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Bengaluru's IT power must reach ITIs; Vision Group hopes to make K'taka global player: Bagchi

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Mindtree co-founder Subroto Bagchi Photo | Express

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Updated on: 03 Sep 2026, 6:54 am · 3 min read

BENGALURU: Subroto Bagchi, Mindtree co-founder who helped shape India's technology success story, has turned his attention to a quieter but more fundamental challenge. Recently appointed chairman of Karnataka's newly-formed Vision Group for Skill Development, Bagchi believes the state's greatest obstacle is its own glittering past.

Bagchi argued that Karnataka's identity as the birthplace of world-class IT, biotechnology and unicorn startups has cast a long shadow over the less glamorous institutions that train the majority of its workforce. Industrial Training Institutes, polytechnics and short-term skill programmes for youth from the bottom of the pyramid have remained largely invisible, he said. "The things that make us world-class, the formula of the past, can be well utilised to make skill development aspirational, to take the Bengaluru magic to Hubballi and Hoskote."

The Vision Group, constituted under the Karnataka State Skill Policy 2025-32, brings together leaders from industry, academia, civil society and government. Described its first-year priorities, Bagchi said the group must first learn about skill development through a new lens by listening to the "unspoken voice of the real Karnataka".

Solutions often lie with ordinary people closer to the ground, he insisted. Members will suspend preconceived ideas, travel across the state and engage stakeholders before proposing ideas to make Karnataka a global player, and not merely a national one. He also wants the Vision Group itself to operate differently — engaging the system as a player that puts its credibility on the line rather than remaining a distant advisory body.

Bagchi has already studied the comprehensive State Skill Policy and considers implementation the urgent next step. Skill development is human transformation at scale. It demands a sustained, spirited effort over time and the creation of a "vision community" that takes ownership with a long-term view, he said.

On the perennial debate between traditional sectors — manufacturing, construction, agriculture — and emerging ones such as artificial intelligence, green energy and semiconductors, Bagchi rejected the idea of balance altogether. “It is about recognising both as one,” he said. “World-class manufacturing cannot be built with second-rate technicians, nor can construction thrive with mediocre crane operators.

Future agriculture will require farmers who can deploy drones for precision spraying; technology must be democratised for them. Even the semiconductor industry will succeed only when it connects to everyday rural life. I do not see parallel universes. To me the future is integrated.”

He was equally candid about the deeper problems that depress placement rates, wages and productivity. India’s economy still runs heavily on labour arbitrage and a use-and-throw mindset enabled by demographics. More than 90 per cent remains informal.

Society continues to view the skilled worker as a mere “labourer”, while information asymmetry keeps local high-school students ignorant of ITIs and polytechnics in their own districts. Bagchi has chronicled these realities in his book ‘The Day the Chariot Moved’. Fixing them is the Vision Group’s core mandate.

Regional disparities form another sharp focus. The India-Bharat divide is real, and the group intends to address it. “The Skill Vision Group will obsess with Chikkamagaluru and Channapatna, Hubballi and Hoskote,” Bagchi declared.

Inclusion is non-negotiable. India is half women, yet formal wage participation remains under 25 per cent. One in six Indians lives with some form of disability. Two-thirds of those under 30 are rural. Any policy that ignores these facts is destined to fail, warned Bagchi.

“Artificial intelligence, far from being a threat, presents Karnataka with a once-in-a-civilisation opportunity. No other state is genetically digital,” he noted. AI has already begun shattering the digital divide — tools like ChatGPT can instantly explain the nuances of Kuvempu’s poetry. Karnataka can, therefore, make every skill AI-first, though the window is limited. “We need to act now before someone else does.”