

Shyamal Majumdar: Transforming ITIs

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The Budget proposal to upgrade ITIs to train workers in specific skills should help meet industry demand.

The Budget proposal to upgrade around 1,400 government-run Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) to Centres of Excellence in specific trades and skills is good news for the country's vocational training infrastructure. What's even better is the decision to give these ITIs academic and financial autonomy.

Both are critical for the survival of ITIs in the country. But the focus on specific trades and skills is particularly important. A survey conducted by apex industry chamber Ficci recently showed that contrary to the general perception, the physical infrastructure in the country's ITIs wasn't so much a problem. Even then, more than half of the ITIs reported underutilisation of seats, indicating that the basic industrial trades offered by these institutes are becoming increasingly unattractive for their limited scope in terms of creating job opportunities. Also, as against 107 trades that have been notified by the government, the maximum trades that any ITI offered were just 38. This reflects the inability of the ITIs to ramp up their scale and offer new and more market-oriented courses.

A Tata Institute of Social Sciences study also highlights the problem of ITIs keeping pace with the changing times. It quoted employers as saying that though the need for multi-skilling is increasing, training in multi-skilling is not keeping pace with the needs of industry. Most ITI trades focused on a single trade, which was not what industry required any more: a mere fitter or a turner is a misfit in the changing industrial setup. While Centres of Excellence have been set up by some ITIs for multi-skilling, industry feels that the initiative has come five years too late. Even in places where the Centres have been set up, there were information gaps as most employers did not know that such training had begun.

And as RBI Deputy Governor Rakesh Mohan said in one of his recent speeches: In India, there are 175 defined trades that can be subject to organised training. In a country like Germany, there are 2,500 such defined trades and occupations, each with its organised training syllabi, training certification, and availability of training institutions. The famed German vocational training system involves a very complex web of interaction between the federal government, state governments, local chambers of commerce, and firms that fund and take on the trainees.

Essentially, this means public-private partnerships. Extensive industry participation at the local level is a must so that the training imparted is seen as relevant by prospective employers. Also the selected institutes chosen for joint management with industry should be converted into autonomous bodies receiving government funds with a management structure in which industry representatives can be formally inducted on the governing boards, and the institutions are also given sufficient autonomy to become effectively board managed.

Employers feel that the Central government should completely withdraw from delivery of vocational training services and should foster autonomous professional bodies that give recognition to training institutes by declaring them as eligible training providers. The government's role should be only one of monitoring the institutions that set up standards of training, and evaluating and assigning rating to the private training establishments.

However, what is heartening is that despite the shortcomings, some of the ITIs have gone off the beaten track already. For instance, ITI Aundh realised that true autonomy would come only when it depended less on the state government for funds and when it has an answer to industry's complaints about a disconnect between the skills imparted in the ITIs and the skills demanded in

the market. Solution: the institute has gone in for a strong linkage with industry. Instead of trying to be a mass producer of technically-trained manpower, it decided to focus on the automobile industry in Pune.

It also decided to turn the functioning of ITIs radically — a specific course curriculum was prepared and sent to the companies for verification and comments. The comments were incorporated into the curriculum to strengthen the industry linkage. The ITI also went in for joint ventures with industry. For instance, it organises non-CFC refrigerator training programmes all over Maharashtra in association with Hidecore and National Chemical Laboratory. So far, it has provided training to over 2,000 trainees under the programme.

There are many other such examples. In People's Education Society College of Engineering, Aurangabad, students in their fourth year of study do a sponsored project with companies such as Crompton Greaves, Johnson & Johnson and so on. The ITI in Nagpur has also made a specific trade as a pedestal for industry linkage and has tied up with Mahindra, while the Government Polytechnic College in Nagpur and Institute of Hotel Management in Aurangabad continuously change their course contents according to industry demands. The latest Budget should facilitate creation of more such institutes.