

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Every year, the Amarnath Yatra, one of India's most significant spiritual pilgrimages, draws hundreds of thousands of devotees to the pristine heights of the Himalayas in Jammu & Kashmir. The journey to the holy cave, where Lord Shiva is worshipped in the form of a naturally formed ice lingam, is a symbol of faith, resilience, and devotion. However, while the pilgrimage inspires spiritual transcendence, it also presents enormous logistical, environmental, and security challenges, demanding meticulous advance planning and coordination among multiple stakeholders. The significance of early preparation cannot be overstated. The Yatra spans rugged mountainous terrain, often exposed to unpredictable weather, snow, landslides, and sudden temperature drops. Pilgrims, many of whom are elderly or visiting the shrine for the first time, require proper medical care, food, rest areas, and safe transportation facilities. This year, as authorities anticipate record footfall, advance planning becomes not only a matter of convenience but a moral imperative to safeguard human life. One key aspect of preparedness is security. Jammu & Kashmir remains a sensitive region, and the Yatra route, passing through remote areas, is vulnerable to multiple threats. Effective coordination between the local police, paramilitary forces, and intelligence agencies is essential to ensure that pilgrims can undertake their spiritual journey without fear. Use of modern technology, including surveillance drones, mobile connectivity in remote zones, and real-time tracking of Yatra buses, can further enhance safety measures. Equally important is the provision of medical infrastructure. Advance deployment of hospitals, mobile medical units, and trained personnel along the Yatra route can help mitigate emergencies ranging from altitude sickness to cardiac issues. Environmental sustainability must also be a central focus of planning. The fragile Himalayan ecosystem is under immense pressure due to litter, human activity, and waste generated during the Yatra. Authorities and NGOs must work together to implement strict waste management protocols, minimize plastic usage, and promote eco-friendly accommodations along the route. Pilgrims themselves must be sensitized to the importance of preserving the sanctity and cleanliness of this sacred landscape. Community participation is another pillar of effective planning. Local residents, volunteers, and religious organizations have historically played a crucial role in assisting pilgrims, providing food, shelter, and guidance. Their involvement, coupled with government oversight, ensures a seamless blend of cultural ethos and operational efficiency. Finally, communication and awareness campaigns are indispensable. Pilgrims need clear information on registration procedures, weather updates, health precautions, and Yatra routes. Digital platforms, mobile alerts, and traditional media can be leveraged to disseminate accurate and timely information, reducing confusion and enhancing the overall experience.

Nurturing Sikh Spirituality and Education: Gurbaksh Singh of Danna

■ DR JASBIR SINGH SARNA

Sant Gurbaksh Singh (b. 1920) occupies an important place among twentieth-century Sikh religious figures who combined spiritual discipline, social engagement, and educational vision. Born to Mata Kartar Kaur in the village of Danna, Muzaffarabad, into a modest agrarian household, he was shaped by the devotional ethos and ascetic traditions of rural Punjabi Sikh society. His early upbringing was marked by simplicity, labour, and religious sensitivity, qualities that profoundly influenced his later life and work. From a young age, Sant Gurbaksh Singh demonstrated a pronounced inclination toward spirituality and ethical rigor. Rejecting ritualism, superstition, and social hypocrisy, he devoted himself to the foundational principles of Gurmat, emphasizing truthful living (sach), inner devotion (bandag?), and moral conduct. His religious outlook was deeply informed by the teachings of Guru Nanak, particularly the rejection of empty ritual, the affirmation of human equality, and the centrality of nam and lived ethics. Sant Gurbaksh Singh consistently asserted that religion must be embodied in conduct rather than displayed through outward symbols alone. Sikh history provided an important interpretive framework for Sant Gurbaksh Singh's teachings. He frequently invoked the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, presenting it as a defining moment in the Sikh tradition of defending freedom of conscience and resisting religious oppression. This interpretation underscored Sikhism's ethical commitment to justice and pluralism and situated Sikh history within a broader moral struggle rather than a narrowly communal narrative. Drawing inspiration from the establishment of the Khalsa in 1699, he aligned himself with the reformist and missionary impulse of Sikh tradition, emphasizing disciplined living, devotion (bhajan and bandag?), and service to humanity.

Sant Gurbaksh Singh's life unfolded against the backdrop of major historical upheavals, most notably the Partition of India in 1947. During this period of widespread violence and displacement, he emerged as a figure of moral resolve and local leadership. Oral traditions and community memory associate him with efforts to support refugees from Muzaffarabad, promote communal solidarity, and preserve social cohesion amid fear and uncertainty. Although many details of these activities remain undocumented, his role as a stabilizing moral presence



during this crisis is widely acknowledged. Beyond spiritual instruction, Sant Gurbaksh Singh demonstrated a sustained commitment to education and social uplift. He believed education to be an essential instrument for moral reform and collective self-reliance, particularly among economically disadvantaged communities. His concern for the marginalized reflected a broader humanist outlook grounded in Sikh ethical teachings. He consistently encouraged learning, discipline, and self-respect, viewing these as necessary complements to spiritual practice. The institutional context of Sant Gurbaksh Singh's work is closely linked to the history of Dera Santpura

Danna, whose roots trace back to Sant Bhai Daya Singh, a disciple of Sant Punjab Singh. According to Sikh historical sources, including Panth Prak?sh and regional chronicles such as T?r?kh-e-Aqw?m-e-Poonch, Sant Punjab Singh received khande d? pahul from Guru Gobind Singh Ji and was entrusted with missionary work in Kashmir and Poonch. This tradition of Sikh propagation continued through successive spiritual leaders, including Sant Bhai Gurmukh Singh, Sant Bhai Khushal Singh, Sant Bhai Gurdit Singh, and ultimately Sant Bhai Gurbaksh Singh. These Sikh missionaries traversed difficult and often snow-bound terrains, engaging communities through personal contact, religious discourse, and the promotion of Rahit Mary?d? as a practical code of Sikh living. Over time, the dera tradition evolved into a reformist force, working to eliminate unethical practices and reinforce Sikh identity among small and dispersed Sikh populations in the region.

Initially centered at Marh Bagh in Jammu, the activities of the dera expanded significantly after 1977, when land was donated at Nanak Nagar for the establishment of Gurdwara Danna. Under Sant Gurbaksh Singh's leadership, with the support of the S?dh Sangat, a Gurdwara complex was developed, including a langar hall, dispensary, and physiotherapy center. These institutions embodied the Sikh ideal of integrated spiritual and social service. Sant Gurbaksh Singh was also well versed in martial Sikh traditions, religious preaching, and writing. His desire to institutionalize education culminated in the establishment of a school, later realized as Sant Gurbaksh Singh Danna International School, Dumanna well functioning under the guidance of his successor, Sant Tejwant Singh Ji. This educational initiative reflects the enduring fulfillment of Sant Gurbaksh Singh's vision. At Marh Bagh Sant Bhai Khushal Singh Gurmat Research Centre established where more than two dozen Sikh students from poor families have been studying free of cost. Sant Gurbaksh Singh's legacy rests not on institutional authority or formal scholarship but on lived practice. His life represents a synthesis of devotion, ethical clarity, historical consciousness, and service. Within the continuum of twentieth-century Sikh religious leadership, he stands as a grassroots saint whose work nurtured Sikh spirituality, strengthened community identity, and affirmed education as a cornerstone of moral and social regeneration.

IMPORTANCE OF SKILL EDUCATION IN INDIA: A STRATEGIC PATHWAY TOWARDS VIKSIT BHARAT 2047

■ PROF. PANKAJ MEHTA

Skill education has emerged as a central pillar for ensuring sustainable economic growth, quality employment, and social equity in the 21st century. Rapid technological transformation, the expansion of artificial intelligence, and the growth of the green economy in the global landscape have exposed the limitations of traditional education systems. For a developing country like India-home to the world's largest youth population and a significant demographic dividend-the importance of skill education becomes even more critical.

The vision of transforming India into a developed nation by 2047 (Viksit Bharat 2047) can be realized only if skill education is integrated into the mainstream across all levels of schooling, higher education, and lifelong learning. This paper examines the significance of skill education in India, analyzes provisions related to skill development in the Union Budget 2026-27, assesses the current status of vocational education in schools based on national data, and highlights the role of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2023, and the National Credit Framework (NCF). In addition, drawing lessons from developed countries, the paper identifies future-oriented vocational courses aligned with emerging economic sectors.

Keywords: Skill Education, Vocational Education, Union Budget 2026-27, NEP 2020, NCFSE 2023, NCF, Viksit Bharat 2047

Introduction In the 21st-century global economy driven by digitalization, artificial intelligence, robotics, and innovation, a nation's competitiveness is determined by the quality of its human resources. Education systems based solely on theoretical or academic knowledge are no longer capable of meeting the complex and rapidly changing demands of today's labour market. Consequently, education policies worldwide are shifting toward models that emphasize skills, competencies, and practical experience alongside knowledge.

India has entered a decisive historical phase. With the world's largest youth population, the country possesses a unique opportunity known as the demographic dividend. However, this dividend does not automatically translate into development. If young people are not equipped with relevant, industry-oriented, and future-ready skills, the same demographic advantage may turn into unemployment, inequality, and social instability.

Against this backdrop, the Government of India has placed skill education at the center of its national development strategy. Policy reforms, institutional restructuring, and increased budgetary investment underscore this priority, which is clearly reflected in the Union Budget 2026-27.

Understanding Skill Education Skill education refers to structured learning aimed at developing job-specific competencies, practical abilities, technical knowledge, and problem-solving skills among learners. It includes vocational education, technical training, digital and IT skills, entrepreneurship education, and life skills such as communication, collaboration, and leadership.

While traditional education systems have largely focused on rote learning and examination-centric approaches, skill education emphasizes learning by doing, experiential learning, and industry relevance. This enhances employability and enables learners to address real-life challenges effectively.

Global experiences demonstrate that countries adopting skill-based education systems have reduced youth unemployment, increased productivity, and fostered innovation. In the Indian context, skill education is not an alternative to academic education but a complement that offers learners flexibility and diverse career pathways.

Importance of Skill Education for India

Harnessing the Demographic Dividend

India's median age is approximately 28 years, significantly lower than that of most developed countries. This youthful population provides long-term economic growth potential, provided the education system equips young people with skills aligned to emerging sectors such as the digital economy, manufacturing, green energy, and services.

Bridging the Education-Employment Gap

A major challenge in India is the mismatch between educational qualifications and employable skills-often referred to as the "skill gap." Skill education helps bridge this gap by aligning curricula with industry standards and labour-market needs.

Global Competitiveness and Innovation

Countries investing in digital technologies, advanced manufacturing, and green skills are leading global value chains. Skill education enables India to compete not only in the domestic labour market but also internationally.

Union Budget 2026-27:

Strengthening the Skill Ecosystem

The Union Budget 2026-27 places human capital development at the core of India's economic strategy. The Ministry of Education has received a historic allocation of approximately Rs 1.39 lakh crore, reflecting the government's commitment to strengthening the education-to-employment pathway.

Simultaneously, the budget of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) has increased to Rs 9,886 crore, facilitating large-scale skilling, upskilling, and re-skilling initiatives.

Key initiatives include industry-linked skill programs, AVGC laboratories in schools and colleges, university townships near industrial corridors, and structured training programs in the tourism sector.

Policy Frameworks Supporting Skill Education

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

NEP 2020 represents a landmark reform, introducing vocational education from Class VI, internships, experiential learning, and flexibility between academic and vocational streams.

NCFSE 2023

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 promotes competency-based, learner-centric education and connects learning with real-life contexts.

National Credit Framework (NCF)

The NCF integrates academic, vocational, and experiential learning, enabling multiple entry and exit options and supporting lifelong learning.

Current Status of Skill Education in Schools

According to the PARAKH National Survey (2024) and the Economic Survey (2025-26), a significant gap persists between the expansion of skill education and actual participation. Only about 47% of schools offer vocational or skill-based courses, and even where available, only 29% of students enroll in them. Moreover, merely 4.9% of youth aged 15-29 years have received formal vocational training. These figures indicate a substantial gap between policy intent and implementation.

Future-Oriented Vocational Courses

Digital and emerging technologies (AI, cybersecurity), manufacturing and automation (robotics), healthcare and wellness, tourism and hospitality, green and sustainable skills, logistics, and entrepreneurship will be major sources of employment in the future.

Institutional and Implementation

Challenges in Skill Education

Despite strong policy intent and increasing financial allocations, the implementation of skill education in India continues to face several structural and institutional challenges. One of the foremost issues is the uneven availability of infrastructure and trained instructors, particularly in government schools located in rural and aspirational districts. Many schools lack well-equipped laboratories, workshops, and industry-standard tools necessary for effective vocational training. In addition, the shortage of teachers trained in both pedagogy and industry practices limits the quality and relevance of skill-based instruction.

Another major concern is the weak linkage between education institutions and industry.

Although policies emphasize industry participation through apprenticeships, internships, and on-the-job training, such collaborations remain sporadic and region-specific.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which constitute a large share of India's employment base, often lack the capacity or incentives to engage systematically with schools and training institutions.

Strengthening institutional mechanisms for industry-education partnerships is therefore essential to ensure that skill education remains aligned with labour-market demand.

Further, social perception and aspirational barriers continue to hinder the uptake of vocational education. In large sections of society, skill-based and vocational pathways are still viewed as inferior to conventional academic routes. This mindset discourages students and parents from opting for vocational subjects, even when such pathways offer better employment prospects. Addressing this challenge requires sustained awareness campaigns, career guidance, and visible success stories that demonstrate dignity, mobility, and income potential associated with skilled professions.

Role of Technology and Digital Platforms in Skill Education Technology can play a transformative role in overcoming many of the existing limitations of skill education in India. Digital platforms enable scalable, flexible, and cost-effective delivery of skill training, particularly in remote and underserved regions. Online learning management systems, virtual labs, simulation-based training, and augmented/virtual reality tools can supplement physical infrastructure and provide learners with exposure to real-world work environments.

The integration of artificial intelligence and data analytics can further personalize learning pathways

by assessing learners' aptitude, tracking progress, and recommending suitable skill modules. National platforms such as DIKSHA, SWAYAM, and Skill India Digital Hub provide a foundation for blended learning models that combine online instruction with hands-on practice. However, ensuring digital access, device availability, and digital literacy remains critical for equitable outcomes.

Micro-credentials, digital badges, and modular certification-aligned with the National Credit Framework-can also enhance learner mobility and recognition of skills across institutions and sectors. Such mechanisms are particularly relevant in a rapidly changing economy where continuous upskilling and re-skilling are essential.

Skill Education, Green Transition, and Sustainable Development

As India commits to climate action and sustainable development, skill education must align with the green transition. Emerging sectors such as renewable energy, waste management, sustainable agriculture, water conservation, and electric mobility are expected to generate millions of jobs over the next two decades. Preparing the workforce for these opportunities requires embedding green skills across vocational curricula and training programs.

Skill education can also contribute directly to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting inclusive growth, reducing inequalities, and supporting decent work. Community-based skill programs, particularly for women and marginalized groups, can enhance livelihoods while addressing local environmental and social challenges.

Thus, skill education serves not only economic objectives but also broader goals of sustainability and social justice.

Way Forward: Strategic Priorities

To realize the full potential of skill education, India must adopt a holistic and coordinated approach. Key priorities include:

- o Strengthening teacher training and capacity building for vocational and skill educators;
- o Institutionalizing industry partnerships through incentives, regulatory support, and shared responsibility;
- o Integrating career guidance and skill awareness from the upper-primary level onwards;
- o Leveraging digital technologies for inclusive and flexible skill delivery; and
- o Establishing robust monitoring and outcome-based evaluation mechanisms.

A strong focus on quality, rele-

vance, and inclusivity-rather than mere expansion-will determine the long-term success of skill education reforms.

Conclusion

For long, India's development discourse equated progress primarily with infrastructure, industrial expansion, and economic growth. However, by the third decade of the 21st century, it is evident that human capital is the true strength of any nation. While India possesses the world's largest youth population, this demographic advantage will become a true "dividend" only if young people are skilled, adaptable, and employable.

This is where skill education emerges as the central pillar of India's future. NEP 2020 redefines education as a means of life, livelihood, and social participation. NCFSE 2023 operationalizes this vision at the curricular level, while the National Credit Framework ensures that skill education becomes a flexible, lifelong learning pathway rather than a one-way track.

The increasing financial allocation for skill education in the Union Budget 2026-27 signals the government's recognition that expenditure on skills is an investment in the nation's future. Expanding vocational education in schools, modernizing ITIs, strengthening apprenticeships, and focusing on emerging sectors such as AI, green skills, healthcare, and logistics are essential steps toward building a competitive and self-reliant economy by 2047.

Global experiences from Germany, Switzerland, Japan, and Singapore demonstrate that skill education thrives when supported by social recognition, strong industry partnerships, and sustained financial commitment. For India, skill education is not merely an economic imperative but also a pathway to social justice and inclusive development.

The vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 can be realized only when:

- o Skill education receives equal status with mainstream education,
- o Clear career pathways exist from school to higher education,
- o Institutional partnerships among industry, academia, and government are strengthened, and
- o Society embraces the idea that Skill = Dignity + Livelihood + Self-Reliance.

Ultimately, skill education cannot be a short-term priority tied to a single scheme or budget cycle. It must be a long-term national mission. If India equips its youth with the right skills, the right opportunities, and the right direction, India in 2047 will not only be economically developed but also socially empowered, self-reliant, and a global leader.