

ELEVENTH HOUR

Time to stop being a semi-skilled nation

! N INDIA IF YOU BOOK A PLUMBER TO COME AND RESCUE YOU from a flooded bathroom, chances are you will get a call at 11 a.m. the following day asking you to repeat your complaint or checking on directions to your address. If you sputter in rage, the voice on the phone will likely say: "But our office opens only at 10 and I had to collect my tools."

That fits the phrase 'tooling around', which means 'to drive or jaunt about from place to place without any specific direction or goal'. The plumber will eventually do his (yes, I have yet to encounter a female plumber) work; at least he is not a layabout, which is what many of our unemployed or under-employed youth might end up becoming if the government and private sector do not create enough jobs.

Talking about plumbing, the Indian Plumbing Skills Council (IPSC) says it faces a 'mammoth challenge' of a shortage of skilled manpower. The IPSC estimates the size of the plumbing industry was Rs 33,000 crore in 2010-11, when it employed roughly 800,000 people, and adds that about 90 per cent of the plumbing workforce is not professionally trained, with most plumbers learning on-the-job (a.k.a. *jugaad*).

We all agree that India faces a skilling crisis, but exactly what does that mean in numbers? Nobody seems to have a precise idea, because the government says it does not trust its own labour statistics, which in any case count only establishments employing ten or more people. If you are a self-employed plumber, you don't count.

Finding skilled employees is a tough task, as any HR professional will tell you. Our burgeoning call centres employ tens of thousands of young people. Most of them receive rudimentary training. When you talk with a call-centre employee, you will usually hear loud *gup-shup*, laughter and background noise. Sometimes it takes three or four attempts before the attention-deficient 'associate' gets your name or phone number right. These young people are

the foot-soldiers of the new economy. They are cannon fodder – low-paid, poorly equipped, barely trained and highly expendable.

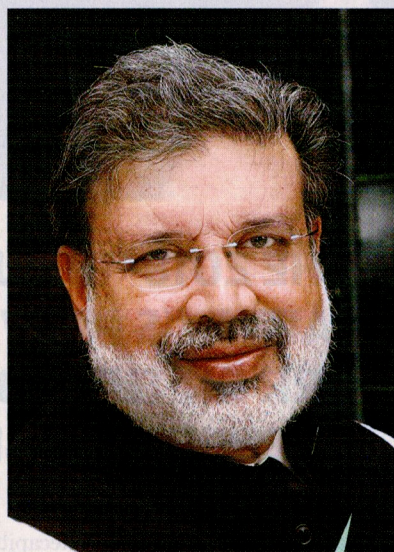
Take drivers for instance. Official data show a total of 44 million vehicles on Indian roads as of March 31, 2012. You can assume that number has risen by at least a quarter since. One survey I saw said drivers (chauffeurs) were the highest-paid among domestic help staff in major Indian cities, but they are lucky if they make Rs 15,000 a month. Most of them

learnt driving at fly-by-night schools. Poor driving skills and poorer compliance with road safety rules cause high accident rates.

A total of 150,785 people died on Indian roads in 2016. Road transport and highways minister Nitin Gadkari said fatality rates fell by 4.75 per cent in January-July 2017. Separately, Gadkari was quoted as saying: "No driverless cars will be allowed in India. The government is not going to promote any technology or policy that will make people jobless."

Quietly working to limit its pension bill, the Modi government itself is guilty of dumbing down its lower

ranks. For instance most of its 'multi-tasking staff' (formerly known as *chaprasis*) are contract workers supplied by private body shops. The number of outsourced workers in central establishments soared to 1.11 million in 2017, up 32 per cent from 2015. **BW**



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The author is former Editor, Reuters Asia, Editor-in-Chief of The Hindustan Times and Editor of Business Today