

How NIIT and others pioneered computer training

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The lowest literacy rate was recorded in Andhra Pradesh with 66.4 percent. (Image: PTI)

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The courses caught the fancy of many young people looking for something to supplement degrees which weren't leading to too many jobs. Doing computers suddenly replaced taking French or German lessons as the go-to activity to keep disapproving parents at bay.

The effort was in earnest but the infrastructure on the ground was a bit thin. Often the institute itself had few or even no computers and all the teaching was done using chalk and a blackboard.

Much like a biology lesson, the first few classes comprised identifying the various parts of a computer. Here's the floppy drive, this is the keyboard, the monitor and of course the central processing unit (CPU). If all this sounds too basic today bear in mind that many of those early learners had never actually seen a personal computer, then priced at a princely Rs 25,000 or more.

This was the 80s, still some time to go before liberalisation released the country from much of its socialist era baggage. Fearing job losses, bank unions were up in arms against the Rajiv Gandhi government's plans to introduce computerisation of some of their functions.

Still grappling with crippling power shortages and phones that weren't available or didn't work when they were, computers were deemed a luxury by all but the most nerdy. In 1985, one year after the first personal computer was launched in the country by Minicomp, sales of hardware in the country totaled just \$50 million.

Predictably, the leaders of this push into private computer training took a lot of stick initially, not very different from what some of today's start-ups are facing. With the country's IT industry in a very nascent stage, it was believed that these courses were mere money spinners for the companies and most of the students would be hard pressed to get any jobs. Some of the programs were creatively titled to imply that these were formal degree programs though, lacking necessary sanction from the government. They weren't. Computer magazines of the time went after such institutes particularly for the franchise model that they were pushing which allowed just about anyone with some space to spare for a small classroom to set up a training institute.

But these training institutes served a vital role and within a decade, many young men and women with some basic knowledge of coding, found themselves in great demand fuelled by the software services outsourcing boom that kicked off by 1990. In fact, companies like NIIT subsequently took their business overseas to countries like Hong Kong and China.

By 1990 the business was large enough and there were enough companies in the fray to lead to the setting up of an Indian Computer Education Society (ICES). Awareness about the promise of computers was growing rapidly, helped along by a robust technology press with magazines like Dataquest, Computers Today, Computers & Communications proselytizing their promise.

By the turn of the century, computer training became more widely available on the web and with that many of these institutes lost their charm for potential students. NIIT, the runaway market leader, also moved into the more lucrative software services business. But if India is today one of the leading lights of the global IT industry, these pioneers deserve some share of the credit.