

Jobs over DEGREES

The right mix of resources, support and training will transform the youth of India and create livelihood across the spectrum

— By **G.V. PRASAD**

Even after years of Independence, we have lived with this myth that a higher educational qualification ensures employability. Today, the country is cluttered with all kinds of colleges and institutions, many with questionable credentials. Our education system churns out lakhs of graduates, post-graduates and even PhDs. Regretfully, not many have had meaningful employment, if employed at all. The curriculum is often obsolete, the quality of faculty is under-par and the overall employment-readiness low. Even worse is the alarming amount of school dropouts, most forced by economic constraints. The government-sponsored schemes,

though well intentioned, have had immense implementation gaps. With a burgeoning young population, we need to think differently; quickly and very substantially. If not addressed on a priority basis, it could have extreme implications.

We must acknowledge that employment and livelihood must get de-coupled from formal higher education. The reality is that most possible employment opportunities neither exist in the organised sector nor need graduates in such large numbers. We must look at greater vocational training and skills building that will create livelihood across the spectrum. An elaborate National Sample Survey (NSS) conducted in 1999-2000 estimated India's labour force at 406 million people with almost 93 per cent in the informal or unorganised sector. Today, even after

a decade, the situation would be no different. The country needs to dramatically augment its education system with more skill and vocation-based training. Even as we see unprecedented economic activity and infrastructure development, we lack basic skills to sustain the progress. It is obvious that there is a significant lack of the necessary skills sets, most of them not needing higher education of the classical kind. And yet we have so many unemployed youth, armed with the misleading 'higher education' qualifications, waiting for jobs commensurate to their degrees.

The paradox is thus of our own making. The result is perpetuation of poverty, right in the midst of substantial opportunity. The huge pool of school dropouts, made worse each year, is often condemned to remain economically disadvan-

Each year, about 400 people do their masters in public health in India. But if India is to put even a single public health worker in each village, we will need five lakh trained people just to deliver public health programmes and messages.



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tagged, unable to change their lives for the better. To me, this is a huge national opportunity. We must indeed link education to skills and livelihood. This situation requires us to equip this huge group with vocational skills. With the right mix of resources, support and training, the youth today can be enabled to solve their own problems. But this needs to be a national priority, commonly shared by the Government, industry and civil society.

In the past 10 years, we have been taking baby steps in this direction. Livelihood Advancement Business School (LABS) of the Dr Reddy's Foundation helps the youth acquire vocational and soft skills responsive to the individual's emotional, livelihood and developmental needs. LABS trains youth across a wide variety of options, from automobile mechanics to hospitality, customer relations to patient assistance and machine operations to BPO services. It has served the local industries and markets by meeting emerging skill needs in the new economy. These short-duration vocational courses include practical sessions, on-the-job training, assignments and guest lectures. Other training inputs taught at LABS include essential life skills, communicative English, and a work readiness module that prepares them to handle responsibilities at the workplace. Various Central government and state government schemes have partnered with us in funding many of these programmes.

I see a huge opportunity for simple and effective programmes like LABS in rural India which is faced with lean and seasonal agricultural income leading to large-scale migration to the already overpopulated urban centres. Most of the youth who go to work at construction sites, small work-

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shops and other commercial establishments in small towns earn their livelihood as unskilled workers. The LABS model can be modified to the needs of these underemployed and unskilled workers to enable them to learn certain skills and seek work in the same markets as better skilled workers. We must teach skills that can make the rural youth acquire the means to generate livelihood. The construction industry would, for one, need a huge army of skilled hands as the focus on infrastructure development will play out in the days to come. As rural India and smaller towns develop, there will be a new wave of demand for newer skills. We must prepare ourselves for it.

Given that the target youth are the dropouts and the marginalised, LABS is a pioneering public-private partnership model, involving the government, corporate sectors, local communities and individuals. Inclusive thinking and collective action drive the creation of sustainable livelihood. It inspires hope and opportunity where none exist. Social audits have proved that it has led to larger benefits, such as reduced indebtedness, increased local area spend, improved education levels and reduced gender inequality. LABS has helped transform around two lakh lives. Still, it remains a drop in the ocean of millions of under-leveraged youth. And yet I remain optimistic. Together we can transform our youth. We owe it to our collective and sustainable future.



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