CHAPTER 7

RPL in India: Suggestions and Recommendations

7.0   Overview of the thesis

This research is an attempt to study the issue of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as envisaged by the Indian policy of skill development, especially for the workforce in the unorganized sector, under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY). The study was undertaken to be able to ultimately help inform implementation of RPL in India by both, understanding its practical implementation by conducting case studies on the RPL Project Types (in the government and in private settings) in India, and by studying the policies and practices of RPL in other contexts across the world. To achieve this objective, the study sought to answer the following four research questions:

RQ 1 What do policy documents reflect about the current strategy of Recognition of Prior Learning being implemented by the Government of India for skilling workforce in the unorganised sector under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana?

RQ 2   How is the strategy of Recognition of Prior Learning being implemented by the National Skill Development Corporation through its Project Implementing Agencies for skill development of the workforce in the unorganised sector in India?

RQ 3 What lessons can be drawn from the strategy of Recognition of Prior Learning as practiced in different international contexts to inform and promote the efforts of the Government of India for skill development of its workforce?

RQ 4 What recommendations can be proposed for improving the effectiveness of the strategy of Recognition of Prior Learning for skilling workers in the unorganised sector in India?

Accordingly, the study began by laying out the nature of the skilling challenge that India faces given its huge unskilled working age population engaged in the unorganized sector in the introductory chapter. Thereafter, the methodology adopted and the theoretical framework of this study was delineated in Chapter 2 and the literature review done for this research was elaborated in Chapter 3. Consequent to laying out these broad factors guiding the present research, Indian government's policy documents related to skill development in general and RPL in particular were analysed in the fourth chapter in order to comprehend the vision, policy and implementation strategy of RPL in India. The succeeding Chapter 5 was related to the study of the actual implementation of RPL in India under the PMKVY which was sought to be analysed by conducting case studies on two of the three RPL Project Types, namely - RPL Camps as well as RPL at Employer's Premises (no RPL Centres Project Type was in operation in the Delhi NCR region that could be studied). Overall, the case studies involved observing the RPL process under the PMKVY in operation at

three RPL venues (RPL Camps at the Gandhi Smriti Gandhi Darshan for auto-rickshaw drivers and at New Ashok Nagar for domestic workers as well as RPL at Employer's Premises at Noida for sewing machine operators) and analyzing the special RPL at the Employer's Premise conducted at the Rashtrapati Bhawan where approximately 1500 employees were trained for certification in 2016. Besides self observation and analysis, in order to understand the RPL process and its policy and implementation at work in India, the techniques of interactions, discussions, interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires were used with the relevant stakeholders in the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), National Skill Development Council (NSDC), Sector Skill Councils (SSCs), Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs), RPL facilitators and mobilisers, Training Partners (TPs), NGOs involved in training, Employer's getting RPL done at their premises, Assessment Agencies (AAs) and the candidates themselves. The sixth chapter then discussed some of the main studies done related to implementation of RPL in different countries which can help inform and improve the Indian strategy of RPL; albeit not by 'policy and practice' borrowing but rather, by 'policy and practice' learning for applying as relevant to the context. The thesis concludes herein by answering, in this seventh chapter, the final Research Question of giving suggestions and recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the implementation of the RPL strategy for skill development of the workforce in the unorganised sector in India so as to achieve better outcomes which are discussed in the following concluding section of this thesis.

7.1   Suggestions and Recommendations

The understanding gained about the RPL strategy in India on the basis of a study of policy documents, analysing the process of actual RPL implementation as well as by learning about the different policies and practices in vogue related to this field in different countries have all contributed to the several findings that can inform the Indian policy and practice of RPL. As such, an attempt has been made here to list out a set of ten suggestions and recommendations that can help improve the overall effectiveness of the RPL strategy for skill development of the workforce in the unorganised sector in India.

1.   Aligning RPL Policy & Practice with its Definition & Intended Purpose

Findings: The RPL policy in India is not conceptualized in terms of the construct of RPL as seen in research findings and as elaborated in the academic discourses on the subject worldwide. This is so since RPL in India does not come across as a policy aimed primarily at recognizing, validating and formally accrediting the previously acquired learning of individuals gained through any learning pathway - be it formal, non-formal or informal. The focus of the RPL is, therefore, not just on certifying the previous learning of individuals, since the assessment is carried out also about the inputs on soft skills and digital literacy that are given to the candidates during the RPL process.

Recommendations: The Indian policy must, first and foremost, be truly aligned with the basic purpose of RPL, which is to certify the learning already available with the individuals such that those skills and competences can be formally recognized and given a stamp of acknowledgment through government

certification. In that sense, RPL must become an entitlement. The Indian legal framework must be modified and strengthened to enhance acceptability of lifelong and life-wide learning together with RPL, and give credibility to RPL certificates as being equivalent in value to other formal learning pathways.

2. Increasing Acceptance of RPL Certification by Industry & Candidates

Findings: RPL certification done by linking an individual's skills with the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) consequent to the RPL training process as per the policy documents and as implemented by agencies under the supervision of NSDC, unfortunately does not have the acceptance among the industry and employers yet and its general awareness levels are rather low. The RPL certificates are, in fact, not known by many people. In fact, at the Project Type RPL Camps for domestic workers, most candidates had heard about the RPL scheme from the mobiliser, at Gandhi Smriti Gandhi Darshan, 30% each said they heard from their employers and those who had done it previously and 24% from friends and family. At the Project Type of RPL at Employer's Premise, 100% of the respondents at M/s Sonu Exim had learnt about the scheme from those who had done this previously. At Rashtrapati Bhawan, 42% heard about it from the employer, 32% from friends/family and only 26% from newspaper and radio. So, media publicity was found to be less.

Further, the possession of this certificate given under the aegis of NSDC for the RPL scheme of PMKVY does not translate into individuals getting better jobs or higher incomes. In fact, the output of RPL scheme under PMKVY has come under severe criticism primarily since the skilling programme is not leading

to employment placements. Thus, the RPL certificate is still not considered the most significant take-away by those undergoing the RPL process, who value the other aspects of the training (on soft skills, digital literacy and domain knowledge) more, including the monetary stipend.

Recommendations: The importance of the certificate issued for recognizing the prior skills and competences of individuals must be enhanced by the government and be given more visibility and weightage. Besides giving these certificates and their relevance wide publicity in the media, government must make these certificates as essential requirements for getting employment in the government and in the private sector to the extent possible (say for the government work outsourced to be done by the workforce in the unorganized sector, for instance, contracts for infrastructure projects, *swatchta abhiyaan* related projects, etc). These certificates would become sought after only when people realize their tangible benefits of leading to jobs and/or higher incomes of being able to earn the official wage rates; and not just on the basis of perceived intangible benefits like being the first and maybe the only formal qualification for many workers in the unorganized sector or for increasing their self-esteem/social recognition.

3. Skills Gap Analysis & Training in Core Skills/Domain Knowledge

Findings: As learnt from the RPL practices elsewhere in the world, and as, in fact, also laid out in the RPL framework guidelines made by NSDC as well as in the Candidates Feedback Form of NSDC, one of the main aspects of the process is that for the candidates undergoing the RPL process to be able to identify their skill gaps by doing self-assessment of the possessed skills. However, the skills

gaps were evidently not identified since all candidates were being given the same training inputs at all the RPL venues studied. The current policy and practice of the RPL process lays down imparting 12 hours of training to the RPL candidates with inputs related to – (i) RPL under the PMKVY *per se* (2 hours); (ii) soft skills with information about personal health and hygiene, life-skills, stress management, management of finances, behavioral changes to suit employment needs, etc.; digital literacy (4 hours); and (iii) training on core skills/domain knowledge (6 hours). However, the case studies undertaken revealed that 95% of candidates at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, 68% of auto-drivers and 79% of sewing machine operators wanted more inputs on core skills. Since most candidates, including those at employers' premise, wanted more core skills, this indicates the requirement for upskilling in the domain trade in the eyes of the respondents. At both the RPL venues at Employer's Premise, the respondents did not consider the training on the core inputs as being the best. This reflects that the objective of RPL which should be to top up the skill gap in the domain knowledge was not fulfilled. In fact, it ought to have been rated as the best, had the true spirit of RPL was given focus. Interestingly, a head of a PIA who was interviewed mentioned with all sincerity of purpose that in his understanding of RPL, he was helping in National Mission on digital literacy, opening bank accounts and doing the Aadhaar card linkage. This was on account of their having to spend a lot of time, effort and resources on getting these basic requirements of the candidates filled from candidates before mobilizing and identifying RPL candidates to be shortlisted for inclusion in the RPL process. Thus, according to him, he was

doing the job well and very specifically as per the policy. As can be seen, this very effort was itself the reason for taking away the focus of RPL from the actual assessment and certification and helping top up the knowledge and skill gap of the candidates by more specific training in domain/trade related areas.

Recommendations: Once the identification of the skill gaps has been done, RPL implementers ought to make the training programme such that it helps the candidates seeking their RPL to get the necessary short top-up training only. This would help the individuals get assessed and certified for the relevant NSQF level according to the capabilities they possess. As such, the prime focus of the RPL process should be to help candidates identify their skill gaps and then giving them top-up domain knowledge training which can improve their trade related skill levels, including some soft skills if those help them get more proficient and efficient at a work place. Such skill training would help them fetching higher levels of employment and/or incomes once they have more domain skills and a formal acceptable certificate acknowledging their skill level.

4. Correct Assessment & Linking with Commensurate NSQF Level

Findings: Regarding the assessment carried out at the end of the training, it was seen that a much larger percentage of those undergoing RPL at the Project Type Employer's Premise felt that they knew more than what they were certified for (71% sewing machine operators at the garment factory and 68% of respondents at the Rashtrapati Bhawan). Most respondents also felt that they should have got a higher grading (92% auto-drivers, 68% respondent at Rashtrapati Bhawan and 43% sewing machine operators). This could be a manifestation of two aspects –

(i) those with skills and domain knowledge felt they deserved a higher grading since they knew their job better than the training inputs being given; and (ii) they knew more than others being trained and certified along with them, who (surprisingly) all received the same NSQF level of certification. It was observed that all those trained were being assessed for the same NSQF level (whether it was pre-decided as being – NSQF Level 3, 4 or 5 for each RPL training scheduled) with different Grades at each venue depending upon the assessment result achieved based on a combination of test of knowledge done on a tablet, a viva and a trade test. This does not seem to be a correct practice since people have different level of competences, each of which technically and theoretically needs to be assessed while doing RPL.

Recommendations: It is important that a RPL process validates the actual amount of knowledge and skills possessed by individuals coming for RPL training and assessment. It is obvious that individuals would possess different levels of skills. As such, a true assessment of their skills becomes crucial so that all are not eventually given the same NSQF level of certification (with a difference only in their grades) depending upon performance in a test of knowledge about PMKVY, RPL, soft skills, digital literacy as well as core skills. The certification ought to build trust in the system of validation and assessment by properly assessing each candidates' prior skills and competences, and not lead instead to demotivation by assessing the entire group as possessing the same NSQF level. There ought to be a provision for giving the candidates a certificate of the higher NSQF level for those found possessing higher skills than those being certified.

5. Provide Routes to Upgrading Skills & Career Progression

Findings: It was observed that candidates undergoing the RPL process as domestic workers, auto-rickshaw drivers, sewing machine operators or even the 19 different job roles like those of the gardener, butler, data-entry operator, security guard, driver, etc. at the Rashtrapati Bhawan were all given the certification, consequent to their passing the assessment test for their respective trades. However, this certification did not show them the possibility and the path to move up the skills ladder or of career progression by getting the next level of NSQF certification, after getting further experience and/or training inputs through short term training programmes or bridge courses that could assist the process.

Recommendations: To make RPL process more relevant and meaningful and more sought after by unskilled workforce, each SSC, in tandem with NSDC, ought to carve out a Skills Ladder or an Occupational Map which could inform the workers in the unorganized sector (who lack skills, are illiterate and low on awareness), about the avenues/ opportunities that could be availed by moving to the next level of NSQF. Thus, given their current prior skills assessed and certified, they could undertake further short trainings and/or gather experience to move to the next NSQF level. This process would enhance their self-esteem and give them the certified qualification to seek out better employment and livelihood which is the stated objective of the RPL policy in India. Thus far, the value of certification and its relevance to switch jobs remains low, not only due of its low acceptance, but also since it is not linked to using it as a credit to move to the next NSQF level. Making of Occupational Maps for each sector must be a

priority. Here, initiative taken by the SSC for Domestic Workers is worth recalling as it is proposing an Occupational Map (with detailed Qualification Packs) for domestic workers, house-helpers and care givers from the current only Level 2 up to Level 8 (a stage where the domestic workers themselves become a placement agent of other domestic workers).

6. Proper Trainers, Training & Training Facilities

Findings: With regard to the rating of Trainers, at the two RPL Camps studied, all those undertaking training for domestic workers found them to be 'Excellent', but only 68% of auto-drivers found them so. At Employer's Premises, while 71% of sewing machine operators responded that trainers were excellent, but at Rashtrapati Bhawan this percentage was as low as 47%, with 21% considering them as 'Good' and 26% even rated the trainers as 'Average'. This reflects the need for better trainers. Regarding whether the trainers should be trained more, some respondents felt that the trainers needed more training (29% at M/s Sonu Exim, 58% at Rashtrapati Bhawan and 23% of auto-drivers). It is important to bear in mind that this is the situation of training and trainers within the national capital region where monitoring is relatively easier with the MSDE and NSDC both being located here. Furthermore, two of these trainings being analysed were conducted in important governmental set ups: with a Special RPL at the Rashtrapati Bhawan and a Mahatma Gandhi's commemorative centenary celebrations of Champaran related initiative at GSGD. Thus, it would not be wrong in assuming that the quality and effectiveness of the trainers and training in rest of India can only be worse off, in line with what one hears about it.

At all four RPL venues, most of the respondents were satisfied with the venue and the training facilities available. However, a few respondents felt that the facilities could have been better. It needs to be brought out that training for domestic workers was being conducted inside a resident colony in a house on the ground floor. In half of the room clean durries were laid out where 50 women trainees were seated on the ground for the training session. The other half of the room had been converted into an area for giving hands-on training for this batch of house-helps. A make-shift kitchen was created in one corner which also had electronic gadgets used in homes (oven, microwave, food-processor, vacuum cleaner, etc.). Next to the kitchen, was a dining table for teaching how to lay the table and serve food. A double-bed was also available in the same space for teaching them how to make the bed, as was a sofa-set and a centre table to create a make-shift drawing room. Thus, effort had been made by the trainers to make available gadgets and furniture available in a normal house-hold. Naturally, had this training been conducted at a venue where a whole house was available to teach the candidates in detail, was bound to have had a better training impact. The training facilities should also be located at places where demand exists for absorbing the supply of RPL candidates. As mentioned earlier in this study, many PMKK centres fitted with the latest training facilities were being closed down in different parts of India for want of candidates. Thus, backward linkages with the industry generating the demand for skilled workers must be a priority which the government has now started focusing on.

Recommendations: One must bear in mind the profile of trainees being given RPL training and that they might not know what else they could have hoped for. Thus, it is felt that training inputs and facilities provided must be given priority by the trainers, RPL facilitators, PIAs as well as by the concerned SSC itself. Training on core skills must lead to enhancement of the skills already available with the candidates and not be a mere repetition of what they already know as part of their prior learning. It is for this very reason that the candidates' self-assessment at the beginning as well as identification of skill gaps is of crucial importance. RPL should never lead to giving training on aspects that are already available with the candidates, rather it is giving those specific inputs that the candidates do not possess and that need to be topped-up. Thus, the RPL process needs to be much more than the generic training currently being provided, as otherwise the skills set of the candidates are not getting enhanced and upgraded to make them employment ready. In fact, a sentiment exists that, in all of this, the only business that seems to be flourishing is that of PIAs, TPs and AAs with the outgo of GOI funds through NSDC; unfortunately without achieving the intended outcomes.

7. Increasing Awareness Levels of All Stakeholders in the RPL Process

Findings: There are several stakeholders in the RPL process - the MSD , NSDC, the SSCs, PIAs providing RPL at the three RPL Project Types, RPL Facilitators, Mobilisers, NGOs involved in various capacities, TPs, AAs, Assessors, Certifiers, Employer's, Industry, Monitoring and Evaluation Officials, and the Candidates themselves. It was observed that most stakeholders were not aware about the RPL process. The centrality of the candidate being made aware of the

entire process has been established by all countries. It has been also established that for best results, the mobilisers and assessors should be tasked to make the candidates fully aware about the entire process. However, it was seen that the candidates undergoing the training were rather clueless about the entire process prior to joining the programme. They were, in fact, being told about RPL and PMKVY during the course of the main training itself with 2 hours out of the 12 being kept aside for this purpose alone. This means a loss of valuable resources – time, effort and money, besides, of course, defeating the very purpose of RPL which is to certify the prior learning of candidates of which the candidates are themselves desirous off and are willingly wanting to join the programme, without having to be given stipends for it and being "mobilized" for.

Here it is worthwhile to recall that at the RPL Camp for domestic workers RPL training, most women candidates lived in the same locality of New Ashok Nagar where the training was being conducted. However, two women had travelled more than 15 kms to reach the venue, using several modes of transport - bus, auto-rickshaw and a rickshaw, but still these women had no complaints of travelling such a long distance as they said that the training and the certificate that they would receive was worth the effort they were making. This reply did not seem convincing to those present and so they further questioned about their real motives for doing this RPL training. The responses that they had missed the training in their own area and hence they were keen to do it seemed convincing. However, the fact that they were neither working as maids nor had an intention to do so after this training seemed intriguing. This aspect, in fact, went against the

very grain of the skilling of the workforce in the unorganized sector which the PMKVY aims to do and provide employable skills to better their livelihoods. Here, it is important to recall that only 17 out of 50 candidates enrolled i.e. 34% of the women undergoing the RPL training were actually working as maids or wanting to do so after undergoing the training. This showed that the mobiliser of the training had actually managed to get 50 "bodies" mobilized together for the training, rather than workers wanting to be certified to improve employment.

Recommendations: It must be ensured that all the stakeholders are trained and are fully aware about the entire RPL process along with all its nuances. Knowledge about the programme must flow equally at all levels, a finding for successful implementation of RPL across the world. The current system seems to suggest that stakeholders are interested in different goals, which are not necessarily aligned to enhancing the skill levels of the workforce. Interactions with different stakeholders and people suggested that PIAs were interested in making skilling a commercial venture since NSDC gives money per candidate trained and finally placed in employment, to the SSC and the PIA (and through them to the TPs/NGOs) and AAs as well as to the candidates. It was seen that the mobilizing of candidates left much to be desired (as in the case of the RPL Camp for domestic workers). While training inputs were better at the venues, the training scenario in other parts of India did not seem to be good as understood during the course of interactions.

8. Monetary Stipends & Fees for Training

Findings: It was noted that candidates undergoing RPL training were being given a stipend of Rs 500, besides not paying any fees. These were being funded through the NSDC by the MSDE, GOI. The findings of the case studies reflected that there were respondents who would have done the training without receiving the stipend. Also, while many said that they would not have undergone this process, if they had to pay for it, but there were some who were willing to pay a reasonable amount for fees as well.

Recommendations: GOI needs to re-assess these monetary issues of stipends and fees; albeit consequent to publicizing the benefits of RPL certification to the industry and the target group of citizens. Once these benefits are recognized, there would be no need for stipends to be doled out, as also possibly of PMKVY logo-bearing T-shirts and caps (which, in any case, are gender insensitive and do not cater well for traditional Indian women undergoing trainings. A case in point being women domestic workers who, incidentally, were not found wearing RPL uniforms). Furthermore, corporates and industry must also contribute to the fees element, especially, for the Project Type at Employer's Premises since such a training directly benefits its own employees and the enterprise by having a better skilled workforce. The issue of levying a nominal fees from candidates, could however, also be considered at a later stage once RPL certification is valued more.

9. Improving Assessment, Monitoring & Evaluation Process – Quality Management & Quality Assurance

Findings: Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation were found to be the weak links in the RPL chain. These need to be strengthened if the true impact and significance of RPL is to be realized. It is impossible for the scheme to be successfully implemented if it is monitored only from the Ministry or the NSDC level. In fact, MSDE has already begun shifting the focus to the Districts, which is a welcome step. NSDC has also been conducting impact assessment studies, but it still requires a huge dedicated team to see the nature, level and quality of the RPL process, including recognizing, validating, training, assessing and certifying the candidates.

Recommendations: Quality management and quality assurance have to become the mantras that are strictly followed. While rewards must be given to those maintaining the standards and to become benchmarks for others to follow, punishments for slackness and wrong identification, training and assessment must also be exemplary such that they become a huge disincentive.

10. Targetting Unskilled Workforce in the Unorganized Sectors

Findings: It was seen that RPL under PMKVY was being conducted at both government and at private setups. While the training was being given to private auto-drivers at GSGD, however, certification at Rashtrapati Bhawan was given to both the permanent and temporary employees. MSDE has also conducted RPL for contractual labour working in their own Ministry, as are other governmental offices, like the Indian Navy, Ministry of Shipping, which were considering it.

Recommendations: The SOP for RPL (2017:51) lays down in the purpose and objectives of RPL that the proposals submitted must target the marginalized workers and groups with a degree of experience in their skill-based trades, but without access to formalized training opportunities. So, looking at this aspect and keep in mind that India has a huge 400 million strong unskilled workforce in the unorganized sector, then those already in the organized sector, be it working in Government sector or those working with the big Corporates (as the new scheme is proposing to do under the fourth RPL Project Type for the Best in Class Corporates) should not be the target group for this form of RPL which is completely state funded. Resources on hand must be used for right targeting of groups that have no scope for formal skilling whatsoever and to recognize their prior learning by giving them certified qualifications that are well recognised by industry and which can get them better livelihoods ultimately.

3.   Concluding Remarks

This research has been in the nature of providing an overarching insight into a subject that is of great concern and crucial significance for India. A full-fledged pan-India study undertaken at this early stage itself of the roll-out of the RPL scheme under PMKVY 2.0 would enable the government to make the necessary course correction. Such an initiative would ensure that meaningful results flow and the scheme is restructured with all social partners and stakeholders committed to the Skill India Mission with the right motives, right purpose and right earnestness.