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Overthere

Rural edge



Centurion University began its journey eight years ago when a group of former academicians joined hands to offer quality education to the poor. The effort began with the take-over of a nondescript engineering college, the Jagannath Institute for Technology and Management (JITM), at Paralakhemundi in Gajapati district of Orissa. Bordering Andhra Pradesh, Gajapati is one of the poorest districts in India, badly affected by Naxalism.

CENTURION UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT

What started as the Centurion School of Rural Enterprise Management (CSREM) is today a private state university with five campuses across Orissa offering BTech, MBA, Plus Two science, industrial training, primary and secondary education, in addition to skills and vocational training and social entrepreneurship initiatives.

"Ours was an experiment to create a skilled workforce from the deprived youth — considered a demographic burden on our nation," says Mukti K. Mishra, president of Centurion university who founded it with fellow academic, D.N. Rao. "These rural youths pick up the gun because they are impoverished and have no alternative means of employment," he adds.

Centurion University (through its social outreach body Gram Tarang) is one of the first partners to the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), a not-for-profit body formed by the finance ministry which plans to make 150 million youth employable by 2022. Centurion will set up over 50 skill training centres on the lines of CSREM across the country. "Right now we have over 7,000 students acquiring skills in welding, masonry, plumbing, hardware networking, automobile repair, electrical work and so on," says Abhinav Madan, head of Gram Tarang. Most of the students are recruited to manufacturing hubs in Pune, Chennai, Jamshedpur and so on. "These youths have deft hands and can work quite hard," says J.K. Majumder, a project head at Ashok Leyland in Bhubaneswar. Adds Ghashiram Bhalu, a tribal youth from Maoist-dominated Malkangiri district, "The Maoists nearly recruited me. Thanks to welding training here, I am getting a good job." As a certified welder he's set to join an air-conditioning firm near Pune.

Although Centurion's primary focus is skill development among rural youth, the university's engineering courses are also quite popular. "Our state-of-the art workshops help engineering students pick up hands on skills," says Mir Sadat Ali, an assistant professor of mechanical engineering. The department has strategic alliances with reputed companies such as National Aluminium Company Limited, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, Vedanta, Jindal and so on. "The mission of the department is to establish itself as a centre of excellence in the field of mechanical engineering through innovative teaching-learning and skill building methods," adds Ali. Other engineering departments, such as information technology, computer science and civil, are also catching up fast.

The sprawling new campus of Centurion Institute of Technology and Management, on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar (**in picture**), also offers MBA and Plus Two science courses. Says A.M. Mohanty, pro-vice chancellor of the university, "We don't produce desk workers as our management courses are industry oriented. Our modern workshops and links with manufacturing companies, help students get hired by top firms." Adds Mrityunjay Behera, a second-year MBA student, "Many heavy engineering companies recruit MBAs from our university."

The rural management students from CSREM, Paralakhmundi, too are in great demand in the microfinance industry, non-governmental organisations and even government employment schemes. "Since our courses have a rural edge, these sectors lap up our students ready to hit the rural market," says Anita Patra, postgraduate co-ordinator at the institute.