

Automated Quandary

[An excerpt on the prevailing dilemma in our country. A tug of war between automation and employment; Indian Economy vs Technology]

A couple of days back listening to the speech of a politician on a news channel, I concluded how well India is doing in the field of digitisation. We are on the path of progress in all respect and dimensions, brought to us through landmark campaigns like Make in India and Digital India. Online and automated services are now available in virtually every service providing and commodity producing industry, be it getting licenses to run a company or filing its GST or on the assembly lines. For customers the process is hassle free and saves a lot of money by cutting the so called middle men.

But on the very same channel after sometime it was covered about a few hundred men and women strong group protesting against the authorities for their incapability to provide them the stable, worthy jobs which they deserve. They were once part of a flourishing local handloom and carpentry, producing ethnic cloths among other things. They are talented and were earning their livelihoods pretty well. All changed, when the government eased its policy to attract MNCs for the foreign investments and technology. This brought a two dimensional change, on one hand a US based company brought its automatic power loom which produced cloth in multiples of what was earlier produced by the handloom that too in lesser time, human and capital resources. Quality of the product was also comparable to what was produced earlier. The owner, management of the cloth factory were thanking and satisfied. The other dimension of the change; is the thing which made the news.

So is technological advancements boon or bane. Are the devices and all the online services villain for our great nation? For those who say no, the critics will quote the industrial unemployment rates, the positions which were once taken by citizens are now taken by a foreign autobot or an automated mechanical arm. For those who say yes, the supporters will put forward the growth in the GDP which primarily is because of the computing and technology sector, the reduction in losses which were a result of 'under the table' expenses, quick and easy transactions cum clearances improving India's Ease of Doing Business rank. Therefore, the answer to this question can't be a simple yes or no, for a diverse and unique country like ours.

Recalling a basic concept explains why India on one hand faces a range of troubles while going digital whereas countries like China and USA didn't face any such issue, obviously except some situations of slowdown or recession which is an unavoidable trough in the sinusoidal curve of economy. A nation broadly has three working sectors consuming its workforce, namely, primary or agricultural sector, secondary or industrial or commodity producing sector, tertiary or services sector. There is a smooth shift from primary sector focused till tertiary sector in a country, or in other words a new nation generally starts as a primary sector dependent economy to a secondary sector focused one, finally to a tertiary sector which US currently is. India in 1980s was a primary sector economy while by 21 century we saw a direct jump to tertiary sector skipping the secondary sector which is considered to be the largest job creating sector in a developing country. But now that, when the authorities woke up lately to these developments, it was tried to absorb workforce by relaxing industrial norms and allowing exploitation of resources to create employment in this commodities production sector (which is not a wise step for environment and ecology, a holistic challenge in itself). To this again automation and mechanical solutions came as a nightmare for the blue collared. This might suggest authorities to slowdown its endeavours towards digitisation or tertiary sector. However such a step should not be taken, because the same thing which takes away jobs actually contribute much more to the national income than what the industries could in the near times. We may lag behind in the race of growth on a global scale.

The main problem, as believed by various scholars is of the workforce and population. About only 4% of the Indian population is graduate (excluding the factors like technical education or skill). The rest is largely unskilled and lack a credible education, thus obviously are unable to get into the growing white collar sector. Education and skilling the people in working age group is considered to be an all inclusive solution. A skilful power loom operator can contribute much more and per capita income of such a worker would also be sufficient for the person to sustain with dignity. However, preservation of the culture, skilful hands are of importance as well. Such automation and mechanical advancements should not be at the cost of the skilful artisans and producers. As automation should mean hands-free and not hands-less.