

The Distance between Learning and Earning

Reflections from Charcha 2026: What it takes for a skill to become a Livelihood

I went to Charcha 2026 with a fairly familiar question in my head. What should India's next step in the skilling journey look like? I work around skilling, so I expected to come back with sharper answers about curriculum, industry linkages, future skills or employment. Instead, I came back with a different question- **What is the ecosystem that allows a skill to move from being something a person knows to something a person can use, earn from, grow through and build a life around?**

Across multiple panel discussions, NGOs, practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders explored this question from different vantage points: technology, public services, agriculture, women's economic participation, entrepreneurship and education.

The discussions on AI asked **what happens in the gap between technology and the technical know-how of a person expected to use it?** Conversations on public services asked **what comes after access?** Discussions on agriculture raised the question of **how information becomes action.** Discussions on women's economic participation asked **what stands between having an opportunity and utilizing the opportunity?** Entrepreneurship conversations explored **why a business that has started often struggles to grow.** Lastly, discussions on education asked **what happens between attending school and attending work?**

Different sectors, different problems, but the same underlying concern: **what needs to exist between an intervention and the outcome we ultimately hope to see?** Subsequently, sessions on scaling asked what happens between a promising programme and an institution that can sustain it. Seen together, these were not separate problems. They were gaps. And skilling sits right in the middle of many of them.

We often describe the skilling journey as a neat sequence: enrolment, training, assessment, certification and placement. But the life of a young person is not a sequence of programme milestones. Before enrolling, there is aspiration. Before attending the training classes, there is access. Before accepting a job, there is family, mobility, concerns on safety and information. Inside the job, there is the question of whether the training actually prepared the person for the workplace. And after joining, there is the much harder question of whether the job becomes a pathway to something better. The conversation on India's New Skilling Journey hosted by **Pratham Education Foundation** captured some of this tension well. **Young people are not rejecting vocational work; they are asking whether it offers dignity, respect and a path to progress.** The session also questioned whether a certificate can really tell us enough about workplace readiness, and whether placement should remain our final measure of success.

The story doesn't end here. I attended several parallel sessions that gave me deeper insights into the non-linear, systemically intertwined nature of skilling, employment, and beyond. I attended a session on "Women at Work", hosted by **Kaabil - Mahindra Rise**. The discussion made me think about the difficulty around mobility, safety, childcare or family decision-making- which are not directly "skilling" issues themselves. But if a young woman cannot reach the job safely, the skill has not failed but the system around the skill has.

The conversations on Vikshit Zila for Vikshit Bharat: Catalysing livelihoods raised another question: are we training people for jobs that the local economy can actually create? Every district has a different economic reality—its industries, farms, enterprises, services and patterns of migration. Skilling must begin by understanding that reality. **The question is not only what skill a young person can learn, but where that skill can create economic value.**

The conversations around employers and entrepreneurship, including those led by **PRADAN, Meesho, and the Global Alliance for Mass Entrepreneurship (GAME)**, highlighted a common theme: capability alone is not enough. Employers emphasised the need to shape talent well before the placement stage, while discussions on enterprise growth showed that training alone does not help small businesses cross the next threshold. **Market access, procurement, finance, business support, and opportunities are as important as skills and capability.**



(Saurabh, seated in the top row in a white shirt, alongside Rajeshji, Co-Head, Pratham, during Charcha)

This is where I began to rethink the status quo. Perhaps the training centre should not be the centre of the skilling system. Around that young person, there is a connected system: a school that creates aspiration; a community that makes participation possible; training providers who build relevant skills; employers who allow honing of those skills; local economies that make opportunities accessible; public and private citizens who can make safe access to employment a reality; technology that reduces information gaps. All of the above need to work in tandem to make the transition after the first job a reality.

This may also explain why the AI conversations felt relevant to skilling even when they were not about skilling. The strongest discussions were not about putting AI into everything. They were about making systems more responsive using data, voice, local language and trusted human networks to help people act on opportunities. The same principle applies to skilling.

The natural next question is: What does success look like, especially for implementing organizations? We must not only ask: How many young people did we train, but also: What made them choose the trade? What prevented others from choosing it? Could they access the training? Did the training reflect the workplace? Was there a viable opportunity nearby? If they migrated, what helped them stay? If they stayed in the job, where could they go next?

These questions are harder to put into a dashboard. But they may tell us much more about whether skilling is actually creating economic mobility. Perhaps this is what I was really taking away from Charcha.

India's development challenge is increasingly not the absence of one more intervention. It is the absence of connection between the interventions we already have. And skilling is no different. A skill does not travel alone. It travels with aspiration, access, trust, mobility, markets, employers, technology and opportunity.

Our next skilling journey, therefore, is not simply about creating skilled people. **It is about creating the conditions in which skills can find opportunity, opportunity can create income, and income can become a livelihood.**

Author: Saurabh Pandey, Program Development Team