Recognising Different Skills and their Uses*

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Skill development and training are two terms that are greatly beloved of policy makers – and indeed of analysts in general – as they seem to present easy solutions to so many labour market concerns. It is commonplace in India, for example, to hear that our economic growth is constrained by the lack of skills among the bulk of our workers, and that skill development is therefore not only a policy priority but also a relatively easy, inexpensive and painless way to ensure employment growth, especially in formal activities. It is seen as the proverbial low-hanging fruit for governments to grab and make use of.

There are many reasons to be sceptical of such apparently easy panaceas, given the current evidence of high rates of educated unemployment and skill mismatch in Indian labour markets. But there may be other concerns with how we approach this issue.

The other day, a conversation about skill development in India led to other thoughts – about how loosely we treat the concept, and how this could be because we possibly do not spend enough time in defining skills, much less in evaluating them.

One of the many online dictionaries, for example, defines skill as "expertise" or "the ability to do something well". But the range of synonyms that Google alone provides gives some idea of the complexity of this concept: they include adeptness, adroitness, deftness, dexterity, ability, prowess, mastery, competence, competency, capability, efficiency, aptitude, artistry, art, finesse, flair, virtuosity, experience, professionalism, talent, cleverness, smartness, ingenuity, versatility, knack, readiness, handiness, informal know-how.

The verb "to skill" has meanwhile been rather simplistically defined, as "to train someone to do a particular task", which seems rather limited given the range of options for what a skill could be. Obviously, then, only a limited range of skills can be taught. You may be able to teach someone how to do something, but can you also train them to be adroit at it, to do it with flair and finesse and even artistry? And how much does it matter if those attributes are lacking when that particular task is performed?

Clearly, with reference to economic activities, a slightly more specific definition of skill is required. An online business lexicon defines it thus: "An ability and capacity acquired through deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to smoothly and adaptively carry out complex activities or job functions involving ideas (cognitive skills), things (technical skills), and/or people (interpersonal skills)." So now we have a more complex definition, involving different kinds of skills that are not always so easily recognised, since purely technical skills seem to get all the attention whenever skill formation is discussed.

This in turn requires a more expansive definition of the various skills that are relevant not just for employability in job markets, but also in life generally. An ILO study in 2011 characterised relevant skills as the following:

- Basic literacy, numeracy and ICT skills
- Core, key, generic, soft ('employability') skills, including communication, application of numbers, team working, problem solving, learning to learn etc.
- Higher order skills, such as logic, reasoning, analysis, synthesis, statistics, etc.
- Specialist, vocational, technical, academic skills, technical knowledge, including enterprise, business know-how, financial skills etc.
- Attitudinal and behavioural skills, such as initiative, confidence, willingness, perseverance, determination etc.
- Life skills, including social, health, and interpersonal skills

It is open to debate how many of these skills can be taught at all, how many are learned "on the job" so to speak, and also how important they are for various different economic activities. But here's the thing: our notions of skill development generally encompass only the first set (literacy, numeracy and ICT skills) which are assumed to be taught through the formal education system, particularly school education; and the fourth set (specialist, vocational, technical and academic skills), the training for which is to be provided through higher education or specialised institutes. This then makes the role of public agencies fairly straightforward: make sure there is good quality school education available, and set up higher education and technical training institutes designed to provide the required "expertise" in particular vocational and professional areas.

But suppose these are only some of the skills required for successful productive activity, whether for an employer or as a self-employed person, and whether the tasks involve producing goods or services. Suppose productivity increases and creating synergies in production actually require more of the second, third and fifth sets of skills. Then focussing only on the first and fourth sets may be limited and in some cases even counterproductive.

Indeed, it can be argued that the conventional approach to skills (and associated with that, to skill training) makes several significant errors in terms of judging the nature of skills, which in turn have adverse implications both for economic activity and productivity and for human well-being.

The first error relates to what are perceived as skills, with a typical over-emphasis on purely "modern" technological knowledge. Because of this, many occupations are seen as requiring only semi-skilled or unskilled workers, when in reality that really reduces the quality of that product. Such underestimation of the skill requirement not only undervalues the workers engaged in such activities; it also has negative implications for society in general and for its economic potential.

For example, in India early childhood education is often treated as an activity that can be performed by well-meaning women from within the local community, with little or no remuneration and no training for this. The continuing low status of women in our

society ensures that work dominantly done by women is both economically and socially undervalued, and the skill requirement in such work is not recognised.

Yet it is now internationally acknowledged that to prepare young children for the lifelong learning requirements necessary in contemporary society, early childhood education is not only essential but must be imparted by those who have been trained in such pedagogy, and can even be quite a specialised occupation. Instead, we relegate this to unpaid mothers and elder female siblings of small children, or to underpaid nursery teachers. Remarkably, the government is one of the worst offenders in this regard, relying on underpaid anganwadi workers and helpers who get a fraction of the minimum wages, or else abandoning responsibility by leaving such provision to the vagaries of the market. Unfortunately, the effects of the casual and even cynical attitude will be felt well into the future as they affect the learning capacities and future potential of the children who ae underserved in this respect.

Another example of lack of social recognition of the skills required in certain activities relates to geriatric care and care of differently abled people. Once again, poor provision of such services by public agencies throws this open to the private sector, which delivers only according to capacity to pay and therefore massively underprovides such services. This means that most of the elderly and the differently abled persons who require specialised care delivered by those who have been professionally trained for this, are simply denied this and forced to rely on unpaid services delivered within families or have to do without. The social undervaluation of the skills required in these activities also means that market wages for those performing these tasks tend to be low, thereby discouraging people from even seeking to acquire these skills even though they are so socially necessary.

The second error in the conventional approach to skills is the underplaying of the other sets of skills noted in the list provided earlier. The over-emphasis on purely technical training often does not equip those receiving such training to develop the “soft skills” associated with communication, working and dealing with others, and so on. The poor development of cognitive and analytical skills that is an unhappy result of the system of rote-learning that still pervades our education system has led many potential employers to reject candidates who would otherwise appear to be adequately “trained”.

The third error is in some ways based on a more fundamental problem, that many of these skills cannot simply be “taught”, but rather get developed over a process of working and activity that enables learning by doing. This means that a lot of skills required in effective work come about through the very process of working, which in turn means that economies must generate adequate productive jobs to ensure that people are able to pick up these skills. This is of course the basic problem with the approach that looks at skill development as the panacea for the Indian economy. Many skills do not get developed because the pattern of economic growth is simply not generating enough jobs to meet the requirements of the large and rapidly growing (and dominantly younger) labour force.

This macroeconomic dilemma is the ultimate concern, and one that cannot be resolved by skill development alone, even if it overcomes the other problems noted here. So our approach to skills certainly needs to be more complex and nuanced, but

we should not hope that thereby our difficulties in productive employment generation will be resolved.

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