

Something hugely exciting happening around women SHGs in

Odisha: Subroto Bagchi

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Subroto Bagchi, former tech czar, one of India's top philanthropists and chairman of Odisha Skill Development Authority, talks about Odisha's skilling benchmarks, SHG powerhouse, entrepreneurship and what makes him and his wife Susmita walk away after writing huge cheques for social good.

The skill story of Odisha began in 2016 when Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik constituted the Odisha Skill Development Authority (OSDA) with the professed objective of making Skilled-in-Odisha a global brand. Seven years down the line, how has it progressed?

The skill story of Odisha actually began in 2014 when the government came into power and set itself a target for doing skill development of 1.2 million youth. Many different departments were doing it and each was doing it in its own way. It so happened that Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik felt that it all needs to be harmonised and get a certain sense of vision and direction.

In 2016, four days after I had stepped out of MindTree with the hope to read, write, teach and travel, I got a phone call from the Chief Minister. He asked me to come to Odisha to set up something that will not just look at skills for employment but also human transformation. That's very important to him. And the human transformation story is about making inter-generational change, particularly with emphasis on the girl child. With this, it took a different momentum. When I discussed what his vision was and how he wanted it to be set up, his thought process was that it is not enough to do skill development. You need to build reputational capital. His vision was that we need to build an organisation that will pull all the different departments together and do that under an umbrella called 'Skilled-in-Odisha' so that it builds reputational capital.

Do I wake up every morning to say that the job is well done? No. I feel that there are thousands of things to be done when it comes to skill development. We have a vision, the resources and the template for it. For example, the World Skill Centre. It has a vision, resources which is 1.2 million dollars worth of equipment and a template. Even the phrase World Skill Centre is trademarked, nobody else can usurp that. There will be no other world skill centre by any other state. My dream is to see four more world skill centres someday.

Today, I am confident that we will be able to go to the next phase of this skill development journey and that the next phase is not about domestic benchmarks and competition. It is about global benchmarks, competition, and global relevance.

The OSDA has set an ambitious target to provide skill training to 15 lakh youths in five years from 2019 to 2024. What is the achievement so far?

Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have to move the goalpost by two-and-a-half years now. We are not abandoning the target but we are just saying that since this is an unusual situation, we are moving the goalpost by a couple of years.

In ITIs, girls account for 22 per cent (pc) of the students' strength. How do you plan to increase this in the next 5 years ?

It will happen. The tough part of this is behind us. In 2016 when I took over, this strength was six pc and we did many things to say that by 2020 it would be 33 pc. Because we said it would be 33 pc, it is 22 pc now. The ITI story has become a wave and the rise in enrollment will happen.

The bigger story is this year we are saying that 50 pc of polytechnic seats should be filled up with girls. This is a bold step and I will tell you why. More than 50 pc of the girls are studying in engineering colleges but they are yet to come to polytechnics. Girls pursuing ITI still will have hurdles like where will they be employed, what will be the nature of work. But a polytechnic qualified girl will not have these issues. She will get a better quality job and pay. It will not be a blue-collar job but a grey-collar job. Polytechnics are ideal for girls.

In ITIs, the girls' enrollment rose from six pc to 22 pc because of a scheme called Sudakshya under which all expenses (education, uniform, hostel, food) of the girl students are borne by the government. The scheme was extended to polytechnics in this budget. Polytechnic enrollment will start in a few days. A week back, I have told all the 30 collectors that this enrollment year, 50 pc of the polytechnic seats in Odisha - both government and private - should be taken by the girls. We want to be the first state in the country where 50 pc of polytechnic seats will be taken up by girls.



How successful has the Nano-Unicorn programme been in creating entrepreneurs at the grassroots level?

This programme has been very tough at multiple levels. If we want to understand what the Nano-Unicorn programme is, we have to first understand entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship anywhere in the world has a success rate of 4 pc. If you start 100 companies, it may be a 'paan' shop or an Infosys, the hurdle rate will be the same for all. After five years, only four of these 100 companies will be standing. By design, nature does not want everybody to succeed. Programmes like Nano-Unicorn will have to be multiplied 100 times so that we have more successful entrepreneurs and that cycle is not an overnight cycle. It takes five to 10 years. Under the Nano-Unicorn programme till now, there are 500 people who have succeeded and it is being raised to the next level.

But something hugely exciting is happening and it is around the women's self-help groups (SHGs). All of us know that Odisha's SHGs are a benchmark. There are seven lakh SHGs with 70 lakh members. But over the years, they have been doing the same things, either making papad or stitching garments. What they did not realise is that they are actually potential small and medium enterprises. If even five pc of these seven lakh SHGs become small and medium enterprises, it will revolutionise the movement. The World Skill Centre has become a partner organisation to Mission Shakti and we are selectively bringing in Mission Shakti members who are now potentially at the cusp of things, those who can go to the next stage. They will be given entrepreneurship training. Today, access to capital is not a difficult thing if you have the skill and technical ability. But the missing link is the knowledge of marketing, managing accounts, and understanding the difference between cash flow and profitability.

The World Skill Centre has started, what I affectionately call the 'Maa MBA'. If the mothers (members) of all SHGs, which are the powerhouse of Odisha, do this 15-day 'Maa MBA', they will take over. Unbelievable things will happen in the next phase, that's my prediction.

How will you choose the SHGs? What will be the selection criteria?

Odisha Skill Development Authority will not meddle in that. That process will be managed by Mission Shakti. Once they are brought to the World Skill Centre, our job will be to do the 'Maa MBA' facilitation and then they go back. They have both the organisational depth and capability to do the pre-processing and post-processing. We will basically focus on the pedagogy, and the network, helping them to come out with their ideas and experimenting with their ideas.

Will this be sector specific?

No. We will be sector agnostic because the beautiful thing about Odisha is that the spectrum is very wide. The producer groups are doing all kinds of things. The difficulty is that they are not seen. In management terms, there is a thing called an adjacency. In the entrepreneurship game, you have to continuously scan the environment and look at what is next. Now, the opportunity for us is to awaken the mothers of Mission Shakti. For example, the World Skill Centre is offering a one-year, all expenses paid training programme on hair designing and technology. It's an international programme with equipment brought from other countries. The boy or girl who does this course will actually do hair designing for film stars. Similarly, there is a course on hair fashion design and beauty wellness which is going to be a multi-billion dollar industry in the years to come. We asked ourselves what will happen if the women SHGs members in villages are provided bridal makeup training. So what we did is brought batches of these SHG women here, put them on a crash course for bridal makeup and sent them back. You should see the sheer happiness on their faces. Skill is a means to an end. Once you have figured out that sense of adjacency, people are smart, they will figure out the skill. Our job would be to show adjacency.

You pledged Rs 340 crore for the Cancer Care Centre and Palliative Care Centre in Odisha. Both were supposed to be ready by August this year. When will the facilities be inaugurated?

The formal inauguration will be sometime in November. However, the project is on track and a little ahead of time. Puja of the cancer hospital building will be performed on April 12 and they will start seeing patients in May or June. They will start having in-patients by August or September. The Cancer Care facility will be one of the largest hospitals in the country.

Adjacent to it will be Karunashraya or Palliative Care. They have crossed more than 4,000 home visits by now. The centre is under construction and in the meantime operating from a building in Gandamunda (Bhubaneswar). A trained set of people are doing door-to-door palliative care, pain management, home dressing and related activities. And they are doing great work.

Both Susmita (Bagchi) and I will have nothing to do with the hospital. It will be run by the Shankara Cancer Foundation. Our philosophy is you make available the resources and walk away from it. I think what Bangalore is to IT, Odisha can be to healthcare. The template has been cracked and I wish that medical entrepreneurs will come from Odisha.

Why do you think Odisha could be a healthcare hub?

The medical talent of the state is admired everywhere. The doctors that we create are world-class. They are doing a great job both in India and abroad. We have medical entrepreneurs. But we now need to say that we built world-class hospitals which will attract patients from outside Odisha. It is a very different ball game. So, I see a distinct possibility and wish and hope that young Odia doctors, both women and men, should think about medical entrepreneurship.

In 2022, you donated more than Gautam Adani, the world's second-richest person. We know about the donation for the cancer centre and palliative care centre. How were you drawn to philanthropy and when?

There was a time in MindTree when we realised that it will reward us more than we expected. Ten of us started MindTree. I liquidated my provident fund and whatever savings I had in 1999 to get Rs 56 lakh and invested the entire amount in MindTree. If this Rs 56 lakh becomes Rs 5.6 crore, I can claim that I was smart and I worked hard for it. But, if it becomes Rs 560 crore, does that money belong to me? Am I really the owner of that? A time comes when you realise that a lot of wealth that gets created was not because of you. I started the company, many talented people worked for it and customers came in. So the growth was not because of my hard work or smartness alone. Then the question is if it's truly not your money, where should it go? Money is a regenerative process. You need to use the money for the larger good and you can do that by creating employment

You compared me with someone. He may not have donated money to charity but he has created employment. You have to give credit to him for that. So, either you put that money to build capital and generate jobs or you use it to address an important social issue. A cancer hospital is a very expensive thing. If you plan to set up a world-class cancer hospital, per bed cost would be Rs 2 crore. Where will that money come from? Why and how will a Shankara Cancer Hospital come to Bhubaneswar? Somebody has to bankroll it. Susmita and I decided that we will be an agent of intervention with our resources. In the process what is happening? We are liquidating the burden that we are carrying.

In Rabindra Sangeet, Tagore has said that before you leave the world you have to return three things to God - breath, voice and wealth. Nobody has taken this to heaven. So if you want to travel light into the afterlife, you shouldn't carry the luggage.

As far as philanthropy is concerned, you have always been into healthcare. Has it anything to do with your past experience?

No. It was just a call. I have seen blindness in my mother, and mental health with my father. I will share a personal experience. There was a conference going on in Delhi where a man was criticising the government continuously. I lost my cool and I asked him who gave him his first vaccination. He asked me what was the connection. I told him that had he not gotten that vaccination, he would not be standing here to ask his questions and make the noise. We cannot say that only government has to take responsibility of healthcare. If we have the capability, and the resources, we have to join hands with the government. You can't say that you are not responsible for what is happening in Capital Hospital or Acharya Harihar hospital. India is the disease capital of the world. Non-communicable disease today is killing more people than communicable disease. Health for the 1.5 billion population is the responsibility of people like you and me.

In a country like India, public spending on social sector is huge for all the obvious reasons. Which is why, private philanthropy plays a key role. In your experience, how has private philanthropy in India evolved in the last few years?

I think we need to give more. But why don't people give? People sometimes do not give because they do not know about it, they do not see the responsibility or the avenue. But people also sometimes do not give because they do not feel safe. Even in small towns, people of upper-middle-class families easily have Rs 20 lakh to Rs 50 lakh. But when they donate money, it draws attention of all kinds. Particularly in Odisha, we are not comfortable with attention in matters of money. We as a society need to remove this.



How does it compare with countries like US?

Many of the things that Susmita and I have learnt are from our experience in the US. In Western countries, giving begins from a small age. When I first went to America, I had a customer who was the chairman of a company called Tandem. He was the first man to come out with a fault-tolerant computer in the world and his was a Fortune-500 company. He was also the chairman of a government school there and used to spend five to six hours in the school every month. In the US, you will find small scouts and guide kids selling cookies in neighbourhoods and bring home \$2 or \$4. These children have their parents accompanying them. So this is their initiation into the idea that 'I belong to a community and I have to work for it'. The feeling gets ingrained. That's not the case with us.

Susmita and I have believed in giving our resources and walking away from it. We learnt it from that country. World's most respectable cancer hospital is Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, named after two people Sloan and Kettering. One day both of them wrote a cheque for the hospital and just walked away. And that's how Sloan Kettering Cancer Center became what it is today. They said that you must have that breed of philanthropy where you don't get attached to money. In America, there are thousands and thousands of such examples. Havard, Standford, Yale, and Princeton universities are all world-class institutions built with anonymous money. We were very inspired by that. The comfort of making money, giving it and not having the discomfort of attention is one thing and the ability to write a cheque and walk away from it is another.

Have you ever thought of joining politics?

No. Politics is serious business. Films, politics and sports, it is not always a good idea to join them late. Politics is a very demanding calling. Just because you speak well does not mean that you should be in politics. It had never had any charm for me. I have great admiration for politicians, I think they do a very difficult job and it requires special competence. It is easier to start an Infosys than to become a village sarpanch.

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