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Challenge paralyzed by society

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Our Prime Minister's call to focus on zero defect manufacturing quality is certainly the correct direction for India's future. Referring to the IT sector as showing innovation and research prowess 25 years ago, he bemoaned that India is yet to create something path breaking like Google, while talent has left the country. Undoubtedly IT/ITES grew to \$86 billion annual exports, but how much adaptable innovation has happened in this business size is debatable, while research investment has been miniscule. Innovation is a big word, we use it all the time in India, but without capability to produce digital technology basics like hard discs. Thailand is dominating this market. Even the Japanese, Koreans, and now Chinese are incredible adaptable innovators in multiple domains, not fundamental inventors. Where are India's engineers making wafers and semiconductors in India?

I'm sure our Government is better facilitating technical paperwork to ease business nowadays. The real problem is elsewhere though. It's in capability building that requires extreme behavioural change to match global standards and an entrepreneurial bent of mind. For manufacturing to acquire an edge, we need engineers dedicated to hardcore engineering,

and well-trained, disciplined, capability-driven workforce. But look at the cream of our engineers jumping to MBA Finance, Marketing or HR without even trying out R&D or manufacturing in India. I asked some brilliant 24-year-old IIT-plus-MBA working people, why don't we hear of 18-year-old Indians having an innovative or entrepreneurial bent of mind?

Several angles emerged in answering this question. Parents in India, they said, want the son to score high marks in school and college, get a high salaried job; the vision for the daughter is wealthy husband and reputable family. Making it to IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) is really tough, they explained. During their last 2 years in school, they enrolled for special and expensive coaching classes to learn engineering fundamentals to prepare for IIT entrance exams. Children continuously feel, often unstated, pressure from parents when choosing the education stream in high school. Science, required for engineering and medical studies, is always first priority. You need high overall marks to take science. So by default, arts or commerce students are considered less intelligent, subconsciously giving them an inferiority complex. Even when good in science, these young professionals said avoiding coaching class was unthinkable because basics are not properly emphasized at school. What's worse, even with rigorous external coaching they may not make it to IIT.

Why go for competitive IIT, when so many engineering colleges exist? "The job market recognizes IIT as top of the pile." Having become an IIT engineer, why go for MBA? They answered, enterprises value MBA graduates over engineers, it's obvious from starting salaries where MBAs get double the remuneration.

Engineers wanting to pursue an engineering profession find Indian research institutes, R&D labs or corporate engineering positions do not offer the right scope of scientific or engineering work, the payscale is dismal, nor do such jobs enjoy mainstream status. For higher education, IIT graduates try going abroad as MTech or Doctoral studies, even in IITs, do not match the high standard of Western universities. But an IIT-plus-MBA, especially IIT-plus-IIM (Indian Institute of Management) is every parent's dream come true. This upwardly-mobile education gets the best job offers, highest societal recognition, uppermost starting salary, all without having any work experience. "There's further hierarchy: IIT-IIM with Finance specialization tops all! Such a student was even offered Rs 1 crore annually." What's the real difference between IIM and IIT-IIM? "The IIT-IIM definitely has better analytical ability and structured discipline at the start, but after sometime, there's no difference." It's disgraceful how we misuse pure engineering professionals. Empowering engineers is certainly a prerogative to fructify India's ambition to become a global manufacturing hub with knowledge competency.

Crunching marks to family pressure somewhat explains how societal systems paralyze self expression, denying our young generation the scope of an inventive bent or entrepreneurial mindset. Here's where the Prime Minister should start his real brainwashing to displace this culture. When children are dependent and protected like treasures by rich parents, their inventive or entrepreneurial inclination go out the window. When parents don't have money, children become street urchins. On the other hand, I've professionally experienced that less educated people in the practical field like plumbers, electricians, auto or electronic mechanics, now the mobile phone repairers, have a huge bent for entrepreneurship. Such working class individuals are vast in number, but not valued in society. Here again the Prime Minister needs to strongly support their

intellectual development. They can translate their working knowledge into adaptable innovation, but they need the right skill guidance, not through pedagogy but with practical training.

I'm very encouraged by a start-up by one of my client friends. The last 12 years I've known Vibhu Hajela he'd often ask about entrepreneurship as I've written about it several times, and I've always encouraged him. This 52-year-old mechanical engineer MBA with 27 years of rich work experience, earning annually half a crore of Rupees suddenly called last year to say he's left his job to start a plastic injection moulding factory. He knows he has to generate working capital to continue, and will miss the luxury of good salary at month's end. I'm sure "Make in India" will succeed with this kind of SME initiative, and the Government will support such start-ups. I must add that Vibhu's wife was extremely supportive of his entrepreneurial drive.

There are several young Americans, school/college dropouts like Steve Jobs, Bill Gates among others who invented in a garage or cellar, then successfully marketed their inventions. Thomas Alva Edison left school from age 7 because his teacher said he was confused. His mother educated him at home, encouraging him to follow his scientific bent of mind. Edison spent all his pocket money buying chemicals for experiments. He invented the microphone, telephone receiver, stock-ticker, phonograph, movies, office copiers, incandescent electric lights, and owns 1093 patents. When Edison died in 1931, his assistant, Russian-born, Paris-trained chemist Martin Rosanoff said, "Had Edison been formally schooled, he might not have had the audacity to create such impossible things."

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