

Lemon Tree skills millions, creates jobs

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The Lemon Tree Hotel Group has embarked on a pioneering program to uplift millions of people with socio-economic and physical challenges out of the morass of poverty. This special feature below details on their modus operandi.

Many Indians are born in the wrong place, at the wrong time under the wrong circumstances, unfortunately not getting enough economic opportunities. Boys living in the slums of metropolitan cities such as New Delhi, hardly have any suitable socio-economic opportunities. There are hundreds of millions of such people and unless they can be brought into the mainstream, their future is bleak. Certainly they belong to some of the most underprivileged segments of the Indian society. It is a socio-economic problem of the paramount importance in India.

Precisely due to this reason, the 'Skill in India' is the single most important initiative of the NDA government at the Centre. If there is 'Skill in India' it can lead to 'Make in India' and not the other way round. In India, there are also educated people who are not qualified for a job. Imparting of skills applies to everybody. 'Skill India' program will help impart skills to a few hundred millions in the next 10 years.

Another big initiative is 'Digital India', which is also crucial for the country. It is only through digitalization that India is going to be able to connect and educate its people. Technology will be used to create training models as an outreach to people.

India has started producing National Occupation Standards from which Qualification Packs, or QPs are created. QPs are used to train people and certify them. Once QP is set up, the training and qualification can happen online for people all over the country. Qualification Packs are 90-page documents which help impart vocational skills to people and certify them as plumbers, electricians, tailors, barbers, chefs and drivers among others.

There is a way to enhance technology, which is linking the digital and skills related parts together.

In the next seven years, India will impart professional skills to at least four million specially challenged people with a focus on employment, Patu Keswani, chairman of the Skill Council of People With Disability, or SCPWD, said.

SCPWD has a target to provide skills to close to four million people with disabilities by 2022, and it is hopeful of achieving its goal, Keswani said.

Corporate India is responding to the challenges but it now needs to reform and be even more aggressive, he said.

Keswani, who was appointed chairman of the SCPWD around two months ago, said 12 sectors have been identified for people with 19 special challenges or disabilities as per a bill tabled in parliament.

The challenge is now to look at these 19 special challenges and the 12 sectors in greater detail to make the project an astounding success, he said.

To give the entire project a holistic outlook, the sectors include Beauty and Wellness, Information Technology and Tourism and Hospitality.

The SCPWDs skills programme will also cover youth from rural areas and slums of India, for employment. These youth are people with economic and social disability.

Elaborating, he said, the SCPWD will also use technology in training programs for reaching out to people across the country.

Corporations in India have responded well to the Skill India initiative as well as the SCPWD, according to Keswani, who is also chairman of the Confederation of Indian Industries National Committee for Special Ability.

A major conference is planned to discuss these issues in conjunction with World Disability Day that falls on December 3.

A Do-It-Yourself booklet is being put together to help companies understand ways which can make work place accessible to specially challenged people. Accessibility is a big issue and there is an urgent need to bring these people into the mainstream, he said.

It is a booklet on how you can hire and induct people with special abilities in the company, said Keswani, also the chairman and managing director for Lemon Tree Hotel Company, which employs 1,000 people with physical and social-economic disabilities.

The hotel Group, which began operations in 2004, has trained over 10,000 people with special challenges, who have now taken up jobs in other industries.

It is easy to provide socio-economic abilities to rural youths by lowering the qualification for entry level unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Lemon Tree has lowered it from it being mandatory to be a college graduate to just being an intermediate, then matriculate and later to just having studied up to only Class VIII and now Class IVth. There are people who are illiterate and it is a massive base to tap people with socio-economic disabilities because more than half of India's population comprises of school drop-outs.

Lemon Tree is rated as the fourth largest hotel group in the country with operations in 16 cities and continues to expand. Its plans include adding 1,000 rooms in Mumbai, and a few hundred rooms per property in cities such as Pune and Udaipur.

In 2006, Weber Pinkess, an American private equity firm invested US\$70 million in Lemon Tree. In 2010, around US\$30 million were invested by Shinsei Bank of Japan and in 2012 around US\$150 million, by a Dutch pension fund. Between them they control over a little over 40 per cent in the company.

Lemon Tree is also working with non-governmental organizations in training and supporting people with special challenges. These include the National Centre for Promotion of Employment of Disabled People, or NCPEDP, one of the premier NGOs in this segment of the society.

Lemon Tree also contributes, in cash and kind, to various other NGOs who are working in the disability sector. These NGOs bring people to the company for training purposes, he said.

A major challenge in the disability sector is that it is not silo and initiatives have to be taken across all the sectors. "Persons with specific challenges have to be identified and earmarked for a sector, where he best fits in, it is a matrix,".

For example, a person with speech and hearing disability can work in the hospitality sector provided he is given a tamper-proof card which states not only his conditions but also ability to take or give orders.

The 2011 census, for the first time, identified 27 million people with disability. Going by the estimates of the World Health Organization that one in 10 persons have disability, India may be having as many as 130 million physically challenged people.

Of the 27 million that were listed in the census of 2011, there are three major disabilities visual impairment, orthopaedic impairment and speech and hearing impairment.

However, there are people with other specific disabilities like Down's Syndrome. Worldwide, one in every 700 children is born with Down's Syndrome. It implies that in India a couple of million children are suffering from autism and Down's syndrome.

Lemon Tree take in people and trains them. There are two opportunities one is that they get promoted and succeed within the company and the other is grabbing better opportunity outside.

The government calls for two per cent of a company's average profit for the last three years to be used for Corporate Social Responsibility. It is enormously rewarding that somewhere along the line instead of focusing too much on generating profit, Lemon Tree has instead decided to become a social worker. The company is neither getting nor interested in taking any benefit from the government. *fii-news.com*