



# Employment News

Since 1976...  
WEEKLY

VOL. L ISSUE NO. 46 PAGES 36

NEW DELHI 14 - 20 FEBRUARY 2026

₹ 12.00 (Annual ₹ 530)

## Atal Innovation Mission

### A Decade of Empowering Capabilities

Garima Ujjainia

In the decade following economic liberalisation, India's growth story was largely defined by markets, services, and incremental reforms. Innovation existed but remained fragmented, concentrated in select institutions and urban clusters, lacking a coherent national framework. By the mid-2010s, it was clear that India's young population and expanding digital reach required innovation to be institutionalised across education, research, and enterprise. Launched in 2016 under NITI Aayog, the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) set out to embed innovation and entrepreneurship into India's development journey. A decade later, AIM has become one of the world's largest and most inclusive innovation programmes, shaping how India nurtures and scales innovation.

#### The Genesis of AIM: Innovation as State Capacity

AIM emerged from a fundamental shift in policy thinking that innovation should not be viewed through the narrow lens of market forces alone, but as a culture in nation building. Three major insights shaped its design. First, India's demographic dividend could only be realised if young people were equipped with creativity, problem-solving skills, and confidence to engage with uncertainty. Second, private capital, while critical, naturally gravitated toward faster-return sectors, leaving deep-tech and public-good innovation under-served. Third, innovation ecosystems do not work in isolation, but they require long-term coordination across education, industry, government, and finance.

AIM is therefore structured as an end-to-end innovation umbrella, spanning early curiosity, enterprise creation, community innovation, and global engagement. Its mandate went beyond supporting startups, it went on to change behaviour, mindsets, and institutions at scale.

#### Taking Innovation to Schools

The Atal Tinkering Lab (ATL) programme, a flagship initiative of AIM, reimagined schools as spaces of exploration rather than instruction by giving students access to state-of-the-art labs and the freedom to experiment. Emphasising design thinking, collaboration, and iterative problem-solving, ATLs enabled hands-on learning beyond textbooks.

Over a decade, ATLs expanded to 10,000 schools across 700+ districts, reaching over 11 million students, with a strong presence in government, rural, and girls' schools—making it one of the world's most inclusive school-level innovation programmes. ATL students have demonstrated stronger analytical skills and confidence, developing solutions



ranging from robotics to low-cost technologies, with many becoming patent holders and startup founders. More importantly, ATLs have transformed aspirations, showing students that innovation is accessible, achievable, and rooted in solving real-world problems.

#### Building the Innovation Backbone

While ATLs strengthened the base of the innovation pyramid, AIM identified a structural gap: early-stage innovators lacked institutional support to convert ideas into enterprises. To address this, Atal Incubation Centres (AICs) were established at universities, research institutions, and industry-linked organisations, providing startups with infrastructure, mentorship, funding access, and market linkages. By 2025, over 72 AICs across 18 states and 3 UTs have supported 4,500+ startups, enabled thousands of jobs, and backed over 1,000 women-led ventures.

AICs have been especially critical in high-risk, long-gestation sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, climate tech, space, defence, and deep tech, helping de-risk innovation and bridge the gap from proof-of-concept to deployment. AIM also built greenfield incubators beyond metros, proving that high-quality entrepreneurship can thrive in diverse regional contexts.

Complementing AICs, Atal Community Innovation Centres (ACICs) extend innovation support to underserved regions, focusing on grassroots entrepreneurship and livelihood creation. Operating in aspirational and remote districts, ACICs incubate locally rooted enterprises where success is measured by social impact as much as scale.

As AIM matured, it advanced problem-led innovation through the Atal New India Challenge (ANIC), aligning startups with national priorities in health, agriculture,

sanitation, mobility, and climate action. Supporting over 100 startups, ANIC repositioned government as an active innovation partner, enabling solutions to move from pilots to real-world deployment and scale.

#### Taking Indian Innovation Global

As AIM matured, its global engagement evolved from participation to institution-building, exporting scalable and inclusive models of innovation governance relevant to emerging economies. Programmes like the India-Australia RISE Accelerator enabled Indian startups to access global markets while contributing context-driven solutions, positioning them as active global innovators.

Initiatives such as the AIM-ICDK Water Challenge under the Indo-Danish partnership advanced co-creation and deployment, setting outcome-oriented models for international collaboration. AIM's work with WIPO added a multilateral dimension by sharing Indian approaches to innovation ecosystems and IP frameworks, especially for the Global South.

During India's 2023 G20 Presidency, AIM anchored the Startup20 Engagement Group, creating a global platform to align startups with growth, inclusion, and sustainability. Its continuation across successive G20 cycles reflects how an Indian initiative has evolved into a lasting global institution for innovation-led development.

#### AIM 2.0: From Expansion to Excellence

While the first decade of the Atal Innovation Mission focused on building India's innovation infrastructure, the second phase is aimed at improving depth, quality, and impact. With 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs, over 1,500 incubation centres, and thousands of supported startups, AIM demonstrated that innovation

can be democratised. The key challenge now is to make innovation integral to excellence and outcomes. In November 2024, the Union Cabinet approved the continuation of AIM with an enhanced mandate and a budget of Rs. 2,750 crore till March 31, 2028, positioning AIM 2.0 as a core driver of *Viksit Bharat*.

AIM 2.0 begins with a realistic assessment: innovation benefits remain uneven, deep and frontier-tech success rates are low, and industry engagement in scaling startups is limited. To address these gaps, AIM 2.0 is structured around three levers—increasing inputs, improving throughput, and enhancing the quality of outputs.

Under the first lever, programmes such as the Language Inclusive Program of Innovation (LIPI) aim to remove linguistic and geographic barriers by embedding



vernacular innovation support across India's 22 scheduled languages. The Frontier Programme adapts ATL and incubation models for regions such as Jammu & Kashmir, the North East, and Aspirational Districts, positioning innovation as a tool for regional development and social stability.

The second lever focuses on strengthening the middle of the ecosystem. Human Capital Development initiatives build a professional cadre of mentors, teachers, and ecosystem managers, while the DeepTech Reactor creates structured pathways for long-gestation, capital-intensive deep-tech startups through coordinated policy, research, and market alignment. State Innovation Missions further extend this systems approach by helping States and UTs develop coherent, locally aligned innovation strategies.

The third lever brings demand into the ecosystem through Industrial Accelerators and Atal Sectoral Innovation Launchpads, blending public support with private capital and embedding startup procurement within government and industry. Together, these initiatives shift AIM 2.0 from ecosystem expansion toward sustained excellence, scale, and national competitiveness.

Continued on page 2

Follow us @Employ\_News

Follow us @EmploymentNews