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SOAR Initiative – AI and Skills Development for India's Workforce Transition

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SUBJECTS COVERED**SCIENCE & TECH****SOCIAL ISSUES****ECONOMY****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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WHY IN NEWS

President Droupadi Murmu launched the **SOAR (Skilling for AI Readiness)** initiative on January 1, 2026, at Rashtrapati Bhavan, alongside Gujarat's launch of the India Artificial Intelligence Research and Operations (IAIRO) at GIFT City – signalling India's accelerated push to build an AI-ready workforce before large-scale automation disrupts traditional employment.

SOAR — SKILLING FOR AI READINESS

SOAR (Skilling for AI Readiness) is a flagship initiative under the **Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE)**:

Parameter	Detail
Launched by	President Droupadi Murmu, Rashtrapati Bhavan Cultural Centre
Date	January 1, 2026
Budget	Rs 500 crore for a Centre of Excellence (CoE) in AI for Education
Companion initiative	#SkillTheNation Challenge – nationwide AI awareness campaign
Focus	Integrating AI learning into school education and vocational training

SOAR's three-layer approach:

School-level: AI fundamentals embedded in Class 6–12 curriculum under NEP 2020 framework

Vocational-level: AI-augmented trades for ITI and PMKVY trainees (manufacturing, logistics, healthcare)

Higher education: Industry-linked AI specialisation modules under AICTE and UGC frameworks

INDIA'S AI SKILLING ECOSYSTEM — KEY INSTITUTIONS

Initiative	Implementing Body	Scale
FutureSkills Prime	NASSCOM + MeitY	10 lakh+ learners; 10 AI skills tracks
IndiaAI FutureSkills	Digital India Corporation	Part of Rs 10,372 crore IndiaAI Mission
PM VIKAS	MSDE	Skill development for artisans + traditional workers
Skill India Mission	MSDE/NSDC	1 crore+ trained annually across 700+ trades
SOAR	MSDE	Rs 500 crore CoE; school + vocational AI integration
NIELIT AI courses	MeitY	Government-run digital literacy and AI certification

GUJARAT'S IAIRO AT GIFT CITY

Gujarat simultaneously launched the **India Artificial Intelligence Research and Operations (IAIRO)** at **GIFT City (Gujarat International Finance Tec-City), Gandhinagar**:

Nature: India's first state-government-backed AI research institution

Structure: Section 8 company (non-profit); public-private partnership (PPP)

Affiliation: India's International AI research network

Focus: Applied AI research — fintech AI, climate analytics, agricultural AI, urban governance

GIFT City (SEZ + IFSC) was established under the Gujarat International Finance Tec-City Company Ltd.

IAIRO positions Gujarat to attract global AI researchers and companies within the IFSC regulatory sandbox.

THE AUTOMATION CHALLENGE — INDIA'S WORKFORCE AT RISK

McKinsey Global Institute (2023) estimated that by 2030, **85 million Indian jobs** face high automation risk — primarily in:

Manufacturing: Textile workers, assembly line operators

Transportation: Truck drivers, delivery workers (post-EV + autonomous vehicle adoption)

Retail: Cashiers, inventory managers

Data entry and BPO: A sector that employs ~5 million in India

India's advantage and vulnerability:

Factor	Detail
Population under 35	~65 crore — largest youth workforce globally
Annual labour force entrants	~12 million per year (next decade)
Formal employment share	~10% of 550 million workforce
STEM graduates	~2.5 million per year; #1 globally
AI-ready skills gap	Demand will exceed supply 3:1 by 2030 (NASSCOM)

India’s demographic dividend — the potential economic windfall from a large working-age population — converts to a demographic **disaster** if the workforce lacks the skills for an AI economy.

NEP 2020 AND AI INTEGRATION

The **National Education Policy 2020** provides the framework for AI skilling:

Coding from Class 6 — foundational computational thinking

Multiple exit/entry in higher education — enables AI micro-credentials

Academic Bank of Credits — allows accumulation of AI course credits across institutions

IIT AI research expansion — 23 new IITs + NAI (National AI Institute) proposed

GLOBAL BENCHMARKS

Country	AI Skilling Initiative	Scale
USA	National AI Initiative + AI.gov	USD 2 billion/year
China	New Generation AI Development Plan	50 million AI workers by 2030
EU	Digital Decade 2030	20 million ICT specialists
India	IndiaAI + SOAR + FutureSkills	Rs 10,872 crore combined

UPSC RELEVANCE

SOAR (Jan 1, 2026; President Murmu; MSDE; Rs 500 crore CoE); IAIRO (GIFT City; Gujarat; Section 8; PPP); FutureSkills Prime (NASSCOM + MeitY); PM VIKAS (MSDE); NEP 2020 AI provisions; GIFT City (IFSC; SEZ; Gandhinagar).

MAINS GS-3:

Science & Technology — automation and future of work; AI skilling as demographic dividend strategy; GS-2 — NEP 2020 implementation; skill development ecosystem.

FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

SOAR (SKILLING FOR AI READINESS):

Launched: **January 1, 2026** | Launcher: **President Droupadi Murmu**

Venue: Rashtrapati Bhavan Cultural Centre, New Delhi

Ministry: **Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE)**

Budget: **Rs 500 crore** Centre of Excellence in AI for Education

Companion: #SkillTheNation Challenge

IAIRO (INDIA ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE RESEARCH AND OPERATIONS):

Location: **GIFT City, Gandhinagar, Gujarat**

Type: **Section 8 company** (non-profit) + PPP model

India's first state-backed AI research institution

FUTURESKILLS PRIME:

Joint: **NASSCOM + MeitY** | Learners: **10 lakh+**

10 emerging technology tracks including AI, Big Data, Cloud, IoT

INDIA WORKFORCE DATA:

Total workforce: ~550 million | Formal: ~10% (~55 million)

Youth (<35): ~65 crore | Annual new entrants to labour market: ~12 million

STEM graduates/year: ~2.5 million (#1 globally)

Automation risk by 2030: **85 million jobs** (McKinsey MGI)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

NSDC (National Skill Development Corporation): PPP body under MSDE; Rs 5,000 crore corpus

Skill India Mission (2015): 1 crore+ trained/year; 700+ trades under PMKVY

PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY): Short-duration certification; 40 lakh+ certified

AICTE AI integration: Mandatory AI module in all engineering programmes from 2025–26

Sources: PIB, MSDE, The Hindu

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