

Giving an ancient craft a new shine: Training youth in the brassware sector in India

Low levels of education, lack of skills, diplomas or certificates within a technical field severely limit the chances of gainful employment for a vast number of youth in India. A new programme of skills developing and training, however, is providing an alternative. Neelam Agnihotri, ILO communication officer in New Delhi, reports how this initiative is providing new jobs for youth in the centuries-old traditional brassware industry in Moradabad, northern India.

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MORADABAD, India (ILO Online) – The brassware industry here is a shining example of a local business with global lustre. The more than 25,000 small artisanal units in Moradabad produce 80 per cent of the brassware handicrafts in India, representing almost 33 per cent of handicrafts that will eventually end up in larger workshops, be sold to manufacturers and exporters and finally to retailers the world over.

After graduation, 23 year old Mohammad Kashif started to work in one of these small brassware production units owned by his father. Initially, Mohammad just operated the drilling machine but was soon confronted with multiple tasks, and he was quick to realize that only formal training would help him run the enterprise efficiently.

Initially he opted to train on one module directly related to his work and put the learning to good use. He not only learnt to organize his work systematically, but also the importance of ergonomically correct posture and better lighting.

“Thanks to formal training, we have changed the way we work. Through a professional approach we have been able to raise the productivity of our unit by over 50 per cent”, Kashif says. His success has motivated him to opt for training on additional modules.

Kashif was lucky when compared to elder craftsmen like Dilshad Hussain. The 60 year old brassware engraver, who was conferred the title of ‘Master Craftsman’ by the Government of India in 2005, faced a long and arduous journey to qualify himself for the job. Born in a family of brassware engravers, where traditionally the craft was passed on from one generation to the next, he dropped out of primary school at the age of 10 to assist his father at work and learn the craft.

Like Dilshad, most craftsmen in India have no formal training and little or no education. They acquire their skills on the job as apprentices, a long process taking several years and often the learning reaches a plateau with no further progress to be expected.

Skills Development Initiative to train 1 million Indians

The situation of training is particularly difficult in India’s sprawling informal economy. This is why the Government of India is using a multi-pronged strategy to tackle existing challenges.

One of them is a Skills Development Initiative (SDI) aimed at training 1 million persons on demand-driven vocational skills over a 5 year period (2008 – 2012). Thereafter, another 1 million would be trained every year to support skills training, certification and upgrading in the informal sector. The Modular Employable Skills (MES) training offers flexible short-term courses to persons with limited education, who cannot afford to be away from paid employment for long periods of time.

On completion of training, the trainees are evaluated by identified independent assessment bodies and awarded government recognized certificates by the Directorate General of Employment and Training. Vocational Training Providers such as Government Industrial Training Institutes, Government Polytechnics, and private training institutions need to register with respective State Governments for providing training through the MES system.

Developing career pathways

This also helps develop a career pathway, as skills thus acquired are also portable to other trades/sectors allowing career mobility. So far over 500 trainees, 30 trainers, training institutions, vocational training providers and other related stakeholders from the three clusters have benefited from the programme.

The ILO is collaborating with the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) and other partners to support the operationalization of the SDI through pilot programmes focusing on three sectors: domestic work (Delhi); brassware (Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh) and glassware (Firozabad, Uttar Pradesh).

“These programmes see skills development as part of broader efforts to improve productivity and competitiveness, but also working conditions in these sectors. By developing career pathways, the programmes aim to develop a model for addressing skills challenges in the informal economy making skill acquisition more visible, structured and formally recognized”, explains Paul Comyn, Senior Skills Specialist in the ILO Decent Work Team for South Asia.

According to Comyn, “Skills development is a major priority not only for India’s socio-economic development, but also to retain its high growth rate and harness its young population. Skills training is important to make the workforce more employable and help them secure decent work.”

One of the unique features of the ILO-MoLE SDI programme is that curricula and modules and related competency standards are developed for identified processes (such as engraving and etching in brassware) where no formal training curriculum/material are available. The modules are developed step by step with the institutional memory of master artisans, craftsmen, workers, technical institutions, industry representatives and others.

Dilshad Hussain is among these craftsmen involved in curriculum development. He is passionate about his craft and travels far to train young craftsmen. His association with the ILO-MoLE programme made him realize the importance of formal skills training. “What I achieved in over 40 years could have come to me much earlier, if I had undergone a formal and systematic skills training” concludes Dilshad Hussain.