

Skilling Odisha

ROTARY NEWS

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After an exciting and rewarding career in the IT industry, a prominent part of it as a founder of the IT services firm Mindtree, barely a few days after he had stepped down as its Executive Chairman on March 31, 2016, Subroto Bagchi got an unexpected call from the Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik. “He said, please come and help us with skill development.”

On April 2, just two days later, Bagchi, one of the best orators from the Indian corporate world, had been invited to address Odisha’s top bureaucrats at the Odisha Knowledge Hub on the topic of leadership.

The CM doesn’t attend these talks so the bureaucrats can have a free flow of ideas. Bagchi had no idea that the CM was watching the whole meet from his room through a video link.

“He took me completely by surprise as this is something I’ve never done in my life, and the skilling is for school dropouts... not fancy stuff... basic, hardcore work.”

In Tirupur alone there are thousands of Odiya girls; so if you buy a Polo or Tommy Hilfiger shirt in New York, chances are that an Odiya girl has touched it.

The State had promised employable skill development for 11 lakh school dropouts over five years; the programme was getting into its third year and eight lakh more children had to be skilled out of the promised 11 lakh.

“It was a very flattering proposal”; a Cabinet position was on offer, “and he said I’ll give you a completely free hand... you can bring in whoever you want. So I told him that is not my style. I work with people who are already there. But I need time to decide.”

The first one he consulted was spouse Susmita; “you know her, she is a very private, reclusive person wary of public life. I thought she’d say no, but surprisingly, she said: ‘You are born in that State and you should do it.’”

Next he spoke to Infosys co-founder and the brain behind *Aadhaar*, Nandan Nilekani, then to Manish Sabharwal, co-founder of TeamLease Services. Both said: ‘Do it’.

When he asked his eldest brother, a retired bureaucrat from Odisha, “he fired me saying why are you even asking me? You guys in the private sector talk about government inefficiency and demonise it, so come here and prove yourself.”

So he took the job, at a grand annual salary of Re 1 from May 1.

I am in Bhubaneswar for a TRF Centennial dinner and catching up with Bagchi after a gap of a few years. Susmita gives us a delicious breakfast, the highlight of which is thinly sliced and lightly fried *baigan* (brinjal) organically grown in the garden the couple tends so lovingly.

Even before beginning the interview, Bagchi walks me through the expansive garden in his sprawling ministerial bungalow in Bhubaneswar, shows off his huge vermicompost tank and is a tad disappointed I don’t go into raptures over it.

Employment generation will not happen by setting up steel plants, it will happen when you set up mom and pop shops.

A journey begins

Immediately after joining, he started an exhaustive tour of the 30 districts in 30 days, to get a hands-on feel of his new job. “It was 45 degrees, and I covered 7,700 km, met thousands of training institute candidates, government officials, trainers, other stakeholders, and devised my strategy.”

The mainstay of this was developing the brand *Skilled-in-Odisha*. “It is not enough to give somebody just a set of skills, which are actually about human transformation and self-confidence. You just can’t say I’ll give you a skill and you go and get a livelihood,” he says.

The problem, he adds, is that in the whole skill business, “Delhi downwards, everybody talks numbers and the human story gets lost. When I came on board, we had to skill eight lakh children; but behind those numbers there is a child.”

The capacity to make a difference, being part of a system, part of government, is just unbelievable. For me it has been an absolute life-altering experience.

His first message to his officers: Don't look only at data but have a human view and "the need to shift the conversation to *Skilled-in-Odisha*, so that over time — it can't happen overnight — we can create the image that the best skilled people come from Odisha."

He also impressed upon them to build a three-year view of the programme, so that just as happens in the IT industry, employers can come and lock in talent ahead of time."

Building a model

In five years, Bagchi hopes to build a success model which is worthy of replication. During his initial travel, when he visited the ITIs, he found the conditions appalling; in some places the plaster was falling off, the ceiling was in shambles, the premises were cramped and so on. And even at 10.15 am, they were empty; the trainers had not come in. Some of the ITIs he visited in the districts were spanking new buildings, but deserted!

Bagchi explains that the Government of Odisha spends Rs 50,000 per child for a 75-day or short-term training course, done through a private agency.

"In India, most skill development is done through private agencies." At a training centre at the bottom of the Niyamgiri hills, he found the Programme Implementation Agency (PIA) had made the girls, training as nursing assistants, sit on the floor. And sleep on the floor too.

Showing me a clip he has compiled from his visits, Bagchi points to Shantilata Patra, a mother of two, who is being trained to make shoe uppers. A typical case of being abandoned by her husband; next she will move to the leather park in Bahadurgarh (Haryana), and join hundreds of other women, and earn at least Rs 10,000 a month. But one of their problems was the groundwater used for drinking was highly contaminated.

"You expect to hear cultural issues, language, food and so on, not that they can't drink the local water, an irony because Odisha has the highest groundwater level in the country, and the villages where they come from has clean water," sighs Bagchi.

A challenge is to change the Indian social mindset that stigmatises the skilled. In Switzerland or US, we offer the electrician a cup of tea, but here expect him to leave his chappals outside!

Challenges abound

Bagchi's first challenge is to make the 44 Government ITIs, (against 600 private ITIs) the exemplars, but right now their shortcoming is good trainers, something that is common across the skills scenario in India. Next, his team will set up eight advanced world-class skill training institutes at a cost of Rs 1,000 crore at eight different locations in Odisha. "These will be like finishing schools; they will also improve the teaching quality of the ITIs."

While this initiative will account for 20 per cent of the eight lakh to be trained in three years, "the remaining 80 per cent will still have to be done through short-term, employment linked programmes.

The largest number of trainees from the State come with skills to operate industrial grade sewing machines. In Tirupur alone there are thousands of Odiya girls; so if you buy a Polo or Tommy Hilfiger shirt in New York, chances are that an Odiya girl has touched it," smiles Bagchi.

So, of the eight lakh Odiya youth to be skilled, will 50 per cent be girls, I ask. "Actually in the short-term employability programme, we're very encouraged that girls come forward much better than boys. Most sewing machine operators in Tirupur are girls; there are hardly any boys. But my problem is that in the ITIs, the involvement of girl children is only six per cent. We are saying that in 3-4 years we'll have to make it 50 per cent."

The young of today don't look at constraints; they have the courage and the spunk to do anything their way. If given the opportunity, they can break through the cloud; that is the power of youth.

Smart new uniforms

As any training/skilling model has to impart self-confidence, along with the skill, he first tackled the "lacklustre archaic uniforms. How would girls wearing *salwar-kameez* and *dupatta* operate CNC machines? So we got NIFD to redesign their uniforms, and made the girls and boys, wearing their smart new uniforms, walk the ramp!" He also introduced the IT industry credo of casual dressing on Fridays!

But a challenge is to change the Indian social mindset that stigmatises the skilled. "In Switzerland or US, we offer the electrician a cup of tea, but here expect him to leave his chappals outside! We need to make society think differently and value and respect skilled people," he says.

Bagchi next hopes to leverage the skill sets that the self-help groups (SHGs) have. “Who skilled us the best? Our mothers. This State is rich in SHGs, and I want those that are doing well to become skill trainers.”

Making small entrepreneurs

Odisha’s new skill development chief hopes to tackle the growing army of job seekers in India by promoting entrepreneurship at the grassroots level.

“It is a challenge; I am calling this the Nano-Uncorn project. Everybody is talking of Ola or Flipkart but Nuapada, or Udala, or some other remote village here needs people to create tiny businesses that will grow to employ one or two more in a year, may be two. Employment generation will not happen by setting up steel plants, it will happen when you set up mom and pop shops. When a small person setting up a tiny business says ‘I see growth and now need an additional person to lend me a hand’. So the way forward is to create Nano-Uncorns... small and capable entrepreneurs.”

Availability of money to do this is only part of the challenge; “breaking down the information asymmetry is the bigger challenge.”

Even in bank loans, the mountains of paperwork required are frustrating for small entrepreneurs. “Why can’t philanthropic capital for impact investment come in here? This year I want to pick up, in the 30 districts, 100 Nano-Uncorns and hold them up like the example of Muni Tiga (See box). And next year, expand it three times, then 10 times and create a groundswell by which skilled individuals won’t have to go to Tirupur, and will stay right here!”

Girls build Bullet motorbikes!

As he hopes to make the *Skilled-in-Odisha* a brand to contend with, to attract quality employers, Bagchi says, “I was thrilled to get pictures from the Principal of the Government ITI in Berhampur, who said my girls are now building Bullet motorcycles!

They’ve been hired by Royal Enfield, are on the shop floor, and have sent selfies with the Royal Enfield bus behind them. We want companies like Royal Enfield to look at those *Skilled-in-Odisha*.”

The next frontier is to get them to open shop in the State. “Many people don’t even know where Odisha is. Or they think Odisha is art, literature, culture, pilgrimage, but nothing beyond that. So we have to build an ecosystem whereby they come and build shop here, or shop for talent here.”

So how important was his being from the State and able to talk in Odiya?
“Unbelievably important; it resolves a lot of issues. If you don’t know the language you are not them,” he smiles.

As he navigates me around his garden, pointing out mangoes, blooming red flowers, an amla tree... I ask him about the concerns, misgiving, doubts and fears that the young from disadvantaged families express to him.

Bagchi smiles, recalls how when he visited the Jewish Museum on holocaust in Berlin, a very depressing place, he was stunned to see at the entrance a big black and white photograph of 18–20 young boys, about 16–18-year-old, behind barbed wire and in prison uniform, on their way to a death march or a gas chamber.

“But they were all laughing... It hit me that when you are that age, you see possibilities when others see a full stop.”

The truth, he adds, is that young people today are not looking at constraints, but opportunities and they have the courage and the spunk to do it their way. “Just give them the slightest opportunity and they can break through the cloud; that is the power of youth, it wants to go somewhere.”

Finally, the obvious questions; so how is it for a corporate head honcho like him to work for the government? He smiles, and says, “Somebody dropped by the other day to see how I am surviving the government. I told him, I wouldn’t give up my past one year for the life I led in the previous 40 years! Where would one have this capacity to make a difference? Being part of a system, part of the government, is just unbelievable. For me it has been an absolute life-altering experience. I’ve worked very hard in my life and it looks like this is the ultimate reward for those years! That’s how I feel, honestly!”

In Odisha, he adds, “compared to most States I know, there is genuine respect for human beings and development is way high here. Having Navin Patnaik... the monk chief minister, as he is called, as the leader has made a big difference. There must be some reason why he has been elected CM for four terms.”

At the end of the day, if all goes well, Bagchi’s ultimate reward will be helping “eight lakh people cross from one bank of the river, with an acquired skill. After that, nothing will be the same again for those people for generations.”

He says his job would be much tougher if today's India didn't have jobs.
“When was the last time you saw a “no vacancy” sign?

Remember the cinema hero of yesteryears who goes searching for jobs and encounters the “no vacancy” sign everywhere?

But in today's India, the ‘no vacancy’ board is non-existent. The beautiful thing about the country today is that if you want to work, there are choices! But to get a good, respectable job, skills are important, and that is where we come in.”