

## **The Price of Shine**

The banner of India Shining has been unfurling at breathtaking speed across one international arena after another, as India hitches a giddy ride at the coattails of its fast moving economy powered by the energy of IT. And yet, even as sector after sector gets devoured and converted into this fast burning fuel, already there are signs of scarcity. Can India sustain itself?

The Indian Institute of Engineering students are at the top of the Indian Academic pyramid. Every year hundreds of thousands of students from across the nation compete in the IIT entrance exam, but only a few hundred make it into the five IIT campuses. Every year India earns a class of these top graduating engineers, and yet, even before they have put on their cap and gown, most of these students have shifted alliances. They have switched into the top paying jobs of today's Indian economy: Information Technology, Banking and Finance.

*"A very small percentage of these kids," says Dr. M.R. Ravi, a professor at IIT, Delhi for the last thirteen years, "actually take to engineering as a profession. They go where the money is. Actually, the demand in the market right now is for managers and people in financial forecasting- so IIT engineering graduates are a good picking ground for Investment banks. Core Engineering jobs unfortunately are still not as well paid, even in the best of employments. It's a straight question of money. Aspirations have completely changed.*

*That's a sad thing that's happening. You ask any student and they'll say academics in IIT is only secondary. They make it here to get into the job. This is the launching point. Aptitude is good- it's the attitude that's the problem. In a class of seventy, if I get ten*

*students academically inclined, I should consider myself fortunate. The formula for high paying jobs is IIT, IIM and get into that high paying job in a multinational firm."*

No! These students are not manning those outsourcing booths that people in the west have become so concerned about. They are not the ones who pick up the phone when our computer mystically malfunctions. These students are the ones at the very top, managing many such centers, and many other types of outsourcing operations that a common person in the west does not even realize have been shipped-over. They are the ones managing banking operations and investment operations in India, and now even at locations abroad. These are the top end managers. And they are in sharp demand, picked up years before they graduate even, because there are not enough of them.

Then there are the students graduating from universities and colleges across the major cities of India with degrees in Physics and Chemistry and History and Biology, and a diploma in Computer Software, streamlining lives, destinations and careers into IT or IT fueled domains such as Banking and Finance. And there are companies, especially one which is at the head of this facilitation process, innovating itself continuously and rapidly to keep up with the changing international market in Information Technology.

For many students in India, NIIT (quite a distinct institution from the IITs) is the pathway into a career in Computer Software Applications, as it was for me about two decades ago. With centers in thirty countries including China, Vietnam and the United States, it is one of the fastest expanding software training institutions in the world. *"Today in India,"* says Mr. Rajendran, the Chief Operations Officer of the company, *"the complete war in an outsourced unit, whether it is captive or other, is in talent. We are a one billion person country that today boasts of having the largest number of young*

*people in the world. To say we don't have talent, we have every thing else- that part must never happen.*

*So far over the last decade when people used to ask us how India is taking the lead, how India is able to grow we always used to say, there are many things, but two, three things are very interesting: One, everybody in universities and colleges transacts mostly in English. Second, there's a strong university technology infrastructure thanks to IITs and others- there is good technical manpower, and third, there is no government interference in IT because they don't know what it is. Now, that was supposed to be the great strength. But where are these people?"*

There are however, hundreds of thousands of university graduates in India- about 400,000 engineers every year and 2.3 million of non-engineering graduates. But even after three years of college education, only a quarter or so are considered employable. That pool is beginning to get exhausted. "Now," says Mr. Rajendran, "*we're going to the next level where necessarily the system has to be good, the education process has to be good. Then only we can make over that. There's nothing wrong with that- They came there expecting that system to be good, which is not happening. So, those are issues- very clear issues in our country.*"

According to the Eleventh Planning Commission report, India cannot sustain 9% GDP growth unless interventional actions in education are taken. With millions of young people coming out of schools and colleges each year, supplemental skills in communication, language and software training are required to make them more employable, but in the absence of major governmental programs for skills trainings, corporations have to find ways of doing it, or they would be left with no options but to

move. *"Because we don't have talent we should not shift from here."* stresses Mr. Rajendran, whose company is planning to set up its own university with a major focus in educational technology. *"But after all this if nothing happens, things will shift. Because the business corporate will say: Opportunity is with me, client is with me, go where talent is available. Then will be the movement to Mexico or Philipines. That will happen. Doesn't mean that when the healing happens, you can't come back here. We have to invent that once right system (in education and retraining) that can work on an ongoing basis and be adaptable around the world. Every thinking now has to be global thinking. Methods of learning and the products and innovations to make that happen- These two things have to happen simultaneously. That will be our test. If we sit back and do more of the same, then we are foolish."*

But even as companies like NIIT innovate and fill that continuously forming demand supply gap in India, helping to keep the economy moving, something else is beginning to open elsewhere. As first the computer science graduates, then the engineers: civil, industrial, environmental, chemical and mechanical, and then the other disciplines from colleges across India pour into IT, perhaps the other sectors are becoming deficient?

Even Mr. Rajendran pauses for a moment, when he considers this: *"Probably, probably, we don't have very good civil engineers, and this nation is now booming in construction. So I'm not really sure if we have the right technicians and civil engineers available who are up to speed on the latest techniques. I'm sure it's all there, but we have created a definition these last couple of years, where we have moved all of them into IT."*

Dr. Virendra Kumar, the director of the National Physical Laboratory concurs that in the last ten years there has been hardly any new blood in the Sciences. *"There is a*

*major dearth of scientists in India today," he says. "The Science industry can't compete in money with the IT and students are not coming into it." He thinks that now what would perhaps fuel the sciences again would be multinationals setting up shop in India to do research. My old Chemistry professor from Delhi University agrees, as he laments the futility of a pure science degree in college for students today. "They have to change the curriculum," he fumes, "so it's at least Applied Sciences. There's no money in pure sciences. No jobs. Students have no interest. They are all heading into IT or Banking."*

Across the spectrum of rural and urban India, computer technology is the new mantra of India. It is used to deliver education as well as to carve a path for millions of young people who would have been unemployed just a decade ago into well paying jobs. It has raised the status of a wide swath of Indians, pulling them up from lower middle and middle class into the upper classes flush with new money. It has fueled construction booms across India with developments and malls and tech cities rising like many mushrooms across all major and many minor cities of India. It has created the definitions of tier-1 and tier-2 and tier-3 cities, awakening with a jerk many hitherto slumberous towns across India. It has fueled many other dormant sectors as well, such as Banking, which used to be manifested as sleepy floor to ceiling register filled offices with pensioned clerks, not accessible to a majority of Indians. It has turned Art into a major investment and artists into the next in-thing.

It has also changed the social and physical structure of India. Almost every urban couple is doing thirteen hour shifts (including commute times through clogged traffic arteries) in major cities like Delhi. With three thousand new cars on the road everyday, it

has turned traveling into an ordeal, and the young are now moving away from joint homes into another location even within the same city itself.

With the high mobility of today's youth within the same city or across cities, the older parents of today are increasingly alone at home, and a new type of development is on the rise, with advertisements much like in the West- the homes for the Aged. Increasingly vulnerable to crime, they are beginning to move into societies for the aged. India in fact just recently passed an Act which holds children liable for negligence towards their parents, especially if they inherit property from the parents.

Children are more and more on their own, with behavioral and psychological problems on the rise. In the moneyed class, ninth and tenth graders are heading to bars for enjoyment and spending late nights out. Divorces are on the increase, and surprisingly in a country like India, there are more and more single mothers.

India has become the largest consumer of alcohol in the world, and health problems on the rise are now life style diseases like in the west: Obesity, diabetes and heart attacks.

Girls are rising. They are heading into new jobs and careers much like their male counterparts, but are also increasingly vulnerable targets in larger cities with huge migrant populations. Marriage industry is spinning like never before with million dollar weddings, (in equivalent western terms,) on the rise and the gift industry is booming. Girls are vulnerable and even more expensive today in terms of the arranged marriage system, and are being killed in the womb before they are born, especially in affluent families, causing the latest plague of India- Feticide.

And yet, India is rising. The Metro runs seamlessly through Delhi providing a first world experience inside, even as outside the windows the scenery is mixed. The slums of the third world and the gleaming buildings of the first coexist, as do the people inside them, one providing service to the other. One helping to pull the other up the ladder. Trains run efficiently and connect parts of India like nothing else can, but the tracks are lined with miles and miles of unending rubbish. Eighty five percent of India's rivers are heavily polluted, but environmentalists and activists are hauling the government up by its scruff to clean them up. Corruption is rampant but the Right to Information Act has started to put a few brakes. No, India is definitely not shining today, but it can. A billion people can accomplish a lot, once they figure out where they are headed, just as in the case of IT. India has always prided itself on absorbing and moving forward with its next invasion. This one that is actually providing employment and raising the standards of Indians in many ways may be for good. And this is definitely a different time.

*"We ourselves are a different generation." says Mr. Rajendran. "We allow more freedom to our children to talk, what used to be called- talk back- we allow them to do that. We allow them to explore their own strengths. The young generation, not only in top cities but even in second cities, they have a lot of confidence. Not everybody is getting what he wants, there is a lot of unemployment out there, lots of issues, but one guy comes into Delhi get a job, becomes a driver, calls two more people from his village, one may get something, other many not- but the sense that I will get a job is far more today than before. The other thing in India is accepting large temp workers which will create a hell of a lot of employment. That is job outsourcing- not services outsourcing. Look at every*

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*building today, its got security. Years ago we used to have one chowkidar with a stick who used to put out all the lights, now we have swipe cards, multiple layers of security. Similarly, housekeeping, canteen services- so the thing about IT is that it created a huge business around that upgraded infrastructure- the expectation of what you get in an office- Gym, canteen etc- all the peripheral jobs that have come up, drivers- its amazing. Yeah, yeah, (its trickle down) It's got multiple manifestations!"*