

PROMOTING SKILLS IN DIFFICULT GEOGRAPHIES: THE GRAM TARANG EXPERIENCE

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About the Author

Dr. Mukti Mishra is President, Centurion University of Technology and Management, Odisha.

Dr. Mukti Mishra worked in the corporate sector for about 15 years in organizations such as Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd, Kinhill Engineers Pvt. Ltd. (Australia) and BHP Billiton (Australia) before turning his attention toward teaching. He was associated with Xavier Institute of Management, Bhubaneswar (XIMB) as Professor-Marketing and Coordinator Placement until 2005, XLRI, Jamshedpur as Adjunct Professor (Mktg) and Victoria University (Melbourne) until 2010. He taught students of Business Schools in many countries, such as India, Australia, China, Malaysia, Africa and Singapore between 2004 and 2010.

In 2005, Dr. Mishra, encouraged by his like-minded friend and colleague Professor DN Rao, decided to become an edu-entrepreneur. He took the first step in this direction by taking over an ailing engineering institute, the Jagannath Institute for Technology and Management (JITM) in the tribal and Naxal-affected district of Gajapati, Orissa.

Under his missionary zeal and commitment, JITM became Centurion University of Management & Technology in August 2010 - the first multi-sector private state University through the legislation of Odisha Legislative Assembly. The University focuses on delivering experience-based learning, hands-on knowledge and practice-oriented education and strives to transform into a full-fledged Skill University by 2020. Dr. Mishra has created social entrepreneurial outreach entities under the banner of Gram Tarang to directly work with communities and link the underprivileged regions to the mainstream market. The entities under Gram Tarang are: Gram Tarang Foods, Gram Tarang Self Help Cooperative, and Gram Tarang Employability & Training Services.

Prologue:

Skills development is a pervasive challenge that the world is currently encountering. A recent study by Economic & Political Weekly ascertained that lack of interest by students, poor coping capacity, lack of interest by parents and financial constraints were the major causes for the high levels of dropouts from educational institutions.

In the state of Odisha for example, 1.2 million children register in Class I. But, only around 0.4 million appear in the Class 10 board exam, with the absence of formal educational degrees causing 0.8 million individuals to join the informal sector thereby contributing to their downward spiral into either underemployment or unemployment. The lack of interest by students and parents demonstrates that the formal education available today is far less relevant and applicable than desired.

In rural areas, especially tribal areas, society is one of subsistence agriculture. This means that the socioeconomic system is based on collective, cooperative activities and there is a strong emphasis on immediate benefits.

The current education system entails a long gestation period for fruition of efforts. This is economically detrimental in the poverty stricken tribal belt where every hand can be a source of livelihood. Formal education has little relevance, significance and applicability in the lives of disadvantaged section of society. Further, there is a great shortage of both quality and quantity of human capital available in these socially and economically marginal areas. This has further triggered the need for alternate means of earning one's livelihood.

Redefining Skill Development

Discussions on "skill development, skill challenge, skill shortage, skill initiative" and so on pervade global economic and policy forums. I find my working definition of skill to be the most useful - "minimal resources resulting in optimal output/outcome". The presence of skill must ensure that human capital is not wasted.

Contextualizing In Indian and Gram Tarang Perspective

The Indian Government has set a significant goal of skilling 500 million individuals by 2022. In contrast to the alleged "policy paralysis" in other sectors, the skill development issue suffers from "policy inundation". Various departments – both at the Central and State levels – have evolved different policy frameworks to skill, train and build labor capacity.

Policy makers are aware that the county is suffering from a "degrees without jobs"-syndrome, and the aspiration is to move

to jobs with or without degrees. In other words, the goal is to provide individuals with degrees that emphasize the skills that are in demand in the labor market, allow individuals to get jobs commensurate with their (skill-emphasizing) degrees, and hence create a workforce that can perform these jobs in a competent matter.

The creation of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) – a partnership between industry and Government - is an appropriate step at an opportune moment. The NSDC has succeeded in bringing visibility to the issue of skill development and its different aspects. From my personal and professional experience, the history of our role as a skills provider could be traced within the context of the skill development policy discussion in India as follows:

In 2005-06, when we launched a program for school drop-outs due to our geographic presence in a tribal and Naxal-affected belt, we were ridiculed, laughed at and subjected to scornful comments about the concept, and about our expectation of its success. The program was meant for youth to have an exit option, preventing their recruitment into the Naxal Cadre. The size of the first batch was only 36 students. We launched this program in partnership with the Central Tool Room for two reasons. First, it had the visibility and a publicly recognizable brand. Second, we did not have the capacity to function independently. The success was noteworthy and all the boys trained by us got jobs. Despite this small initial success, our idea was criticized and it was claimed that the idea couldn't be sustained for too long. We persevered, however, and started brainstorming. A breakthrough moment came when we realized that rural youth,

especially tribal boys, would do well in hardcore machine-based training. Hence we decided to focus on machine-based training design and delivery.

During the next phase from 2007 to 2009, people did lend their ears, but the support was merely verbal; material support was still lacking. However, our efforts were then noticed by organizations like Vedanta, and they sponsored a batch of 100 candidates (individuals displaced by the contentious Vedanta projects) for a one-year training program. We also approached the Government of India and the Odisha government to explore the possibility of scaling up these initial training initiatives. We thus became the only institute to be sponsored by the Government of Odisha for launching employment-based skill training for Odisha's rural youth; 75% of funding came from the Ministry of Rural Development at the central government level. During this period, we established linkages at the panchayat level for sourcing more candidates and gaining traction at the grassroots level.

In the third phase spanning 2009-2010, efforts were made to mobilize knowledge and administer pilot projects to tackle skill shortage at the national level. Skill training initiatives under policies such as the Swarna Jayanti Gram Rozgar/Sahari Swarozgar Yojana (SGSRY) by the Ministries of Rural Development and of Urban Development provided a handy framework, but the vagueness of implementation guidelines regarding selection of partners and funders made the impact negligible.

NSDC came into existence with the target of training 150 million by 2022. Initially, the parameters for selection of partners were nebulous, the delivery mechanisms were non-standardized, there

was no recognition accorded to regional disparities, the importance of economic and cultural context were not addressed, and implementing organizations were not given the discretion to take local decisions on training programs.

Despite this, we scaled up and opened residential training centers in the state's most challenging regions - Bolangir, Koraput and Rayagada - in addition to centers in Bhubaneswar and Gajapati. After we received sanction from the Ministry of Rural Development to train 10,000 youth from rural areas, we restructured our deliverables and strengthened our linkages within panchayats and beneficiary slums.

Additionally, we created a School of Vocational Education and Training, and established our Social Entrepreneurship Outreach - Gram Tarang Employability and Training Services - which could partner with NSDC on skills development issues and play the role of a catalyst in creating new programs. Our core goal was to end socio-economic exclusion by creating an alternate path to economic welfare for every disadvantaged youth.

The fourth phase - 2010 - 2011- has seen a spurt of uncoordinated and conflicting actions by various Ministries and States, rather than the kinds of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems that would allow for a focused solution.

The Department of Public Enterprises (Government of India) brought out a policy directive for all Public Sector Units to focus on skill development as part of their CSR initiative. Unfortunately, its outcomes have not been successful. Further, although NSDC developed a framework to track the activities of its partners, it is still far away from assessing the ultimate impact of such partnerships.

Centurion-GTET has received support from HPCL, NALCO, SAIL, and Axis Bank Foundation for hostels and equipment. This support has helped deliver low cost but high quality skill training to school dropouts from underdeveloped regions and marginalized communities. We also expanded into the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh by partnering with regional institutes.

In general, while the support from NSDC helped us scale up, financial sustainability remained a big challenge. While we became a Vocational Training Provider under the Ministry of Labour & Employment, we were unable to act upon it given the weaknesses in the implementation scheme.

Finally, we developed the Centurion Vocational Qualification Framework (CVQF) but did not implement it since the national level framework was being formulated. Certification continues to be a major sticky point.

Sector Skill Councils have been formed in the current phase – 2011-12 onwards – but they are yet to obtain national-level recognition and prominence. There are considerable disagreements and differences in implementation of various skill initiatives (funding, certification, recognition of prior learning, credit transfers, etc) among various Ministries, Regulatory agencies, and Industry Bodies.

At present, industries are maintaining a hands-off approach when it comes to creating an equipped labor pool because policy incentives are not forthcoming from the Government.

There is a complete lack of linkage between the policy makers and the public on the issue of existing and proposed skill and training initiatives. There are no efforts

for information dissemination to some of the most populated areas, and areas that would benefit the most from such programs.

At CUTM-GTET, we have forged robust partnerships with various industries for curricula, delivery, certification and employment; we have partnerships with Ashok Leyland, Café Coffee Day, Godrej, Cotton Blossoms, TATA ASL and others.

We are registered as a component manufacturer for Hindustan Aeronautics Limited for their Sukhoi and MIG aircraft and RSB Transmissions. The core strength of our approach is “Teaching, Training and Production”, and Centurion-GTET has embedded this approach into all training modules.

Centurion-GTET has also successfully bid for a Mini Tool Room under PPP Mode and the commissioning is in an advance state.

Further, we have also signed an agreement with the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) to facilitate the way forward for implementing the National Vocational Education Qualification Framework. All school dropouts enrolled in our skill development programs are registered in the NIOS program for schooling upto the Class 8 level: the PhD level for Vocational and Skill Education.

Entrepreneurship - Skills training and poverty alleviation via Nano – Mini-Micro and Small Enterprises:

Another skills deficit related problem can be seen in the area of poverty alleviation via self-employment schemes. While current models for international development and best practices are increasingly promoting business entrepreneurship and formation of nano/ mini/ micro/ small/ medium enterprises, the training to create successful

entrepreneurs has hardly kept pace. The focus is usually on increasing access to credit, but there is very little attention given to business development skills that will allow these enterprises to be economically viable in the long run.

The uniqueness of CUTM-GTET is to have established three entities as part of its "Social Entrepreneurship Outreach" which aim to mentor and promote entrepreneurship.

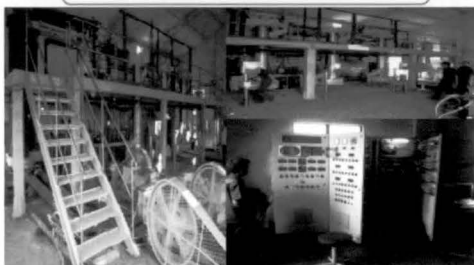


- **Gram Tarang Self Help Co-operative** – This is an enterprise to process seed produced and used by local farmers who were not able to access high quality seeds on time, an especially critical problem at times of crop failure. The ownership model of this enterprise is based on the co-operative model, and includes self-help groups. In addition to extending financial, foundation seeds and best practices support, this entity supports contract farming and other common services needed by farmers .

Skill Implication – We are actively involved in introducing modern farm technology with service and maintenance training in order to make farmers self reliant. When technical snags develop in tillers, tractors etc, it affects the activity cycle and farmers feel helpless; we train them in skills that allow them to repair and maintain their equipment.

THE TECHNOLOGY: SUPER-CRITICAL-FLUID-EXTRACTION

GRAMTARANG FOODS
Extracting essential oils & oleoresins using super-critical-CO₂



Currently, we have 200 farmer families that are members in the co-operative but we intend to add 50 families every year. We are also setting up a Micro Business and Common Facility Centre to establish horizontal and vertical linkages with farmers.

- **Gram Tarang Foods** – This unit is established using super-critical-CO₂ technology for extracting essential oils

and oleoresins from spices, flowers and herbs which are sourced and cultivated locally by Tribal farmers. The Unit also supports Inter cropping and high value crops and establishes market linkages for the value added products. The end users are advanced and sophisticated industries like Food & Beverage, Pharmaceutical, Perfumery, Cosmetics and Skin care in India and the USA. We have exported to the USA with FDA clearance.

Skill Aspect – This project continues to skill 500 farmers and intends to reach all 2000 + tribal farmer families. The goal is training in best practices for ginger and turmeric cultivation. For example, we are presently working with them on organic farming methods, helping them use natural and organic fertilizers and pesticides. This is in addition to the regular training in use of appropriate technology, product hygiene, product preservation, and low end value addition.

We also allow trainees to use our machines and equipment for production with nominal or no charge for one year as the incubation support.

Recently, we have trained 30 tribal boys for three months and provided welding machines to operate in their villages as welders – Nano/ Mini Entrepreneurs with the help of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). We will conduct the impact

assessment study in March 2013. Besides encouraging entrepreneurship, the intent is to use these machines and candidates as trainers at village level. These 30 boys will be provided refresher training and trained in “higher” skills in April 2013 so that in turn, they can become primary trainers.

Epilogue

For inclusive and sustainable growth, the youth from socioeconomically underdeveloped regions have to be made self-reliant and given the skills that will allow for their effective participation in the economy. Changing the current number of the human development index or even achieving environmental sustainability will remain a far cry if human capital amongst this marginalized youth is not developed to the full extent of its potential.

To truly make the skills development approach work in these challenging regions of the developing world, one simply has to discard the use the “one size fits all” mentality. If local context is ignored, the very demographic that these skill training programs target will slip through the cracks and will be unable to take advantage of these opportunities.

To be truly effective in providing access to greater levels of socioeconomic welfare and well being, education has to be tailored to the needs of the marginalized, and has to be customized to their specific livelihood needs.