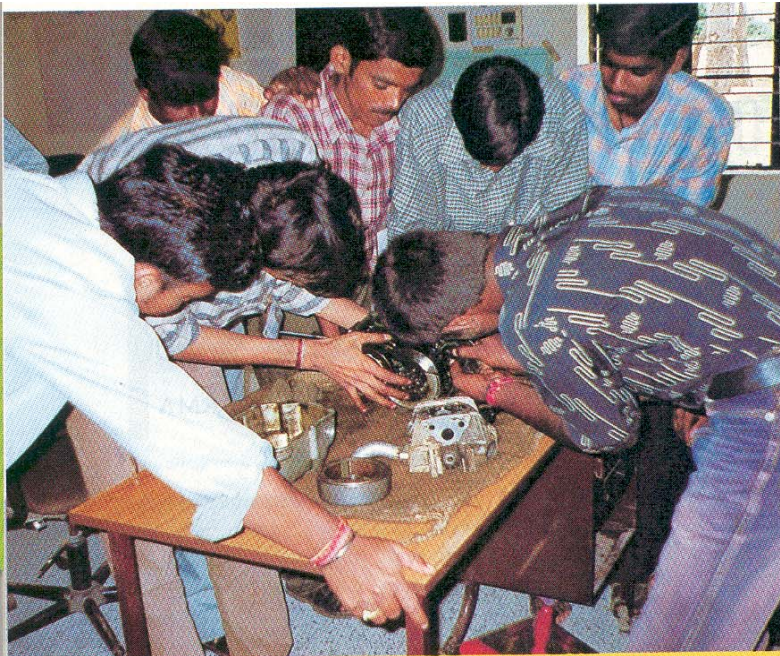


**Taking note:** A LABS roadshow in Bangalore draws many hopefuls

Rs 7,000 a month. In fact, in the last six years that it has been around, LABS, which trains people for about 150 entry-level positions (see *Jobs On Offer*), has been able to create livelihood opportunities for some 35,000 underprivileged men and

business school because it trains people for the workplace, was first rolled out in 1999, two years after it had been in place as a programme for street children that taught them how to make candles, pickles and *papads*, among other things. The





**A headstart:** Students are trained in workshops like this one in Karwar

## JOBS ON OFFER

There are six broad areas where a LABS "graduate" can find a job.

- **Science & Technology:**  
From data entry operators to drivers to animators.
- **Health & Healthcare Services:**  
From hospital health workers to hospital administrative assistants.
- **Hospitality Services:**  
From housekeeping to waiters to captains to front office assistants.
- **Finance, Business & Marketing:**  
From billing clerks to tele-marketing executives to techno-marketers and route agents.
- **Communication, Arts & Humanities:**  
From assistant cameramen to graphics designers to call centre executives.
- **Environment Resource Management:**  
From micro-entrepreneurs in sanitation to pest controllers and vermi-composting.

latter model didn't work because, as the Foundation realised, the emphasis was on employment and not employability. Then, around 2000, some of the Foundation's volunteers suggested that it try a different tack. Instead of training people for cottage industries, the focus would be on the services sector, which was beginning to boom. Thus, training modules for data entry operators, animators and "route agents" were created. The idea of route agents actually came from a Pepsi executive volunteer, who suggested that youngsters capable of driving their own vehicle could double up as sales people for companies like Pepsi.

The response to LABS from companies has been enthusiastic. Color Chips India, a Hyderabad-based animation firm, has not just helped train 22 such animation artists, but also hired them on its payrolls. Pantaloon Retail has, in the last three years, hired around 300 LABS-trained people for its various stores. Indian Hotels and ITC (Kakatiya Sheraton hotel) have hired close to 80 people each. Then, Cafe Coffee

Day has taken on close to 15 LABS graduates as customer service executives for its outlets in the state.

### Spreading The Good Work

Interestingly enough, the LABS initiative of Dr Reddy's has attracted the attention of others in the corporate world. Some are already working with it, while some others have expressed interest in using LABS to further their CSR (corporate social responsibility) initiatives. Some corporates actively involved include TVS, Murugappa, Rane, Fair and Lovely foundation of HLL, the Azim Premji Foundation and Microsoft. Then, there are governmental and non-governmental partners, and bilateral and multilateral agencies like the European Commission and USAID that are helping. In Andhra Pradesh, for instance, LABS works with AP Urban Services for Poor (in a programme named Upadhi) and the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (a project funded by the World Bank). Says Nazeen Koonda, Communication Coordinator at Dr Reddy's Foundation: "LABS is now

being recognised as a source for trained entry-level manpower and corporates are now increasingly approaching LABS for customised training to suit their requirements."

Today, LABS operates out of 84 centres spread across 11 states in India (it even has a presence in Vietnam and Sri Lanka). By the end of this year, it hopes to be present in 16 states across the country, including J&K, and three new countries (Indonesia, Nepal and China).

So far, the Foundation has invested close to Rs 8 crore on the LABS initiative. Those involved with the initiative do not expect money to be a constraint going forward, as the flagship programme enjoys unrestricted educational grant from the Foundation. That apart, the partnership model allows LABS initiative to be taken to wherever there's a willing partner. This year alone, 100,000 youngsters would be trained at various LABS initiative centres in India. In a country with around 36 million unemployed, that may not look like a big enough dent. But it's a dent nevertheless.