

Fixing India's Skilling Pipeline: Supply, Demand and Dignity of Work

India does not lack talent. It lacks pathways that translate potential into dignified work. The country's skilling challenge is often framed as a **question of scale, but the deeper issue lies in perception, access, and outcomes**. Across India, young people are building livelihoods through vocational skills, navigating pathways that were once seen as second-best. From workshops and hospital wards to small enterprises, these journeys reflect a larger shift underway. Vocational education is slowly shedding stigma and emerging as a credible route to economic mobility, stability, and dignity of work.

From Stigma to Aspiration: A Cultural Shift

For decades, vocational education in India carried deep-rooted stigma. It was seen as a route for those who could not succeed academically. Manual, technical, or care work was often regarded as “lesser” compared to white-collar, degree-oriented careers. This perception, anchored in both class and caste hierarchies, has been one of the biggest barriers to meaningful skilling uptake.

But the ground is slowly shifting. Globally, vocational education is recognized as a vital driver of employment and progress toward the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. For example, [SDG 4.4 calls](#) for a substantial increase in youth participation in vocational skills training by 2030. **Germany**, for instance, sees [nearly half its youth in dual vocational training systems](#). In **China**, vocational skills are [central to workforce planning](#). Even in rapidly digitizing economies such as **Singapore and South Korea**, vocational high schools are industry-aligned, aspirational, and seamlessly integrated into mainstream education.

India must catch up. With over [65 percent of its population under 35](#), the demographic window is narrow and urgent. Despite flagship programmes such as PMKVY and DDU-GKY, and the integration of vocational streams in the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**, uptake remains limited. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey ([PLFS 2023](#)), only **4.9 percent of youth aged 15–29** reported receiving formal vocational training. The issue now goes beyond infrastructure. It is about transforming how society values skilled work and who gets access to these opportunities.

When the Numbers Speak: Evidence from the Field

Across the social impact sector, emerging evidence points to the transformative power of vocational training when it is delivered well. At Pratham Skilling, for instance, nearly 60,000 youth have been trained in the past two years across sectors such as healthcare, hospitality, construction, beauty, automotive, and electrical trades. In FY 2023–24 alone, over 26,000 youth were trained across 17 Indian states. **Nearly half, 48 percent, were women**. Most were **first-generation learners, with 90 percent belonging to SC, ST, OBC, or minority communities, and 92 percent coming from households earning INR 10,000 or less per month**. Even in the face of structural disadvantages, **63 percent had completed Class 12, graduation, or technical diplomas**, challenging the myth that vocational training is only for the “underqualified.”

The outcomes further challenge prevailing assumptions. Of those trained, **82 percent of participants were placed in skill-aligned jobs immediately after training. Around 72 percent remained engaged in employment, self-employment, or further education six months later**. One year after training, **68 percent were still active in productive pathways**. Among trained women, **64 percent remained economically active a year later**, a strong indicator of both resilience and agency.

The diversity of trajectories is striking. Some alumni move into formal jobs, while others pursue self-employment or higher education. Ajay from Aurangabad started with a monthly income of INR 10,000 and now earns over INR 55,000 through his own electrical repair business. Shama, trained in beauty

services in Bhopal, earns INR 65,000 a month and plans to open her own training academy. Healthcare trainees such as Rani and Rekha from Ranchi are now pursuing postgraduate degrees.

These are not outliers. They represent a growing trend in which vocational skilling enables economic mobility, particularly for first-generation learners across sectors, geographies, and gender.

What Makes Vocational Training Work?

At its best, vocational education challenges India's rigid hierarchies of work by democratizing opportunity. With [85 percent of India's workforce still in the informal sector](#), vocational skilling offers a **rare formal intervention point to improve incomes and livelihoods**. It enables youth, especially those from rural, marginalized, and low-income backgrounds, to become **not just wage earners but creators of value**. A plumber servicing 10 homes a week or a beauty entrepreneur in a tribal belt is no less critical to India's growth story.

However, success depends on much more than technical instruction. At Pratham, for instance, the model invests across the **full value chain, including mobilization, life skills, career counselling, placement support, and, crucially, post-training mentorship**. Trainees learn not just their trade but also communication, financial literacy, time management, digital fluency such as UPI usage, and job readiness.

Job quality matters too. In 2023, **66 percent of trainees received support such as accommodation, travel allowances, and food benefits**. This reinforces the principle that dignified work must be economically viable, not extractive. Additionally, **60 percent of Pratham-trained youth were placed in their home districts**. This is particularly important in a country where migration decisions are shaped by gender, caregiving responsibilities, and safety concerns.

What sets strong vocational training providers apart is a holistic model. Career counselling, job readiness sessions, and mentorship improve not just job placement but also job retention and long-term growth. A [₹60,000 crore investment](#) to modernise Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) through public-private partnerships is a promising step. It signals that the government sees skilling not just as a social obligation but as a strategic economic priority. However, infrastructure alone will not transform outcomes. What matters is how training is delivered, who delivers it, and whether it leads to meaningful opportunity.

What Must Change?

While successful examples exist, they remain isolated. Systemic change requires a shift on multiple fronts.

1. Adapt Skilling for the Future of Work

India's vocational training ecosystem must evolve for a rapidly changing economy. Emerging sectors such as renewable energy, eldercare, green construction, and platform-based work are redefining employment. It is estimated that India could create [millions of new "green jobs" by 2030](#). Vocational curricula must integrate adaptability, digital skills, soft skills, and sector-specific technical competencies to ensure that youth are future-ready.

2. Fix the Demand Side: Quality Jobs Matter

Training alone cannot solve India's employment challenge. Job quality remains a persistent bottleneck. Employers must co-design curricula, ensure clear career pathways, and provide dignified work standards, including minimum wage enforcement, safe and gender-sensitive workplaces, childcare support, anti-harassment protocols, and access to social security such as ESIC, PF, and

health insurance. The private sector must step up, not just as recruiters but as co-investors in skilling ecosystems.

3. Integrate Vocational Training into Mainstream Education

The NEP 2020 provides a rare opportunity to dissolve the false binary between academic and vocational tracks. India can learn from countries such as [Singapore, Germany, and South Korea](#), where vocational high schools offer aspirational and credit-linked pathways. Interlinked academic and vocational systems would allow students to move seamlessly between technical training, higher education, and career advancement.

Stigma remains a stubborn barrier. Skilled workers are still often perceived as less capable or easily replaceable. All three levers, adapting curricula, improving job quality, and integrating skilling into education, must work together to reshape aspirations and outcomes.

Reframing the Narrative: Dignity of Work

Economist Amartya Sen argues that development must be assessed not just by economic growth but by the expansion of people's capabilities. Vocational training is central to this idea. It expands individuals' ability to choose work that is both meaningful and economically viable. For thousands of young people, vocational training serves as a launchpad. It builds both resources, such as skills and income, and agency, including choice, dignity, and aspiration. It also aligns with India's growing service economy and infrastructure needs, making it not only inclusive but also demand-driven and economically relevant.

India does not just need to skill its youth. It needs to value their skills. Culturally, the country must elevate the dignity of skilled work and rebuild the narrative around what constitutes value. National campaigns should position electricians, plumbers, caregivers, and solar technicians as nation builders rather than fallback options. India's skill development ecosystem has already demonstrated the power of public-private partnerships in reaching scale, aligning with industry, and innovating in delivery. Civil society organisations, training providers, and the private sector must now go further by co-creating curricula, ensuring placements, building strong local ecosystems, and elevating skilled work as the backbone of India's future.

Author: Snigdha Sony, Program Development Team