

# “The students are not adequately industry-involved”

From F&B Manager, to Chef, to General Manager, Virender S Datta has assumed different roles during his tenure in the hospitality industry. Now with his institute, the Indian Institute of Culinary Arts he believes it is time to pay back. He talks to us about the current situation in the HR segment in hospitality industry and suggests a few solutions to improve it.



## Virender S Datta

Founder,  
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## Manpower has always been a challenge for the industry, what is the current scenario in the industry?

I believe that the current situation is not good. Tourism in the country is not growing at the rate we thought it would. It is a constant subject of debate; we are getting only 0.06 percent of the global tourism shares. And we must look at why. Any service is served by the people who are involved in it. Any satisfied customer is your best sales person. Obviously this is not happening everywhere. I personally attribute this directly to the lack of trained manpower in the hospitality industry. There is a great rush for fast growth. Hence, at times, the training is not complete, their understanding is not complete. So this is one fundamental reason I believe the situation is not good. We need to focus very aggressively and seriously on the subject of what do we need first of all, what kind of training do we need, and what are we doing at the moment.

Currently the entire focus is on management training, where we are opening IHM institutes by dozens, in private as well as the public sector. Everybody joins these institutes thinking that he'll be a manager. For example, a hotel of 100 rooms might have 100-200 employees, but only 10 managers. So where are the rest of the 190 coming from? Who is training them? So with this logic, the distribution of training facilities should also be 10 percent vs. 90 percent. This is not happening; hence the answer is very clear. We do not have training facilities; we are training in the wrong direction. Those people who are trained thinking that they will be managers are dissatisfied when they come out and have to pick up plates and other menial tasks and then they start looking for other industries.

## What should the current focus be on to get skilled people?

Skills are again perceived as hand skills but they are of many forms. There are skills of the hands such as cookery and engineering and there are also skills of articulations such as speech, and other services as well, so you require skills at all levels. There is a lack of training facilities available and there is a lack of skills available. There is also a social stigma attached with the skills so anybody's child who does a little better, thinks skill is out of question for him, and he goes for academics. The first and major challenge for us is to change the social perception of skills and of taking them professionally. The skilled man is more important than one who does only academics. Today various skilled people are doing better than many other people who do academics. I think the fundamental issue is skill comprehension, what is skill and why it is so important. I must say in this direction, there is a very significant move by the government. There are skill councils they are putting up and there is also a hospitality skill council being developed. The government is now introducing programmes where a chef can do PhD in the culinary arts and a carpenter can do PhD in his sphere. These kinds of programmes, now being developed will raise the social status of a skilled person and he will be as respected as those in other professions. Therefore, good people will start coming to the industry.

## To get the required number of trained manpower, how many more institutes do we need to have?

My figures may not be correct but with reference to a recent presentation at the skills council committee it was explained that we need millions of trained manpower. If we go by the current rate, it will take us 100 years to train them. So I think we are just on the tip of a huge



iceberg and the rest of it below is waiting to be explored. We are very basic; putting any figures would be irrelevant at the moment. There is much more to be done in the training facilities they just don't exist, the concept is not there.

### **What are the major reasons behind this shortage of skilled manpower?**

The first and foremost reason for the shortage is the social acceptance of skills. I think, as today's generation grows up and become parents, the situation will change because they are going through this. We are a young age nation so I believe when this young age nation grows and comes into parenthood; they will value skills much more. Wisdom existed before also, but there was not the appropriate application of the same. Today much more wisdom exists and I am sure with the right environment the coming times will be better. A major mind shift is required and it will happen also.

### **Currently, what step can be taken by the industry and the institutes together to bring a change?**

First of all, industry and educationists must work together and I feel the moment this happens, things will be better. Right now we are working at cross purposes. The industry complains a lot that they are not getting the right students. So I think it is time that we come together and become partners in education. The faculties must work together, plan together and understand. Industry must tell us how are we doing, they must guide us as to what we should do and then must participate in sharing their highly professional staff, sharing their knowledge, being available. And this must become a part of their schedule, to train people, and come to the institutes.

Secondly, I personally believe that the

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moment a professional crosses the age of 55 years, he should think of education, he should think of transferring knowledge through education. He has been lucky. He has been fortunate to join good employers who invested heavily in him/her. What is the use of taking it home, and saying I used to do this and cursing the current situation. They should join in. This is very common practice in the western world and should now be practiced here too. Share your knowledge, be available to the institutes, and tell the students your *mantras*. There should be more availability of trained faculty, which is only possible if the senior professionals when planning their second innings, allocate a few hours of their lives to the institutes. Similarly, people in the industry also, who are at higher levels, must share learning options with them. This can change quite a lot from the industry point of view.

### **Why did you choose to take culinary education forward?**

Applying the same logic, when I turned 55, I switched to imparting knowledge. I was quite lucky to have employers like The Oberoi and ITC and others. They spent so heavily on me and sent me to England, America and Europe. I have played my innings. I have reached where I could have. Everyone has a level of incompetency. Everyone reaches there sooner or later. It's was then time for me to transfer my knowledge and so I started planning three years before my retirement. When I was travelling abroad, I was looking at education more seriously, I established contacts with

education providers. So my awareness of education as a subject increased much more. When I retired I was absolutely ready to launch this innng. In 2005 we launched this institute and I believe that this was the best decision of my life. I am very satisfied as youngsters come to me with their parents and the parents have dreams in their eyes for their children, and they leave all those aspirations with me. So this is a noble profession, it is not business and it is most rewarding to society. This is payback and it is high time we do it.

### **What is IICA's vision? How do you plan to improve the situation?**

It is driven from my personal experiences. In my opinion I did the right thing by shifting and becoming a chef. I had realised the lack of availability of chefs in the industry. I also realised how we were promoting people with less knowledge. There was nobody at the helm of affairs in any company who was a chef at once. I could have opened IHM and got many more students but I felt that this was one area which was neglected and needed to be filled in. My firm belief is that a chef can be a great General Manager one day if he wants to be. There are various examples in the industry currently. So if you want to be the General Manager of a hotel, start the chef route. You will reach that stage faster and better equipped. It is not about the cooking knowledge but the managerial skills you experience. It is better to be a chef than to be personnel in any other department of the hotel. This is so because managing a kitchen involves human resources

and leading the team. This is also the only department where the food cost is calculated every day, so the chef needs to be good at cost consciousness too. In the food business you get only one chance. If it is bad, the customer is gone, he has lost his appetite. This makes you quality conscious and you have to be right the first time and every time. Therefore, a chef's managerial skills develop better. Once he is the General Manager, he is very incisive. He is very involved and he leads from the front.

**Do you think the batches of students coming out of these institutes are industry ready? Or do they need to undergo another round of training?**

They are not industry ready yet. There is a reason behind it. Most students are from institutes which teach multiple subjects at one time. The reason is obvious. They are not very industry-involved. The course curriculums are so heavy that they cannot complete the theory part. Where do they have time for the practical? Internationally, hotel management institutes have classes only three times a week

and that too for just four hours a day. After that the students are expected to work in the industry. They are industry ready even before they pass out. Industry uses them. Students here are not industry ready. Hence they have to undergo training programmes.

We, at IICA, have a different approach. We are governed by international methods because of our course curriculums and affiliations. Our students are industry ready within four months of joining the college. We have tied up with hotels and restaurants where our students work after three p.m. They work for five to 10 hours, they get paid, they get experience and so they get placements easily as they are already involved. We are a skill rooted industry. All growth will happen through the skill route.

The second reason why they are not ready is that industry is not involved with the institutes. They have to start giving more value to these students coming from the institutes. The industry must ensure that they are not used as a cheap labour. Also the leaders of the institute must have close links with the industry. As industry is the end user, so they have to be

partners, hand in gloves with us. Various hotels are coming forward but more should come up.

**What new development do you see in the HR segment in the industry?**

The major development that I see is that now students will be working also. This must happen faster and this is possible if the industry accepts it. That major shift to multi-skill is going to happen which will make the shortage of chefs history. Within the industry also they should expose young people to new experiences. I used to put my Sous Chef in manager's uniform whenever the Restaurant Manager was on leave and vice versa just to make them experience what the other person goes through. The management has to think a little bit more out of the box. We are too much in the box. We must break out of this mode of thinking and think about innovation and change. I believe HR Managers and people on the board must start thinking differently and take such people on board as are skill oriented. ■

as told to **NIKITA CHOPRA**

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