

SOCIETY

Transforming young lives



Aiming high Youngsters can dream big, thanks to this new initiative from the bank

ICICI Academy trains rural youth to find gainful jobs

RASHEEDA BHAGAT

Bhagwan Sahay Khatik from Amaranar village in Rajasthan's Jaipur district is 50 but looks 60. Years of grazing his goats in the rocky terrain have left his face deeply wrinkled. "But now that my son Vikky has got a good job, I will retire," he smiles. Vikky, all of 19, completed a 12-week course at the ICICI Academy of Skills in Jaipur last month, and has got a job that pays ₹7,000 a month.

For his mother, more important was the fact that for the 12 weeks Vikky "never slept on a hungry stomach". At home the staple diet was *roti* and chillies.

Wholesome food

The 150-odd youngsters get much more than food at the Academy which aims to find sustainable livelihood for the youth. After opening in 2013 in Jaipur, the Academy has six branches in Hyderabad, Chennai, Bangalore, Coimbatore, Pune, Kolhapur while two more, at Patna and Guwahati, will be ready by March. Together they will train about 5,000 youth every year.

The curriculum has been designed with NIIT, Blue Star, Schneider Electrical, Tally and Crompton Greaves, which have also helped set up classrooms and labs. The technical stream students get hostel facility. The 12-week course offers six skills — electrical, motor and pump repair; refrigeration and AC (RAC) maintenance; selling/marketing skills; web designing, and office administration (this covers basics of accounting, banking, filing papers, etc). The last is in great demand in the SME sector.

Gender divide

The gender divide is along expected lines; the boys prefer technical courses, the girls opt for web designing, office ad-

ministration. But in Coimbatore, six girls have broken the gender barrier. R Kavya, from nearby Pollachi, loved changing bulbs and doing small electrical repairs from childhood and "wanted to do electrical engineering, but my family couldn't afford the fees." Now she is a budding electrician.

The trainees are also taught discipline and grooming. "Good behaviour, neat dressing and talking politely to customers are important. Coming from a humble background doesn't mean you can talk rudely to anybody, we tell them," says a teacher. Some elementary English is taught too.

Chanda Kochhar, MD and CEO, ICICI Bank, says she was heartened by the fact that the girls from the first batch have all taken up jobs and are "participating in the economic process." Training youth and making them employable "is the only way to take advantage of our demographic dividend," she says.

Placement

All 146 from the first batch in Jaipur have been placed. Both ICICI Bank and its partners leverage their goodwill and dealer networks to find jobs for them. The minimum wage is ₹6,000; those with technical skills get ₹8,000-10,000. RK Sharma, a Blue Star consultant and an RAC instructor, says his distributors have employed seven "and are asking for more. RAC is in demand, and will explode as the cold chains for fruits and vegetables expand. Hotels and restaurants also need AC mechanics."

Surprisingly, 13 from the first batch of 146 refused to take up jobs; they had experience in their fields and came to the ICICI Academy to hone their skills. The Bank may fund their own ventures.

Hanuman Sahib Bhairwan from Ramjipura village, 40 km from Jaipur, is 19, but on his shoulders rest the responsibility of paying his father's debts. A marginal farmer with two acres of land, the father dou-

bles up as a daily wage labourer to feed his large family. "The income from land is meagre; there is always water shortage. And I have two brothers and five sisters," says Hanuman who is training to be an electrician. Four of his sisters are married; the dowry for each was ₹2-3 lakh. "*Pitaji ke sar par bahut karz hai* (father is heavily in debt)," he says and wants to help clear the debts.

Ashok, 19, is the son of a potter from a village 20 km from Jaipur. Unlike other happy faces, his eyes are sad. He tells his story only after much coaxing. His father makes pots that his mother tries to sell in the nearby villages. The daily income is uncertain, and so is the meal. The story is related dispassionately in a resigned monotone. Divesh Kumar, 20, hails from a Haryana village. His father is a barber and earns less than ₹5,000 a month. Divesh has three siblings and made it to Class 12 with great difficulty. "*Khana badiya hai*," he beams, reflecting his circumstances. Most have completed Class 12, but many are in third year of college.

Useless Degrees

Captain Amar Singh, who has retired from the Army Aviation wing and trains students in electrical skills, explains: "After Plus Two, they enrol for correspondence courses. They get a degree, but no real education and are unemployable."

Teaching them circuitry is a challenge. "Hailing from this region, I know how to put things in their heads".

So, when explaining resistance, Amar Singh invokes Usain Bolt. "I tell them, on a proper track he will run superbly. But bring him to the sand dunes of Bikaner, his speed will reduce dramatically because of the uneven surface... They understand!" Hopefully, students of the Academy, who have got a running start, will not be slowed.

The writer was in Jaipur recently at the invitation of ICICI Bank.