

Empowering people

A B-school on the extremist-infested Andhra-Orissa border shows an alternative way to tackle terror

The Harvard-educated home minister P. Chidambaram could learn some valuable lessons at this campus located in the heart of the Naxal-infested tribal district of Gajapati in Orissa, bordering Andhra Pradesh. Centurion School of Rural Enterprise Management (CSREM) is run by two management professors – Mukthi Mishra and D.N. Rao – who quit their jobs at Xavier Institute of Management Bhubaneswar (XIMB) to set up their own B-school barely seven years ago. They have made a tremendous impact in this poor and restive region. “Over the past few years, we have managed to produce over 10,000 graduates in engineering and management, and vocational certificate holders in a range of trades from the region,” says Mishra, co-founder of CSREM.

The work of the professors is not confined to Paralakhemundi village in Gajapati, where the campus is located. This is one of the 34 districts declared by the home ministry as extremist-infected. CSREM has spread its influence to three other adjoining districts – Srikakulam, Raigada and Bolangir – which are also on this list.

A shroud of white mist covers the miles of hills and forests surrounding the campus, which is situated on the picturesque slope of the Eastern Ghats. The buildings, some inherited by the professor duo from the erstwhile owners of this back-of-the-beyond engineering college, glisten with their new coat of paint.

“We built everything here,” declares Rao, who is keen to give a campus tour of over 300,000 sq ft of built-up space; at the end of the tour, one can understand the seriousness and commitment of the passionate team. “Our idea is to empower people, teach them the skills of survival, find them the market for their products and inspire them to teach others,” explains Rao, who had earlier run one of the most successful non-government initiatives to bring electricity and water to the rural poor of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

It’s not just what CSREM is doing now that is different; even the way it came to be set up and the management model that the duo is practising are unique. “It’s a call we could not resist,” recalls Mishra, while explaining how they came to set up a campus in Gajapati, where most would hesitate to venture.

Fund infusion

The campus – originally the Jagannath Institute of Technology and Management (JITM), an engineering college – needed infusion of funds and management. Mishra saw an opportunity. “It was not an easy decision to quit our jobs and move into this region, leave alone handle the affairs of a campus in a shambles,” he says. The institute had seen its heydays under the Gajapati ruling clan.

The two professors first set about rebuilding the campus. They brought in funds through a public-private partnership arrangement with equity

support from the Union ministry of small and medium enterprises and the industries department, government of Orissa. Getting faculty was next and then coaxing students in the region to take admissions. “A combination of vocational certification and regular courses helped us with our student pool,” explains Rao. That seems eons ago seen from the speed of progress of CSREM, which has now acquired a much larger campus tract and also set up its second campus at Lucknow with the same combination of B-school, engineering college and vocational training institutions.

Ashok Leyland recently inked an agreement to let CSREM train 10,000 of its mechanics and sales staff under the vocational training programmes, while the National Skills Development Corporation has entrusted the campus with the responsibility of training the region’s poor. “Building skills is not the only thing; there should be avenues of employment here,” says Rao, explaining the initiatives the campus has taken to generate jobs. “We set up a seed processing plant with ₹1 crore investment in the nearby region, an essential oil processing plant, an automobile spare parts plant, among others – all of which will generate their own income stream and of course, employment for those trained by us,” he explains.

The B-school of CSREM is no different from most other swanky, glass-and-concrete structures that dot the country, complete with multimedia classrooms, seminar halls and other trappings. The faculty members are an enthusiastic lot, not bothered about the fact that they are working at a school in one of the most backward regions of the country. “We attracted some of the best employers in the country including HDFC, Aviva, Bajaj Allianz and top NGO groups like PRADAN, BISWA and CPSW,” Guru Charan Patro, director, CSREM, says.

The next big opportunity has already come with CSREM becoming the first private university in Orissa. “CSREM University will have a department for tribal development,” says Mishra.

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