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People Over Populism: Budget Narrative for Employment Strategy

The Budget 2026-27 recognises that global integration must be matched by domestic employment preparedness. Protecting Indian industries while building human capital and skills has emerged as the key economic priority



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Article Content:

As Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented her ninth consecutive Budget, anchored in the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047, one message came through unmistakably: India's growth strategy is now a jobs strategy. In an era of expanding trade agreements with partners such as the UK, the EU, the EFTA, and Oman, the Budget recognises that global integration must be matched by domestic employment preparedness. Protecting Indian industry while building human capital and skills has therefore emerged as the central economic priority. This is reflected in the Finance Minister's framing of the Budget as one that places people over populism.

India's demographic reality makes this focus unavoidable. As the world's most populous nation with a median age of 28, the country stands at a decisive moment where its youth dividend can either translate into productive employment or become a source of economic strain. The Budget responds by making skilling and workforce readiness central to its design. It acknowledges that job creation today is not confined to traditional sectors alone, but increasingly shaped by new labour markets in

the care economy, the gig economy, and emerging industries such as AI and AVGC. The emphasis on building structured care systems and training frameworks signals recognition that social sectors are also major employers.

At the same time, the Budget identifies where scale will come from. MSMEs and micro enterprises remain the backbone of India's employment engine, and initiatives such as Champion SMEs, liquidity support, and professional mentoring through ICAI, ICSI, and ICMAI, delivered via a network of "Corporate Mitras," reflect efforts to strengthen enterprises that directly translate growth into jobs. Parallel investments in emerging sectors through institutions such as IICT highlight a forward-looking strategy that links job creation with technology, creativity, and innovation rather than low-productivity work alone.

Yuva Shakti

The Budget also carries a distinct Yuva Shakti character, shaped by inputs from the Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue. As the Economic Survey notes, India's constraint today lies less in policy imagination and more in execution capacity. The Budget's focus on the three Kartavyas, therefore, sets an important moral and administrative framework, but its success will ultimately depend on whether these commitments translate into credible delivery systems for jobs and skills.

Beyond new sectors, the Budget recognises the need to stabilise and protect existing employment-intensive industries facing global headwinds. Targeted support for pharmaceuticals and labour-intensive sectors such as textiles and leather reflects an understanding that trade volatility and supply chain disruptions directly threaten livelihoods. In parallel, investments in healthcare, sports, heritage, and cultural tourism widen the employment base beyond manufacturing and services, creating job opportunities across regions and skill levels.

Implementation Factor

Taken together, the Budget presents a coherent employment narrative: one that links global engagement with domestic capability, technology with skills, and enterprise growth with social inclusion. However, India's core challenge has never been a lack of ideas. As the Prime Minister emphasises, when you make and design in India, you make for the world. The binding constraint lies in implementation. Too often, ministries, schemes, and departments function in silos, while employment generation demands coordinated action.

The Budget, serving as a comprehensive national plan, aligns these priorities within a single framework and highlights the importance of a true whole-of-government approach. This year's focus on jobs and growth requires more than just celebration; it calls for thorough examination, ensuring that strong intentions lead to targeted action. Ultimately, the Budget's effectiveness will be measured not by its vision but by how well it turns policies into tangible results and ambitions into lasting, dignified employment for India's youth.