



## BRIDGING THE EMPLOYABILITY GAP: THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF SOFT SKILLS TRAINING IN INDIA'S WORKFORCE

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### Abstract

Despite expanded access to education in early 21st-century India, a significant employability gap persisted due to a lack of soft skills among graduates. This paper explores the status of soft skills training across primary, secondary, higher, and vocational education before 2010. It analyzes key government policies, institutional responses, and early initiatives such as CBSE's Life Skills Education and the MES program. Challenges included curriculum rigidity, untrained faculty, and unequal access. Although implementation was fragmented, these efforts laid a foundation for future reforms. Integrating soft skills into education is essential for enhancing workforce readiness and unlocking India's full economic potential.

**Keywords:** Soft Skills, Training, Employability

### Introduction

India has made considerable strides in expanding access to education over the past few decades. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, higher education enrollment had grown from around 8.4 million in 2000–01 to over 14.6 million in 2009–10 (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2010). However, this growth in educational access did not translate proportionally into employment readiness. A landmark study conducted by NASSCOM



and McKinsey (2005) found that only a quarter of engineering graduates and between 10 percent–15 percent of general graduates were considered suitable for employment in the organized sector. One of the primary causes of this disconnect was a widespread deficiency in soft skills—non-technical abilities such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence—which are critical for professional success. At various educational levels—primary, secondary, higher education, and vocational training—India’s formal education system emphasized academic content over the development of life skills. Soft skills instruction was often fragmented and inadequately integrated into the curriculum. Recognizing this challenge, policymakers and educators began initiating reforms in the early 2000s. This paper investigates the historical state of soft skills education in India prior to 2010, analyzes government policies and institutional responses, and highlights how early interventions laid the foundation for future reforms in workforce readiness.

## **SECTION I**

### **Historical Overview of Soft Skills Training Across Educational Levels in India**

#### **Primary and Secondary Education: The Beginning of a Shift**

Until the mid-2000s, the Indian school system was primarily centered around rote memorization, with academic success measured by performance in standardized board exams. Teaching practices prioritized textbook knowledge, leaving little room for classroom discussions, project-based learning, or skills such as communication, empathy, and decision-making.

A turning point came with the release of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2005 by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The NCF emphasized the



importance of “learning without burden” and advocated for holistic education that included life skills as a core component (NCERT, 2005). It promoted values such as self-awareness, empathy, and cooperation, especially at the foundational levels of education. However, the policy’s implementation was highly uneven. Many public and rural schools lacked resources, trained teachers, or administrative will to carry out these reforms effectively.

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), India’s largest national education board, introduced a Life Skills Education program in 2003–04 to help secondary students develop critical soft skills such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, and interpersonal communication. By 2009, however, only about 1,200 of its 9,000 affiliated schools had adopted the program (CBSE, 2009). According to a UNESCO-UNICEF (2009) regional report, fewer than 10% of Indian schools provided structured life skills education, underscoring the limited reach of such programs.

### **Higher Education: Reactive Rather Than Proactive**

In the realm of higher education, including undergraduate and postgraduate studies, the demand for soft skills training began to gain traction largely due to pressure from employers. While graduates were often academically qualified, they lacked the interpersonal and cognitive flexibility needed in modern workplaces. The NASSCOM-McKinsey (2005) report was a wake-up call for educational institutions. It highlighted that only 25 percent of Indian engineering graduates were ready for employment in the IT and business services sectors due to their limited communication and analytical skills. In response, some institutions began offering optional personality development courses, group discussions, and mock interviews. Communication laboratories and presentation skill modules started to appear in engineering colleges and management



schools, particularly in urban private institutions. Despite these efforts, there was no standardized approach to integrating soft skills in the curriculum across universities and colleges.

The All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the regulatory authority for technical education, acknowledged the importance of soft skills in its 2008 annual report. A survey by AICTE that year revealed that fewer than 30 percent of technical institutions had embedded any form of soft skills training in their formal curricula (AICTE, 2008). The absence of formal assessment tools and a lack of faculty trained in this area further restricted the progress of such initiatives.

### **Vocational Education and Training: Early Experimentation**

Vocational education, traditionally offered through Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), focused predominantly on practical and technical skills such as welding, electrical work, or machinery operation. Prior to 2007, most training programs did not include modules on workplace communication, customer service, or team coordination.

Recognizing the shortcomings, the Ministry of Labour and Employment launched the Modular Employable Skills (MES) program in 2007. The initiative sought to offer flexible, short-term training programs tailored to industry demands and included optional soft skills modules such as workplace etiquette and customer interaction (Planning Commission, 2009). However, by 2009, only 18 percent of MES centers had effectively implemented these modules. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as IL&FS Skills and Pratham also initiated vocational programs that included soft skills training. While these efforts had localized success, they were not

extensive enough to bring about system-wide change (World Bank, 2008).

## SECTION II

### Government Policy and Institutional Initiatives Before 2010

As concerns over youth employability grew, government bodies began introducing broader policies to foster skill development. These included:

1. **Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002–2007):** This plan promoted personality development and extracurricular activities in schools to support holistic learning.
2. **Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007–2012):** It placed a stronger emphasis on employability, advocating for skill development and partnerships with private training providers (Planning Commission, 2008).
3. **National Skill Development Mission (2009):** Aimed to coordinate skill development efforts across sectors and emphasized life and employability skills.
4. **National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC):** Established in 2009, NSDC focused on bridging the skills gap through public-private partnerships. It began to identify soft skills as a priority in training modules across sectors.

Although these policy directions were forward-looking, they suffered from weak implementation due to institutional inertia, funding limitations, and the absence of a unified framework for soft skills training.

## SECTION- III

### Challenges in Implementation

Several systemic issues hindered the full-scale integration of soft skills into Indian education before 2010:



- **Curriculum Rigidity:** School and college curricula were overloaded with academic content, leaving no space for co-curricular or experiential learning.
- **Lack of Faculty Preparedness:** Teachers and trainers were seldom trained in delivering soft skills education, resulting in superficial or inconsistent implementation.
- **Assessment Limitations:** The lack of standardized metrics to evaluate soft skills made it difficult to justify their inclusion in mainstream curricula.
- **Socioeconomic Barriers:** Soft skills training was often limited to urban and elite institutions, further widening the employability gap for students from rural or marginalized communities.

## SECTION IV

### The Transformative Role of Soft Skills

Research increasingly supports the view that soft skills significantly influence professional success, lifelong learning, and socio-emotional well-being. Heckman and Kautz (2012) argue that non-cognitive skills such as motivation, self-regulation, and social aptitude are strong predictors of labor market outcomes. Their inclusion in formal education can help bridge socio-economic disparities and promote upward mobility. In the Indian context, embedding soft skills into education can enhance not only employability but also student confidence, civic engagement, and adaptability in a rapidly evolving global economy. Early initiatives such as CBSE's Life Skills Education and vocational MES modules marked a critical, albeit modest, shift in this direction.

## Conclusion

The landscape of soft skills training in India prior to 2010 was marked by fragmented implementation, institutional resistance, and policy experimentation. While the foundational ideas for soft skills integration emerged in government documents, school curricula, and vocational training frameworks, the scale and depth of implementation were insufficient to bridge the growing employability gap. Nonetheless, these early initiatives laid essential groundwork for future reforms. By 2010–11, the recognition of soft skills as a critical component of workforce preparedness had become more widespread across educational and policy circles. Going forward, the challenge lies in designing inclusive, measurable, and scalable strategies to embed soft skills at every stage of education. If implemented equitably, such reforms could transform India's demographic dividend into a skilled, adaptable, and resilient workforce ready to meet the demands of the 21st-century global economy.

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