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Forecasts for a job-rich India

CRYSTAL BALL GAZING If India wants its abilities to dovetail with the needs of the market, it will have to mould itself in line with the dynamic present, not the static past



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In the early 1980s on the streets of Delhi, a little-known company with an institute-sounding name, NIIT, advertised for students, talking about the future potential of an industry called software. Computers were then hardly in vogue in India, with IBM having been unceremoniously thrown out by the government in 1977. HCL, one of those companies that tried to replace IBM as a computer maker, parented NIIT. Yet, it was only a decade later that most of India woke up to the industry. Tentative beginnings were such that software experts at HCL and NIIT were then doing stuff that future giants such as Oracle and SAP were doing at the same time.

TOMORROW
Rajat Chauhan on how to make India a fitter and healthier nation

What India lacked then was two things: foresight and ambition. Typewriters gave way to computers, with old jobs fading and new careers springing up. The challenge for India now is to spot the future sunrise industries while shedding baggage of the past.

To a good extent, the dramatic informalisation of skilling initiatives under the Skill India mission does reflect a positive change from the moribund system of formal education, but the world has changed so much, that it may be desirable to find even newer grounds.

Schemes such as Make in India smell of the same old dreams: Build infrastructure, create factory jobs, and be like the China of the 1990s or US of the mid-20th century. Things, however, seem to have moved on in the larger world. That is where future-gazing and future-readiness may be key performance areas for policy-makers, corporate strategists and entrepreneurs.

Increasingly, there is focus on creativity across a set of industries. This would require a mindset that goes beyond the narrow "skill" approach. There is no doubt that skills will generate higher

wage jobs but they will still be "McJobs" associated with assembly lines.

Can India look beyond that? It probably can and should. Recent studies have shown that nations that have strong English-language capabilities are more likely to attract research and development investments. Now, if India, aided by science education and English, leapfrogs into cutting-edge innovations, does it need a different approach in deciding where public investments should go and skills should be built? Can India the global R&D hub get the better of India the manufacturing hub? New areas beckon. Electric cars, genomics, robotics, renewable energy and big data analytics are examples of activities or industries in which economic paradigm shifts would render obsolescent some of the old industries.

Dovetailing emerging demand with supply of skills requires calibration at many levels. There may be a requirement for a multiplexing of educational qualifications with attributes such as design thinking, creativity and flexible management styles.

We live in an age where a huge amount of self-service skilling will happen through the Internet and videos. Web ventures such as Lynda.com, Coursera, Udacity and Khan Academy are redefining education — both at the basic and mid-career level. Public policy makers and administrators need to "recede and facilitate" rather than "build and control" in a framework where entrepreneurial ferment seems strong. NIIT's former research head Sugata Mitra used to speak of a "just-in-time" system of education that would help flexible learning suited to emerging jobs. Can India's public policy rise to such a challenge?

At a fundamental level, climate change, management of urban pressures and universal healthcare initiatives may in themselves generate "socially oriented" jobs by the millions. These may even be more productive than the fabled factory jobs.

Who knows, Swachh Bharat may spell more jobs than "Make in India!"

The future is not something easy to predict on the basis of what others might have done in the past. Its contours must be spotted in the tectonic shifts of a dynamic world.

Forecasting skills may be, in that sense, the mother of all skills.

HT-Ipsos Connect Survey

INCREASING (BRIGHT)NESS

The government wants to buttress India's economic growth and the Make in India campaign by leapfrogging to the 50th position on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index. We check what people feel can be done to forge ahead

JOBS NEEDED*
Jobs are needed for 120 mn people, who will enter the workforce in the next 10 yrs

- 55% 55% respondents said that the govt needs to eliminate delay and boost activity in the infra sector in order create more jobs. This was followed by giving tax incentives to cos to boost output at 52%
- 44% 44% felt incentives to labour incentive sectors and building matching skill-sets can help spur employment
- 37% 37% said reducing the cost of doing business is the key factor that can help create more jobs

LAND AND LABOUR KEY
Reforms have been a key plank of this govt, and it will need to keep going

- 53% 53% of those surveyed said simplifying land acquisition and labour laws are the reforms govt should undertake immediately
- 16% 16% respondents said expanding the judiciary should be the first reform measure
- 15% 15% said implementation of Goods and Services Tax should be done first

FOOD PRICE RIDDLE
Food prices have risen steadily, despite overall inflation being low

- 42% 42% said that hoarding and failure of monsoon were behind rising food prices
- 26% 26% attributed the price rise to the fall in the rupee's value
- 22% 22% said increase in income, which was pushing up demand, was to be blamed

CHEAPER LOANS
RBI has cut rates, but they would need to be passed on

- 32% 32% said lower interest rates were most important to sustain economic revival
- 27% 27% said that more tax breaks was the key factor to keep up growth
- 25% 25% thought reversal of adversarial tax laws can help do the same

METHODOLOGY: The survey was conducted in 12 Indian cities divided into two groups: Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Delhi (Metros); and Jaipur, Lucknow, Patna, Kochi, Ahmedabad, Pune (Tier 1). A total of 2,036 respondents over 18 yrs were surveyed from Nov 5-11 and 54% respondents were male. All ratios are a percentage of the total sample. *Respondents were allowed to choose more than one option