

Construction worker's skill training and recognition needed for development

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For a long time now this country has been lacking a balanced system of education. The education system has tended to emphasize foundational and theoretical studies over technical and vocational training. As a result there is a dearth of technically qualified and skilled persons in many sectors of the economy. This has naturally hampered economic development and moreover has contributed to the growing problem of unemployment. This problem has now been acknowledged and this is perhaps why there has been an increased focus on technical education in recent times. It must be said, however, that the avenues for relevant training as such exist are also inadequate and in many cases the training programs themselves lack balance. Some sectors of the economy have been conspicuously ignored. For example, there is no comprehensive and productive program to generate technically skilled persons to the construction industry, which contributes around 10% to the Gross National Product.

The national construction industry has, over the past two decades seen tremendous technological advancement. Earlier, there used to be only two categories of skilled workers, masons and carpenters. Today there are fitters, tillers, painters, plumbers, bricklayers, and scaffolders etc., all of who have specific tasks to perform in the construction process. Thus, a need has arisen to provide skill-development training in these sub-fields of construction. This has been necessitated in part by an increased propensity to maintain international standards as well as by the boom in large-scale construction.

One of the main constraints preventing the construction industry

from catering to this demand is the lack of skilled workers. It is indeed lamentable that there is no systematic national program to rectify this situation. A recent survey conducted by us revealed that less than 4% of the workers have been systematically trained and carry certificates that are indicative of their skill. At the same time, it must be mentioned that the state-run technical vocational institutes are equipped with some training facilities as well as qualified instructors. Why, then, have these not translated into a resolution of the mismatch between the availability of skilled workers and the demands of the industry?

The truth is that while the facilities are there, young people, including those who have become lost in the conventional education system due to a variety of reasons such as economic hardship, often from village backgrounds, seem reluctant to enrol. When there exists a demand for skilled workers and when facilities are available to provide unemployed persons with the skills required, why aren't they attracted to these courses and training programs? To understand this situation, we have to look at the peculiar conditions associated with the construction industry in Sri Lanka.

To begin with, unfortunately, it has to be admitted that only a very low status is accorded to workers in the construction industry in our society. The jobs are not fashionable, so to speak. This discourages people from obtaining the necessary skills and entering this sector. In the end one finds many individuals whose only "training" is that gathered as "helpers" to masons, carpenters and other skilled workers. They enter the sector as a last resort having exhausted all other avenues for self-development and employment. Often too, they get

trapped in the urban environment and the many forces that generate alienation quickly lead their minds astray. Discipline is something they lose quickly or can never acquire.

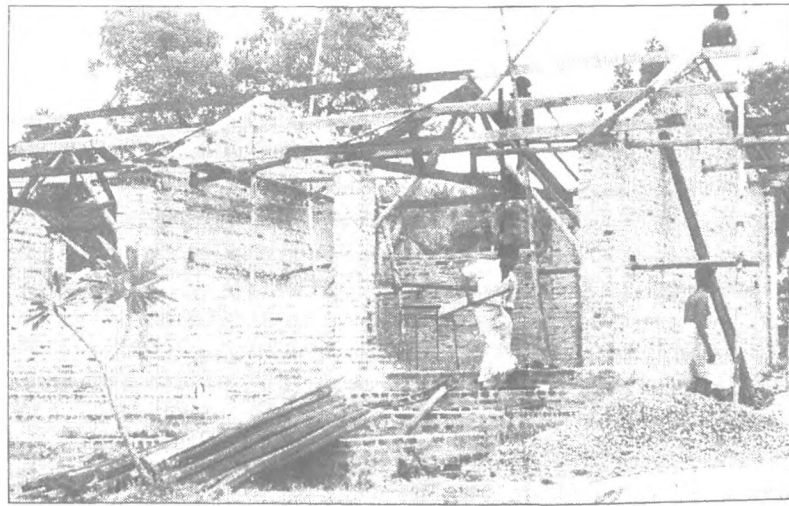
If the construction industry is to make any significant advances, there has to be radical attitudinal change regarding the worth of labour and in particular the dignity of such workers whose skill is in a sense as essential to the final product as those with qualifications that are accorded higher social value. This has to begin at the school level. Steps have to be taken to correct the misconceptions that have been allowed to develop with respect to construction. Beginning with children, everyone must be made to understand that construction is not just a key sector of the economy, it is an important indicator of progress, prosperity and well being of a community, a city and the nation itself and that it is indeed an art. When our children are taught about the magnificent constructions of our forefathers, effort has to be expended in inculcating in them an admiration and respect for the labour and skill that went into those structures. From this, to convince them that the same admiration and respect ought to be directed towards the descendants of these very same craftsmen, i.e. today's skilled worker in the construction industry. Such ideas have to be propagated among children, through the curriculum as well as through exhibitions and workshops. This would be the essential first step that precedes the launching of a comprehensive training system for skill development that targets the national construction industry. If this is done, we would, as a society, be weaned of the socially conditioned aversion to skilled occupations in the construction industry

and one could expect higher enrolment rates in vocational and technical training. It is clearly a long-term strategy, but we have to start by recognizing that it is a non-negotiable where the future of the construction industry is concerned.

There are also short-term strategies that can be employed. Among these, it is crucially important that those who are already employed in the construction industry who are unskilled or whose skills have not been certified by an accredited training institute, be given the necessary skills and provided the opportunity to obtain such certification as necessary. As mentioned above, less than 4% of the total number of workers in the construction industry holds competency certificates. The reason for this is that the vast majority of them have wandered into the sector for lack of "better" employment opportunities and even then as unskilled "helpers" to carpenters, masons etc. Their "skills" have been obtained through experience. Their training has been more on-the-job than anything else. The absence of competency certificates stand against them if and when they want to move from one employer to another or when they seek promotions.

In economics this situation is referred to as the "cost of information". If they could be given recognized certificates or be graded according to skill level, the cost of information pertaining to the identification of these skilled workers in the construction industry will be considerably lessened.

Certification would serve to resolve another problem in this sector. It will go a long way in according the given individual a sense of dignity and self-respect. This, as we pointed out earlier, is a serious issue in the Sri Lankan construction industry. Most of



those employed in this sector do not seem to understand, acknowledge and appreciate that their contribution to the economy, the country and society in general is not second to any other citizen. Therefore they are not inclined to maintain a sense of discipline, decorum or propriety, as would others who feel that their social status forbids them to step out of line. Where the absence of other opportunities or inability to continue education pushes them to the construction industry, they often lack the pride that a person holding some educational qualification or certificate would have. By awarding them recognized trade test certificates, it is likely that they would have an enhanced sense of self-worth and perforce motivated to maintain higher standards of discipline and sense of responsibility.

What we have outlined above are some of the benefits of offering those working in the sector relevant training and certification. It is also important to decide who should do the training and how. As of now, institutes such as IC-TAD and NAITA hold trade tests and award certificates. However, there is little encouragement for say a mason to sacrifice two work-

ing days, spend some hard earned money and procure such a certificate. Therefore a national level program should be launched to establish an institutional structure that encourages them to take such trade tests and to initiate training programs that are suitable for those in the construction industry. A practical solution might be to decentralize the administering of these trade tests, perhaps at the district level. Such exercises, if held in selected schools at the district level, would also serve to dispel the negative notions that many hold regarding skilled workers in the construction industry. Owners of construction companies should also be made aware of these issues so that their support could be mobilized in directing workers to such workshops and training programs. If the government takes the initiative, then the resources and instructors available in the various technical and vocational training institutes under the Ministry of Vocational Training could be used to formulate and implement such a program. Coordinating such a program would be a primary duty of all construction companies and construction material manufacturers in the island, be they large and small.