

Skill Development in Tripura - Challenges and Opportunities

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Food, Cloth and Shelter are the three basic primary needs of a human being. There has been significant improvement in meeting these needs as a result of various planned development measures taken in the past decades since Independence. Consequently, the development process has shifted to the next phase relating to development of human resource, as advocated by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. Human resource development has three aspects viz. Education, Healthcare and Livelihood. These three are interrelated; however livelihood opportunity for earning a decent income is of critical importance for living a life with dignity. Once one has adequate financial resources, the choice to avail education and healthcare facilities widens covering both public and private sources. Accordingly, acquisition of necessary skill, which is critical for getting livelihood, has

emerged as a key element of development all over the world.

With economic development, the structure and nature of economy has been undergoing continuous changes. Contribution of agriculture to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been declining and that of services sector has been increasing. Transition of agrarian economy to industrial economy is accompanied by urbanization and migration from rural to urban areas in search of employment. In India, adoption of the new economic policy in the 1990s based on liberalization and privatization for meeting the challenges of globalization brought about major changes in the economy in the past two decades. Importance of Public sector got reduced and the role of Government got revised to being a regulator of private sector dealing with production and commercial activities. As a result, the scope for direct employment under the Government has been reducing and same under the private sector has been expanding. These changes have impact on the scope for livelihood and skill development as well. It is estimated that there are about 51.1 crores workers including 3.8 crores part time workers and 3.9 crores elderly workers in the country, of whom 22% are women. This figure is growing at the rate of 1.5% per year adding about 55 lakhs persons to the workforce annually. The poor household cannot afford to remain completely unemployed and have to for under employment by taking up any work that is available to survive. In the past decades, employment in the organized sectors has increased faster than the un-organized sectors and workers have moved to better quality jobs, from informal to formal, casual to regular and un-organized to organized sectors along with increase in the wage virtually for all categories of workers. Notwithstanding this, the unemployment has increased in the country. Employment in the organized sector accounts for only 17% of the total employment. About 43% are employed in the low productivity jobs in the agriculture sector with high incidence of under-employment and low wages. Large section of labour force, which has relatively low level of education are not employable in the skilled job in the services sector. Giving a push to the low skill jobs in the manufacturing sector will help them in migrating out of agriculture. Simultaneously, it is necessary to improve the quality of education along with skill development for tackling the situation.

Magnitude of the unemployment problem faced in the country is evident from a recent case of Uttar Pradesh. In response to an advertisement (issued in September, 2015) for recruitment of 368 Peons in the government with basic educational qualification Secondary School and ability to ride bicycle, over 23 lakh applications were received which included 250 PhDs, 25,000 postgraduates and 1,50,000 graduates. Similar problems have been faced in other States as well. Recent agitations by Gujjars in Rajstan, Patels in Gujarat and Jats in Haryana seeking inclusion in the lists for reservation in employment under the government reflect the magnitude of unemployment problem on the one hand and limitations of job opportunity in the open market on the other. It is necessary to appreciate that the educated youth look for employment for livelihood. There is expectation from parents and relatives as well, who have funded their education out of own scarce resources or by taking loan. Delay and uncertainty over getting suitable employment leads to frustration, which in turn gives rise to anger, social unrest and at times lead to violence. It is necessary to provide market linked skill to the youth for getting employment for tackling this situation on an urgent basis.

Skill is defined as the ability and or capacity, which is acquired through deliberate, systematic and sustained effort to smoothly and adaptively carryout complex activities or job functions. Skilling is broadly of three types relating to (i) Ideas (cognitive skills), (ii) things (technical skills) (iii) People (interpersonal skills).

So far as the employment situation of Tripura, a state of the North eastern region, is concerned 6,62,756 persons seeking employment were registered in the Live Register in various Employment Exchanges (March, 2015). This figure included both unemployed and under-employed, who are seeking better employment opportunity. The State has an excellent record in provision of employment under the rural employment programme (MGNREGA). 511.76 lakh mandays were generated during 2014-15, which works out to 88 mandays per household, one of the highest in the country. It is noteworthy that notwithstanding its limited resource base, the State has been implementing a similar programme. "Tripura Urban Employment Programme (TUEP)" with its own fund for providing employment in the urban areas. Rs 60 crore was spent and 27.03 lakh mandays were generated under TUEP during 2014-15. Due to various factors typical to the Northeastern region, setting up of industries in Tripura has been slow and 61,592 persons were employed in various industrial establishments during 2014-15.

Though small in size, the state has several strengths like peace loving people, high literacy, good soil and high rainfall, favorable law and order, good and transparent governance, which has been widely appreciated all over the country. Position of physical infrastructure in government schools and colleges has also improved in the last decade. It is one of the few States, which is surplus in power. The rate of economic growth and per capita income has increased considerably and come at par with the national average and several mainland States with large resource base. This has led to creation of a market within the State itself, which can be exploited for employment of the youth. So far as weaknesses are concerned, the private entrepreneurship is in a nascent state in the State because of various reasons. It will take some time to improve. The problem of geographical isolation will be solved to a considerable extent shortly with the State getting connected with the mainland by broad-gauge railway line. Thus the main challenge, which needs to be tackled, relates to the mindset of the unemployed youth who are looking for government job. In view of the high number of employees under the government and high percentage of salary related expenditure, it will be extremely difficult to create more jobs under the government. The opinion makers in the society, in the government,

private, PRI bodies, media and civil society- all need to counsel the youth about this hard reality along with advice for acquiring quality skill and exploiting the job opportunity in the open market outside the government. Publicizing success stories covering achievements of the youths, who have run their own private enterprises successfully and earning a decent income in the private sector, will be of help in this context.

Skill development of Tripura has to be based on the need and ground realities of the state. It is noteworthy that the state economy has been growing steadily and state per capita income (Rs.71,666 /- in 2014-15) has shown significant increase over the past and come at par with the national average. As a result, a good market has been created within the state itself. Primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy contributed 32%, 17% and 51% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) respectively during 2014-15. The strategy for skill development in Tripura is required to be carved out based on these parameters.

Tripura is endowed with good soil and high rainfall. While major parts of the country in the northern and western India are facing severe drought and acute scarcity of drinking water, Tripura has been blessed with plenty and long spell of monsoon from April to September. The tribal and non-tribal farmers of the State are hard working and have excellent skill. This strength is required to be nourished and supported with assistance for growing high value cash crops in general and vegetable and fruits in particular. After meeting requirement of the State, these produces can also be sent outside the States to the mainland. At present sizable stock of apple and other fruits are being brought from outside. Papaya, other fruits and vegetables can be grown as per the agro-climatic factors like the queen variety of pineapple on a large scale which will generate huge employment opportunity and give a boost to the economy. As soon as the State gets connected by broad-gauge railway, surplus fruits and vegetables produced within the state can be packed and sent outside. This would ensure the farmers to getting a better price for their produce.

Production of milk and other dairy products has similar potential. Requirement of milk for nutrition of the infants and children and for making sweets provides a growing market for these products. Production and processing of milk can be taken up on a large scale with provision of required skill and support.

Fishery, Poultry as well as Duck, Goat and Pig rearing offer similar opportunity for meeting the internal requirement of the State. With the increase in per capita income, the requirement of fish, meat, egg, has been increasing continuously, which offer ready market for these products within the State.

The concerned administrative departments are required to streamline and impart quality skill along with entrepreneur development for exploiting this potential. Several institutions of higher education relating to these sectors have been set up in the state namely the State Agriculture College, State Veterinary Science College, and Central Fishery College. These institutions have a vital role in promoting entrepreneurs as well as skill development for taking up production with appropriate technology on scientific lines on a commercial scale.

The secondary sector, including construction, offers another huge potential. Construction activities, both in the public and private sectors, are on the rise and it is estimated that over Rs 3,000 crores

worth projects relating to National Highway, Railway, Border Roads, buildings are under execution in the State. Construction of private dwelling houses is another big area. There is huge requirement of technical manpower viz. masons, plumbers, carpenters, drivers for driving heavy vehicles for supporting these activities. At present, skilled labourers for such construction have to be brought from outside the State. Non-availability of skilled labour has been often quoted as one of the reasons behind delay in execution of projects in the state. The State has one National Institute of Technology, a Tripura Institute of Technology, two Universities, number of Polytechnics and Industrial Training Institutes offering courses in Civil Engineering. One Construction Worker's Training Institute has been set up at Khumulwng, which has taken up for skilling of masons and rod binders. Setting up similar institutes in each of the other seven districts would help in scaling up skilling in construction sector. Such training can be conducted at block and subdivision level, which will be easier and less costly as the trainees can commute from their houses or make own arrangement for stay. Such short duration trainings can be held in existing accommodation available at block level by evolving suitable synergy in functioning of the concerned organizations for provision of quality skill as per requirement. Civil society organizations like the Institution of Engineers and retired Engineers can play an important role in supporting these skilling activities.

On account of various factors typical to the Northeastern region namely geographical isolation, lack of infrastructure, lack of market, limitation of raw materials, industrial activities of the State is limited to rubber, cane and bamboo based and few others industries. One apparel and garment centre has been set up at Bodhjunnagar recently by the Ministry of Textiles. It has three units of 100 machines each, two of which are being used for commercial production and one for skilling. The production units are self-contained and are being used by a startup entrepreneur for commercial production. Setting up similar units in other production activities will promote entrepreneurship and can be used both for skilling and for production and sale of on commercial scale by providing forward linkages. Production of furniture and other household items out of bamboo has good market both inside and outside the State. Similarly production of ceramic and pottery items, fired by gas burners with high-end technology, has good market with scope for employment and income. It is expected that with availability of power and the State getting connected by broad-gauge railway line, the industrial and manufacturing activities will get a big boost in the coming years. This would require skill manpower for which planning and execution needs to be done in advance.

As evident from its contribution to GDP, the tertiary sector offers the highest potential for employment generation. Rapid urbanization, as evident from the growth of Agartala town, has been offering similar opportunity for employment. Skilling needs of this sector cover several areas. Repair and maintenance of domestic electrical appliances, agriculture equipment, water pump, etc. has huge potential.

With increase in the income and improvement in the road network, the number of two, three and four wheelers vehicles, has increased significantly within the State. Provision of skill for repair and maintenance of such vehicles has another big opportunity. The skill development programme can be organized in liaison with the authorized sale agent of the vehicles by evolving a "win-win" situation – which will provide better service to the consumer (vehicle owner) on the one hand and an edge over their competitors to the vehicle sellers as well on the other hand.

Information Technology based skilling as data entry operators, workers in call centers, rendering services in government departments, Panchayat has got good potential within the State. The IT department along with the National Institute for Electronics and Information Technology (NIELIT) (which has set up its new office at Bodhjungnagar recently) needs to standardize and scale this up.

Preparation of food as per the changing taste and higher purchasing capacity of people is another area. A casual visit to the Agartala city in the evening indicates the wide range of fast food being served and the scope for this activity. Preparation and serving of food in the hospitality industry offers considerable scope for skilling and employment.

Because of good climate and greenery, the nature based tourism has excellent potential in the State. Promotion of wildlife, nature and rural tourism can generate enormous employment and income opportunities. Development of suitable facilities, packaging and advertisement for attracting tourists to spend two to three nights in Tripura would attract large number of tourists from Kolkata, Delhi and other metros. This will give a big boost to skilling, employment and income generation. Concerned administrative department along with the organizations dealing with such subjects like the NB Institute of Rural Technology (working in the area) can take up skilling and entrepreneurship development of the purpose.

The process for skill development is nothing new and has been continuing for decades. It is necessary is to learn from the experience of the past and reorient the strategy for capitalizing the strengths and overcoming the shortcomings. In this context, it would be necessary to give particular attention to the following:

- Skill development would be meaningful only if it is linked with market. As such, the prevailing and emerging markets both within and outside the State are required to be carefully studied, assessed for designing the skill development programme accordingly on a dynamic basis.
- Today we are living in a competitive world and any producer has to compete with others for sale of goods and services. In the market, the consumer is the king and the producer has to make goods on services as per his/her satisfaction. Quality and competitive price are extremely important in the skill development as well as starting and running any commercial venture.
- Skilling process is only the first step and is required to be supported by provision of adequate loan for acquisition of the assets and working capital. The line department, skilling organization and financial institutions have to take a people friendly approach and extend all required facilities to the entrepreneur.
- Self Help Group (SHG) often start production of mushrooms and other consumables but it often fail to scale up as marketing linkages could not be established. As such entrepreneur development should be given as much importance as skilling of primary producers. The entrepreneur should be trained and assisted for working as aggregator and the link between the producers and the market for continuing the production and marketing on a regular basis. The SHG and cooperation of primary producer can also perform this role with dedicated leadership.

- In order to ensure quality of skilling, the guidelines laid down by the National Skill Development Council and the Sector Skill Councils should be followed scrupulously. The syllabus, hour of study, practical work, equipment, building, classroom, trainer, examination and certification on completion of the programmes should be standardized as per the National Skill Development Framework guidelines. Contents of the ongoing skilling programmes need to be carefully examined and suitably revised for bringing it at par with the general guidelines.
- Achievement of youths, who have achieved excellence in the field of skill development and running start up enterprises, should be recognized and publicized as role models for other youths.

In the recent decades, Tripura has created history in controlling insurgency, which has attracted attention and applause at the national level as a case study for other States. This arduous task was possible by hard and sustained efforts of the State and Central Police and Para Military Forces with active support of the peace loving people, concerned government departments and people's representatives. Another similar success has been in the field of literacy and achieving the rare status of the highest literate State in the country. Concerned government departments, representatives of the three-tier PR institutions with active co-operation of all the stake holders have made it possible. It is hoped that skill development and providing employment to the unemployed youth will come up similar lines involving all concerned Central and State departments, training institutions, NGOs dealing with training, private training providers and other agencies dealing with provision of forward and backward linkages to the trained youth for starting and running their own enterprises. Such action no doubt will make the State proud of another rare achievement in tackling one of the most important and difficult problems faced by the country today.