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'In 5 years, skilled worker from Karnataka, and not just an IT engineer, could be sitting next to you on a Frankfurt or Tokyo flight': Subroto Bagchi

By K R Balasubramanyam, ET Bureau Last Updated: Nov 23, 2026, 07:10:00 AM IST

Synopsis
Around four lakh students graduate each year in Karnataka, yet many employers struggle to find skilled talent. This mismatch highlights the need for improved focus on vocational education and skill development. Initiatives are required to enhance the quality and capacity of ITIs and polytechnics to meet industry demands. Additionally, the government aims to connect skilled workers with global opportunities through partnerships with international employers.

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Mindtree cofounder and Karnataka Skill Development Vision Group chairman Subroto Bagchi

Mindtree cofounder and Karnataka Skill Development Vision Group chairman Subroto Bagchi speaks about the mismatch between college education and jobs, the need to strengthen ITIs, the impact of AI, the condition of gig workers and Karnataka's potential to supply skilled workers to global markets. Edited excerpts:

Around four lakh students graduate in Karnataka each year, yet employers say they struggle to find job-ready talent. Where is the mismatch?

We need far fewer students in conventional colleges and more in ITIs, GTTCs, polytechnics and other skill institutions. They can acquire technical skills that offer better prospects of getting a job after completing their courses and greater chances of long-term employment.

Because of societal factors, we equate knowledge and employability with BA, BSc, BBA, engineering and MBA degrees. Many educational institutions over-promise and under-deliver because they run education purely as a business.

Poor educational institutions create a capability handicap and lead to an aspirational mismatch. A poorly educated graduate may struggle to find work, while someone graduating from NTTF in Electronic City can get a Rs 20,000-a-month job offer immediately after completing the course.

How should Karnataka prepare for jobs in semiconductors, EVs, drones and renewable energy when roles are changing rapidly?

We need both. We must focus on deep-tech and high-tech opportunities while also producing high-quality plumbers, electricians, carpenters, garment workers, drivers and mechanics.

Instead of worrying about which jobs will disappear, we should build a skilling system that gives an individual an employable skill and a sustainable wage to begin with. After that, the skill must provide flexibility.

A young person graduating from an ITI as a carpenter could become a restaurant owner 10 years later, while an electrician could run a tourism trail. IT engineers, too, may need to be ready to become part-time Uber drivers. Such movement between occupations is common in the developed world and carries far less stigma.

How can Karnataka build a stronger manufacturing talent pipeline through ITIs, polytechnics and apprenticeships?

Karnataka has excellent technical institutions, including NTTF and Toyota Kirloskar ITI in the private sector, as well as government-run Model ITIs, tool rooms and polytechnics. Our job is to raise their quality and capacity, not incrementally but by an order of magnitude.

We must also bridge the rural-urban and gender divides. Girls have a strong presence in Karnataka's degree, engineering and medical colleges, and in many institutions their enrolment is higher than that of boys. Yet girls account for less than 4% of enrolment in ITIs. That is simply not acceptable. We must fix it.

We also need deeper engagement with industry. Historically, many private-sector employers have viewed workers as consumables. That narrative must change. We need employers who see their workforce as a strategic advantage, pay people well and invest in training so employees can build careers rather than merely hold jobs.

Money is not the bottleneck. What needs to improve is the vision, perspective and quality of stakeholder engagement.

Which jobs are most vulnerable to AI and robotics over the next five years? How should Karnataka respond?

We are over-anxious about the vulnerability caused by AI and robotics. AI will certainly disintermediate some low-value technology jobs. But for the larger blue-, brown- and green-collar workforce, AI can have a hugely positive impact by improving trainer quality, learning outcomes, reskilling and upskilling.

Imagine an ICU nurse who is AI-enabled and can increase face time with patients. Or a television or air-conditioning technician trained on one type of equipment but asked to troubleshoot another. Instead of undergoing fresh training or reading a 100-page technical manual, the technician could use AI on a smartphone, speak in Kannada and solve the problem.

Karnataka has an advantage because of its deep-tech and high-tech capabilities. We want an AI-first approach across the skill-development ecosystem. Every skilled worker in Karnataka should be conversant with AI.

How can skilling help gig workers earn more and find greater job security?

The condition of gig workers is a huge social aberration. The combined market capitalisation of the top two food-delivery companies exceeds Rs 4 lakh crore. We must ask how that prosperity translates into better quality of work, wellbeing and shared prosperity for delivery workers who inhale fumes and put their lives at risk every day.

We have some deep soul-searching to do before worrying about skill development for gig workers.

How can Karnataka turn global worker shortages into opportunities for its youth?

We are engaging with consulates of leading countries that have a presence in Bengaluru. At the last Bengaluru Skill Summit, they had a strong presence, with Japan as the country partner.

We are also working with high-quality organisations that connect workers with employers in leading global markets. The government wants to selectively engage with credible international employers that value our human resources.

The state will provide interventions ranging from globally benchmarked skill training and cross-cultural exposure to pre- and post-placement support.

In five years, the skilled worker from Karnataka, and not just the **IT engineer**, could be sitting next to you on a flight to Frankfurt or Tokyo.

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