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Trade deals made from position of strength: PM

Modi urges the private sector to step up and take advantage of new policy framework

Slew of trade agreements will expand global market access for MSMEs in key sectors

The govt.'s 'political stability' has restored investors' confidence in the country, says PM

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

India recently entered into a slew of trade agreements, including with the European Union and the United States, "from a position of strength", Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Sunday, adding that these deals were designed to expand global market access for Indian manufacturing and services.

In a written interview to the Press Trust of India, Mr. Modi said that the 2026 Budget gave private sector the opportunity to step up and take advantage of government's investment in infrastructure and capital expenditure.

"This is not a 'now or never' moment born out of compulsion. It is a 'we are ready' moment born out of preparation and inspiration. This Budget reflects this yearning to become a developed nation," he said, explaining the Budget's boost for capital expenditure.

He added that it was now time for the private sector to step up and take advantage of the government's investment in infrastructure and capital expenditure.

The Prime Minister's remarks comes as Parliament remains in recess after the first part of the Budget Session where the government faced an attack by the Opposition on the terms of the trade deals.

Mr. Modi defended the agreements, noting that while long negotiations by the previous Congress-led UPA government had not yielded any results, his government's "political stability and political predictability" had restored investors' confidence in India.

His government's top three reform priorities for the next decade, Mr. Modi said, would be continued structural reforms, deepening innovation, and further simplification of governance.

"I am proud to say that we have moved from incremental adjustments to systemic transformation," the Prime Minister said.

Looking beyond tariffs

The Prime Minister spoke at length about his own government's efforts to enable the environment to strike these deals as well as his expectations from the private sector in taking advantage of these agreements.

"Trade competitiveness is not only about tariffs. It is about liquidity, certification, technology adoption and compliance with global standards. Our Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) are designed to reduce non-tariff barriers and expand market access for Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in sectors such as textiles, leather, processed food, engineering goods, chemicals, handicrafts and gems and jewellery," Mr. Modi said.

"Indian MSMEs are more export-ready than before, and India's trade policy now deliberately places MSMEs at the centre of global integration. These FTAs are tools to ensure that our youth are not just suppliers to the domestic market, but active participants in global trade and growth," he said.

But, he added, "policy can only create the enabling framework. The next phase of transformation requires a decisive response from the private sector."

"As a country that is part of various trade agreements, making Indian products and services globally competitive is crucial. Our stance on 'Zero Defect, Zero Effect' has resonated deeply with the youth, start-ups and small and medium businesses," the Prime Minister said.

"MSMEs must move beyond being peripheral suppliers. They must become technologically upgraded, globally integrated and export-oriented enterprises that form the backbone of India's participation in global value chains," he added.

Defence focus

On defence expenditure and reforms, he noted that his government's focus on the issue had visibly paid off during the course of Operation Sindoor against Pakistan. "During the operation, one could see the benefits of the reforms we have undertaken in the last decade. Defence budgets, modernisation, etc., all these are parts of our continuous effort and need not be linked to any particular issue," he said.

Asked whether the higher budgetary allocation to the defence sector was part of the lesson learnt from Operation Sindoor, he answered in the affirmative. "Yes, the reality is that our country has to be strong and be prepared at all times, and that is what we are doing," Mr. Modi said.

"In this year's budget, a record ₹7.85 lakh crore have been allocated to the sector. This is 15% higher than the previous budget and is also the biggest chunk allotted to any ministry or department," he said.

Opposition slams PM's interview

NEW DELHI
The Congress dismissed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's interview with the Press Trust of India as a "carefully scripted" one and a "desperate PR exercise". » PAGE 4

Static Linkages

- Article 253 – Parliament's power to implement international treaties.
- Union List – Defence, foreign affairs, foreign trade.
- Balance of Payments – Impact of exports and imports on Current Account.
- Capital vs Revenue Expenditure (NCERT Macroeconomics).

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- The Prime Minister stated that India signed recent trade agreements with the European Union and the United States from a "position of strength."
- Budget 2026 emphasizes capital expenditure-led growth.
- Record ₹7.85 lakh crore allocated to defence (15% increase over previous year).
- Focus on integrating MSMEs into global trade and value chains.

Key Points

Trade and FTAs

- Objective: Reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers.
- Target sectors: Textiles, leather, processed food, engineering goods, chemicals, gems and jewellery.
- MSMEs placed at the centre of export strategy.
- FTAs are permitted under WTO framework as an exception to the Most Favoured Nation principle (GATT Article XXIV).

Budget 2026

- Continued thrust on capital expenditure (infrastructure, logistics, manufacturing).
- Capital expenditure has a higher multiplier effect than revenue expenditure (Economic Survey).
- Aim: Crowd in private investment and boost medium-term growth.

Defence Allocation

- ₹7.85 lakh crore – highest allocation among ministries.
- Focus on modernization and indigenization under Atmanirbhar Bharat.
- Strengthening preparedness and strategic capability.
- MSME classification (Revised 2020: Investment and Turnover criteria).
- GATT 1994 – MFN principle and exceptions for FTAs.

Critical Dimensions for Mains

Positives

- Expansion of export markets.
- Greater MSME participation in global value chains.
- Infrastructure-led growth with higher multiplier effect.
- Improved defence preparedness and modernization.

Concerns

- Risk of widening trade deficit.
- Compliance burden on MSMEs (standards and certification).
- Fiscal pressures due to high defence spending.
- Possible vulnerability of sensitive sectors such as agriculture and dairy.

Way Forward

- Strengthen trade facilitation and logistics ecosystem.
- Capacity building for MSMEs in quality standards and digital compliance.
- Diversify export basket toward high-value manufacturing and services.
- Maintain fiscal consolidation path alongside strategic spending.
- Deepen defence indigenization and boost R&D investment.

AI Impact Summit 2026 begins today, Modi set to inaugurate India AI Expo

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

Global tech leaders Sundar Pichai and Sam Altman and leaders of about 20 countries, including Brazil and France, are among those from about 100 countries expected to attend the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Impact Summit this week. The event kicks off on Monday with Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurating the "India AI Impact Expo 2026", which includes pavilions from 13 other countries.

The event is being hosted from February 16 to 20 at the Bharat Mandapam complex in Delhi where the G-20 Summit was hosted first in 2023. It marks the fourth AI Summit after summits in the U.K., South Korea, and France. Officials said it would be showcased as the first time the summit on the transformative effect and challenges from AI is hosted in a Global South country.

"India has consistently championed the voice of developing economies in digital policy forums. The summit will push for equitable access to AI resources and fair rule-making," a senior government official said. Unlike developed countries, India was not seeking to build regulatory frameworks, but was focusing the summit on a "human-centric" approach, for the "economic good" of all, the official added.

According to a statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office on Sunday, the AI Impact event will feature more than 3,000 speakers over 500 sessions and host more than 300 exhibitions and live demonstrations of AI technology and startups, which are "structured across three thematic chakras – People, Planet and Progress". The government hopes to attract more than 2.5 lakh visitors to the event, the statement said.

After the Expo inauguration on Monday, the summit will see an "all-woman" hackathon on Tuesday in Delhi.

Stacked schedule

Mr. Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron will hold bilateral talks in Mumbai on February 17. On February 18, he will host a dinner banquet for the dignitaries and then chair a leaders' summit followed by a Tech-CEOs event on February 19. Brazil President Lula, who will hold bilateral talks with Mr. Modi, is accompanied by a large AI official and tech company delegation and will host an entire session on February 20.

The heads of 18 other countries attending range from European countries including Switzerland, Spain, Serbia, Slovakia, Croatia, Estonia, Netherlands, Finland and Greece, to Mauritius, Bhutan and Sri Lanka in the neighbourhood and Kazakhstan, two countries from South America (Bolivia and Guyana) and one from Africa (Seychelles), a list provided by the External Affairs Ministry said.

Crown princes of Liechtenstein and the UAE will also attend as heads of their delegations as will some prominent former leaders such as former British Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Rishi Sunak. Ministerial delegations from over 45 countries would participate, officials said. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, whose tenure ends this year, will also attend.

Officials said that big tech leaders such as Google's Sundar Pichai and Open AI CEO Sam Altman will "headline" sessions as will Demis Hassabis (CEO of DeepMind Technologies), Dario Amodei (Anthropic CEO) and Brad Smith (Microsoft president). NVIDIA CEO Jensen Huang, who was to be a key speaker, pulled out on Saturday "due to unforeseen circumstances". Microsoft founder Bill Gates, who is at the centre of allegations over his links with American businessman and convicted sex offender Jeffery Epstein, is expected to attend.

On Monday, Mr. Gates will be in Andhra Pradesh for a series of meetings with Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu to discuss digital technologies and health development issues.

Reacting to a poster of Mr. Gates at the AI Summit, Opposition MP Priyanka Chaturvedi called the invitation to him "shameful" and has asked the government not to give "platform and promote" him.

Preparations on for the fourth iteration of the global AI summit at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi on Sunday. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Restricted access on Day 1, expo to open from Day 2

NEW DELHI

Entry to the summit will have some restrictions on the first day of the event, and the expo being organised along with it will open for all from February 17, according to an official advisory. "Registration for the event is free," an IT Ministry official said. PTI

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- India is hosting the AI Impact Summit 2026 (Feb 16–20) at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi.
- It is the 4th Global AI Summit (earlier: UK, South Korea, France).
- Projected as the first AI summit hosted in a Global South country.
- Inaugurated by PM Narendra Modi.
- Participation: ~100 countries; leaders from France, Brazil, European & Global South nations; UN Secretary-General.
- Themes: People, Planet, Progress (human-centric AI approach).

Key Facts

- 3,000+ speakers, 500+ sessions, 300+ AI exhibitions.
- Focus areas:
  - AI for healthcare, agriculture, education
  - Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)
  - Ethical AI & equitable access
- Emphasis on human-centric AI (development-oriented, not heavy regulation).
- Major global AI firms participated (Google, OpenAI, DeepMind, Anthropic, Microsoft).
- Includes inclusivity measures (e.g., women-focused hackathon).

Important Government Linkages

- National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (NITI Aayog, 2018) – "AI for All" (5 priority sectors: healthcare, agriculture, education, smart cities, smart mobility).
- Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 – Governs personal data processing.
- IT Act, 2000 – Legal framework for cyber activities.
- India Semiconductor Mission (2021) – $10 billion incentive package.
- National Supercomputing Mission – Indigenous HPC capacity.
- G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration (2023) – Responsible AI principles.

Constitutional & Ethical Dimensions

- Article 14 – Risk of algorithmic bias (equality concerns).
- Article 21 – Right to privacy (Puttaswamy Judgment, 2017).
- Transparency, accountability, and fairness in AI decision-making.
- Ethical concerns: surveillance, misinformation, job displacement.

Significance for India

- Positions India as AI voice of Global South.
- Strengthens tech-diplomacy.
- Supports Digital Public Infrastructure export model (Aadhaar, UPI, CoWIN).
- AI projected to significantly boost India's GDP (NASSCOM estimate: ~$500 billion potential contribution).

Challenges

- Lack of comprehensive AI regulation framework.
- Compute infrastructure dependency (imported chips, GPUs).
- Data governance & implementation issues.
- Skill gap in advanced AI research.
- Balancing innovation with safeguards.

Way Forward

- Develop balanced AI regulatory framework.
- Strengthen semiconductor & chip ecosystem.
- Invest in AI skilling and R&D.
- Promote open-source AI for developing nations.
- Institutionalize AI ethics oversight mechanisms.

Bridging a divide with an 'Indian Scientific Service'

India's post-Independence service rules were designed to ensure stability through generalist administrators – an approach that was essential for nation-building. However, governance has since become increasingly shaped by science, technology, and environmental challenges. As scientists joined government service, they remained governed by rules created for a different era. This mismatch has limited the effective integration of scientific expertise into policymaking. Unlike many advanced countries with dedicated scientific cadres, India lacks a specialised framework for scientific governance, making the case for separate scientific service rules increasingly compelling.

A paradox – administrator and scientist

Civil services recruitment is highly competitive, reflecting the rigour of the administrative system. Scientific careers, however, follow an equally demanding but different path – drawing from a smaller, highly specialised pool shaped by years of advanced education, research and peer review rather than a single examination. Within government, administrators receive structured training aligned with governance roles, while scientists are often placed in diverse technical portfolios without comparable frameworks for role-specific training, career progression, or clear alignment of authority and professional safeguards.

Scientific inputs in policymaking are often commissioned for immediate needs – such as legal cases or regulatory decisions – making research time-bound and narrow. A stronger approach would support continuous, long-term research that anticipates emerging challenges, allowing decisions to be guided by evidence and foresight rather than urgency.

Until science becomes a regular partner in governance rather than a reactive tool, its full potential to improve policy and public trust will remain underused. Thus, most scientific research is not specifically designed to improve the effectiveness of existing policies or to meet the future needs of countries in shaping policy change.

As India's responsibilities expanded into technically intensive sectors, environmental protection, climate change, oceans and coasts, public health, disaster management, nuclear safety, biotechnology, space science, and artificial intelligence, scientists became indispensable to government functioning.

Yet, instead of creating a distinct institutional framework that was suited to scientific work, scientists were largely absorbed into the existing administrative system. They continue to be governed by conduct rules, appraisal mechanisms, and hierarchies that were originally designed for general administrative functions. Over time, this has limited the ability of scientists to exercise their professional role fully within governance structures. While organisations such as the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and a few others have separate rules for recruitment, assessment, and promotion, they continue to be bound by the Central Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, 1964, a framework designed primarily for administrative governance rather than scientific independence.

P. Ragavan

is a coastal ecosystem researcher with 15 years of research and field expertise on mangroves and seagrass

A dedicated scientific cadre is needed to strengthen governance as science, technology and environmental challenges become central

Administrative rules are not neutral

Service rules shape behaviour and culture. While civil service rules stress discipline and neutrality, scientific work requires questioning assumptions and presenting evidence even when it challenges policy. Without frameworks that accommodate this, scientific inputs remain advisory rather than fully integrated into decision-making.

Scientific progress depends on continuous inquiry, testing of evidence, and honest assessment of risks and uncertainties. In governance, this translates into the ability to flag ecological risks, technological limitations, or long-term consequences in a transparent manner. When scientists are unable to formally record or communicate such assessments within institutional processes, their role risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Science that cannot question policy is not science. It is a decoration. Effective governance requires mechanisms that allow scientific assessments to be placed on record, even while final policy choices remain with elected authorities.

Many countries, which includes France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States have created distinct scientific cadres within government, with tailored service rules, career paths, and professional protections. These systems strengthen governance by ensuring transparent, independent scientific input into policymaking. For example, U.S. Scientific Integrity Policies protect scientists from political interference, require transparent documentation of advice, and prevent suppression or alteration of research findings, ensuring that policies are guided by credible evidence rather than political convenience.

India's situation is distinctive. Despite strong scientific institutions and highly trained professionals, government scientists often have limited institutional authority relative to their expertise. Their inputs may not always carry formal weight in decision-making processes, particularly in technically complex sectors. This can result in cautious communication, limited documentation of uncertainty, and an over-reliance on science during crises rather than as a continuous input into policy formulation. A governance system that does not fully utilise its scientific capacity risks long-term policy weaknesses. India's aspirations, to be a leader in climate action, environmental stewardship, public health, and technology, require institutions that value scientific evidence alongside administrative efficiency. What is needed is not additional committees or ad-hoc advisory bodies, but structural reform that clearly defines the role of scientists within governance and provides appropriate institutional safeguards.

The creation of an Indian scientific services, or ISS, offers a constructive way forward. The ISS could function as a permanent, all-India scientific cadre working alongside existing civil services. Scientists would be recruited through rigorous national-level selection and peer evaluation and placed within ministries and regulatory institutions as integral participants in decision-making. Separate scientific service rules would protect professional integrity, enable transparent recording of scientific assessments, and clarify the distinction between scientific advice and policy decisions. The ISS is not intended to replace administrative systems, but to complement them. Administrators ensure coordination and execution; scientists contribute evidence, risk assessment, and long-term perspective.

A potential framework

A possible structure for an ISS could include specialised cadres such as the Indian Environmental and Ecological Service, Indian Climate and Atmospheric Service, Indian Water and Hydrological Service, Indian Marine and Ocean Services, Indian Public Health and Biomedical Service, Indian Disaster Risk and Resilience Service, Indian Energy and Resources Service, Indian Science and Technology Policy Service, Indian Agricultural and Food Systems Service, and Indian Regulatory Science Service.

India has built strong scientific institutions. The next step is to integrate scientific expertise more directly into governance structures. The need for an ISS is no longer theoretical. It is a practical and timely reform to strengthen evidence-based policymaking and build more resilient governance for the future.

Under the current political leadership, India is steadily moving beyond its colonial legacy and building a confident new India. In this spirit, an ISS would be a forward-looking reform – much like the transformation of the Indian Civil Service after Independence – strengthening a science-driven administrative system that is aligned with India's national aspirations and global ambitions .

The views expressed are personal

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Debate has emerged regarding creation of a separate Indian Scientific Service (ISS) to institutionalise scientific expertise within governance.
- Scientists in government are presently governed under the Central Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, 1964, originally framed for generalist administrators.
- Increasing policy complexity in climate change, biotechnology, AI, public health, nuclear safety, disaster management and environmental regulation.
- Countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Japan have structured scientific advisory systems with institutional safeguards.

Key Points

- Post-Independence civil services structured around generalist administrative model.
- Scientists recruited through specialised academic and research pathways.
- No separate All-India Scientific Cadre currently exists.
- Service conditions of Union services governed under Article 309 of the Constitution.
- Organisations like CSIR and ICAR have separate recruitment mechanisms but remain under general conduct rules.
- Scientific advice in India often crisis-driven rather than institutionalised.
- Scientific Integrity Policies (USA model) ensure:
  - Protection from political interference
  - Transparent documentation of advice
  - No suppression or alteration of findings

Static Linkages

- Article 309 – Recruitment and service conditions.
- Article 312 – Creation of All India Services.
- Doctrine of Ministerial Responsibility – Final decision rests with elected executive.
- Precautionary Principle (Environmental jurisprudence).
- 2nd Administrative Reforms Commission – Need for domain expertise.
- Disaster Management Act, 2005 – Role of technical authorities.
- National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC).

Mains-Oriented Dimensions

1. Governance Reform
   - Generalist vs Specialist debate.
   - Need for domain expertise in complex sectors.
   - Institutional autonomy vs administrative control.
2. Science–Policy Interface
   - Reactive consultation vs continuous advisory integration.
   - Recording scientific dissent and uncertainty.
   - Strengthening regulatory institutions.
3. Constitutional & Ethical Angle
   - Balance between technocracy and democratic accountability.
   - Scientific integrity and transparency.
   - Public trust in evidence-based policymaking.

Critical Analysis

Arguments in Favour

- Strengthens evidence-based governance.
- Improves climate and environmental decision-making.
- Encourages long-term risk assessment.
- Reduces over-reliance on ad-hoc committees.
- Aligns with India's global climate and technology leadership goals.

Concerns

- Risk of bureaucratic overlap.
- Inter-service friction.
- Possible technocratic dominance.
- Need to maintain democratic control.
- Fiscal and structural challenges.

Way Forward

- Create Scientific Cadre under Article 309 or Article 312.
- Develop Scientific Integrity Framework.
- Institutionalise documentation of expert advice.
- Promote interdisciplinary training for civil servants.
- Pilot ISS in climate and disaster sectors.
- Ensure parliamentary oversight for accountability.

The UAE-India corridor is sparking a growth story

Badr Jafar

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The UAE-India corridor is driving growth, technology and strategic global expansion

Something remarkable has happened in the economic relationship between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). When the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed in 2022, both sides had set a target of $100 billion in bilateral trade by 2030. That milestone was reached five years ahead of schedule. In January this year, leaders set a new target of $200 billion by 2032. Few economic corridors in the world today are moving with the speed and ambition of this one.

The scale and direction

The numbers tell part of the story. Non-oil trade between the two countries grew nearly 20% last year to reach $65 billion, demonstrating that this partnership has moved well beyond its energy origins. UAE entities have invested over $22 billion into India since 2000, while Indian companies have invested more than $16 billion into the UAE. Nearly five million Indian nationals live and work in the Emirates, forming its largest diaspora community and the human backbone of a corridor that now supports over 1,200 flights a week between the two countries – one of the busiest air routes on earth.

But what excites the most is not just the scale. It is the direction. This corridor is being reshaped by advanced manufacturing, financial services, technology, and logistics. Reliance Industries has partnered with TAZIZ on a $2 billion-plus investment in low-carbon chemicals manufacturing in Abu Dhabi. Ashok Leyland has relocated its electric bus production from the United Kingdom to the UAE. Larsen & Toubro has been selected as preferred contractor for one of the world's most ambitious solar-plus-storage projects in Abu Dhabi. Indian banks, technology firms, and health-care companies are building real operational presence across the Emirates. These are not tentative first steps. They are confident long-term industrial commitments.

Investment is flowing with equal conviction in the other direction. DP World has committed an additional $5 billion to Indian infrastructure, expanding its already extensive network of ports and logistics parks across the country. Emirates NBD's acquisition of a majority stake in RBL Bank represents the largest single foreign direct investment in Indian banking history. ADNOC has signed long-term LNG supply agreements with Indian Oil Corporation Ltd and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited worth billions of dollars. Mubadala has deployed over $4 billion across Indian health care, renewables, and technology platforms. Abu Dhabi Investment Authority became the first sovereign wealth fund to establish a base in India's GIFT City.

It is for the long term

What underpins all of this is trust built over decades, reinforced by human connections, and supported by a policy architecture – the CEPA, which eliminated tariffs on roughly 90% of tariff lines, the 2024 Bilateral Investment Treaty, and now a strategic defence partnership - that gives businesses the certainty to make long-term bets.

The ambition is now extending into third markets. Bharat Mart, currently under construction in the UAE, will serve as a wholesale hub for Indian goods targeting Africa, West Asia and Eurasia, aiming to help double India's exports to these regions. India and the UAE are also exploring joint digital infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives across Africa. The corridor is becoming a platform not just for bilateral exchange but also for global reach.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as the next major frontier for this corridor. India this week hosts the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi (February 16-20, 2026) – the first global AI summit held in the Global South. It is a powerful statement of India's growing role in shaping how this technology develops and is governed. The UAE, which appointed the world's first Minister of State for AI back in 2017 and has invested heavily in AI infrastructure and research ever since, is a natural partner in this space. The UAE and India are already exploring cooperation on advanced computing capacity, data centres, and AI-driven innovation. In a technology that will reshape every sector of every economy, the countries that lead will not be those that build fastest alone, but those that build the smartest partnerships.

The next chapter

India's global moment is here. As the world's fourth largest economy, with GDP at around $4 trillion, it is powered by entrepreneurial energy, manufacturing ambition, and digital infrastructure that are genuinely world-class. In conversations with Indian business leaders, there is one theme that is coming through consistently: the appetite to scale internationally has never been stronger. The question is no longer whether Indian enterprise will go global, but how effectively the right corridors can accelerate that journey.

This is also part of a wider realignment. The recent Delhi Declaration between India and Arab Foreign Ministers outlined an ambitious programme of cooperation across politics, economy, energy, technology, and security through 2028. The India-UAE corridor is at the vanguard of that broader convergence.

The UAE and India are demonstrating what becomes possible when two countries align policy, capital, and execution around a shared vision. The first $100 billion came faster than anyone expected. The next chapter will be defined not by the numbers alone, but by how deeply their economies integrate – and how far that integration reaches.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India and the UAE achieved the $100 billion bilateral trade target (set for 2030) five years ahead of schedule.
- A new target of $200 billion in trade by 2032 has been announced.
- This growth follows the signing of the India–UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022.
- Bilateral ties are expanding beyond hydrocarbons into manufacturing, logistics, renewable energy, finance, AI, and digital infrastructure.
- A Bilateral Investment Treaty (2024) and strategic defence partnership further strengthen institutional architecture.

Key Points

Trade & Economic Data

- Bilateral trade crossed $100 billion ahead of 2030 target.
- Non-oil trade reached ~$65 billion, indicating diversification.
- CEPA eliminated tariffs on ~90% of tariff lines.
- UAE among India's top trading partners (Ministry of Commerce data).
- UAE invested $22+ billion in India since 2000.
- Indian investments in UAE exceed $16 billion.
- ~5 million Indian diaspora in UAE — largest expatriate group.
- Over 1,200 weekly flights – high connectivity corridor.

Strategic Investments

- UAE sovereign wealth funds (ADIA, Mubadala) investing in:
  - Infrastructure
  - Renewable energy
  - Healthcare
  - Technology
- LNG supply agreements support India's energy security.
- DP World expanding port and logistics infrastructure in India.
- UAE's ADIA established presence in GIFT City (IFSC).
- Bharat Mart (UAE) to promote Indian exports to Africa & Eurasia.

Emerging Areas

- AI cooperation and digital infrastructure.
- Renewable energy and solar-plus-storage projects.
- Electric vehicle manufacturing relocation to UAE.
- Expansion into third markets (Africa, West Asia).

Static Linkages

- Article 253 – Parliament's power to implement international agreements.
- Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) & Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements.
- Current Account & Balance of Payments (NCERT Macroeconomics).
- Energy security & LNG diversification (Integrated Energy Policy).
- Role of diaspora in foreign policy (India Year Book).
- FDI norms & Sovereign Wealth Funds (Economic Survey).
- International Financial Services Centres (GIFT City framework).

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Diversification beyond oil reduces vulnerability to crude price shocks.
- Strengthens India's energy security through long-term LNG contracts.
- Enhances logistics competitiveness via port investments.
- Boosts manufacturing under Make in India.
- Positions India strategically in West Asia.
- Facilitates global expansion of Indian firms.

Concerns

- Potential trade imbalance.
- Geopolitical instability in West Asia.
- Regulatory and digital governance challenges in AI cooperation.
- Investor-State dispute risks under BIT.
- Welfare concerns of Indian migrant workers.

Way Forward

- Ensure balanced trade growth with export diversification.
- Deepen value-chain integration in manufacturing.
- Strengthen diaspora welfare frameworks.
- Develop clear AI data governance cooperation.
- Leverage Bharat Mart to expand India–Africa trade.
- Use CEPA as template for future FTAs.

Poll sop

The ECI's proven bias on model code seems to have forced T.N.'s hand

When welfare measures to uplift underprivileged sections are deployed as a political tool in an election year it raises the question whether it is an instance of affirmative action or merely a cynical device that plays out as a poll-eve incentive. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's surgical action of crediting ₹5,000 each in the bank accounts of over 1.31 crore women beneficiaries of the *Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thittam* (KMUT), triggers exactly this uncomfortable thought. The KMUT, in operation since September 2023, envisages a monthly direct transfer of ₹1,000 "rights grant" recognising the dignity and contribution of women heads of families. Notably 32% of its beneficiaries are SC/STs. Citing political and legal apprehensions that the scheme, which is being projected as a rights-based social entitlement and not as a populist freebie, could be suspended prior to the Assembly election, Mr. Stalin chose to give it the force of a political multiplier by disbursing ₹3,000 each for February, March and April in one go. He also introduced a novel "summer assistance" of ₹2,000. Mr. Stalin's concerns about the possibility of the scheme being stopped after the announcement of the election schedule are not unwarranted. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has not been consistent in its interpretation of what constitutes a violation of the Model Code of Conduct. A recent precedent for voter incentivisation emerged during the 2025 Bihar elections, when the JD(U)-BJP coalition deposited ₹10,000 each to one crore women under the *Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana*. The ECI turned a blind eye to what was widely seen as an attempt to buy votes for the ruling coalition with funds from the exchequer. Previously, in Tamil Nadu, the ECI had suspended a cash support scheme for farmers (2004) and distribution of free colour television sets (2011). Adoption of double standards by the ECI when it comes to adjudication of such issues has become common.

The overall outgo from the exchequer on a single day exceeded ₹6,550 crore including an unplanned expenditure of ₹2,620 crore for the summer component. Offering cash benefits through government schemes on poll eve does not guarantee absolute voter loyalty. But it certainly places the ruling party in the pole position to politically leverage the exchequer. Unless the ECI plays fair in the implementation of the model code, it is difficult to fault such measures by those in power. At least, in the case of Tamil Nadu, this was an ongoing scheme since 2023, and only the newly added summer assistance raises a political stink. But, in the context of what the BJP-led coalition did in Bihar, this is innocuous.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Tamil Nadu government advanced ₹5,000 each to 1.31 crore women under the Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thittam (KMUT).
- KMUT (launched Sept 2023) provides ₹1,000 per month to women heads of families as a "rights-based grant".
- Advance payment (₹3,000 for 3 months) + ₹2,000 "summer assistance" announced before Assembly elections.
- Total fiscal outgo: ~₹6,550 crore.
- Debate: Welfare measure vs electoral populism.
- Concerns regarding enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) by the Election Commission of India (ECI).

Key Exam-Relevant Facts

- Article 324: ECI's constitutional authority over elections.
- MCC: Non-statutory code; prohibits new schemes after poll announcement but allows continuation of ongoing schemes.
- FRBM Act, 2003: Mandates fiscal discipline and deficit control.
- Subramaniam Balaji vs State of Tamil Nadu (2013): Supreme Court distinguished welfare schemes from "freebies"; directed ECI to frame guidelines.
- Gender Budgeting introduced in Union Budget (2005–06).
- DBT mechanism reduces leakages (Economic Survey findings).
- Directive Principles:
  - Article 38 – Social order for welfare.
  - Article 39(a) – Adequate livelihood.
  - Article 46 – Promotion of SC/ST interests.

Static Concepts to Revise

- Welfare State vs Populism
- Model Code of Conduct (nature, enforceability)
- Fiscal Deficit vs Revenue Expenditure
- Direct Benefit Transfer (JAM Trinity)
- Electoral Reforms (Level Playing Field doctrine)
- Gender Empowerment and Inclusive Growth

Issues Involved

Governance Dimension

- Ambiguity in MCC interpretation.
- Selective enforcement weakens institutional credibility.

Economic Dimension

- Revenue expenditure vs capital expenditure debate.
- Impact on fiscal deficit and debt sustainability.

Ethical Dimension (GS 4)

- Public money for public good vs electoral gain.
- Probity in governance.
- Fairness in democratic competition.

Social Justice Dimension

- Women's economic empowerment.
- Targeted redistribution (SC/ST coverage).

Arguments For

- Supports women-led households and inclusive growth.
- Ongoing scheme (not newly announced).
- DBT ensures transparency and efficiency.
- Consumption support during inflationary stress.

Arguments Against

- Timing may influence voter behaviour.
- Creates competitive populism across states.
- Fiscal strain on state finances.
- Undermines "level playing field" principle.

Way Forward

- Give statutory backing to MCC for clarity and uniformity.
- Define objective criteria to distinguish welfare from electoral inducement.
- Strengthen fiscal transparency and legislative oversight.
- Promote outcome-based welfare instead of unconditional transfers.
- Ensure uniform ECI enforcement across states.

Hot air

Donald Trump is trying to turn back the clock on environmental issues

As part of his continuing assault on science, U.S. President Donald Trump revoked a foundational guideline of the American environment regulator that allowed it to control the transportation sector's emission of greenhouse gases. The repeal of the 'endangerment finding' was the final, formal blow following a series of actions by the U.S.'s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in weakening Obama-era administration fuel economy and greenhouse gas (GHG) standards for vehicle model years 2021-26 and loosening fuel efficiency norms. The 'endangerment finding' emerged after the US Supreme Court's 2007 decision, in *Massachusetts vs EPA*, which held that greenhouse gases qualify as "air pollutants" and required the EPA to determine whether they endanger public health or welfare. In December 2009, the EPA concluded that six greenhouse gases – including carbon dioxide and methane – "may reasonably be anticipated to endanger" health and welfare, drawing heavily on assessments by the IPCC and U.S. scientific bodies. The EPA's action had a seismic impact on the American automotive industry, setting in motion the first federal greenhouse gas standards, set in 2010, for cars and light trucks (2012-16), later extended through 2025. Manufacturers accelerated fuel-efficiency improvements, invested in hybrid systems, lightweight materials, and, eventually, battery-electric vehicles. Regulatory credit markets emerged, benefiting firms such as Tesla, Inc. and resulting in the popularity of electric vehicles globally, including in India.

Though indirect, the stricter greenhouse gas emission norms also influenced a world-wide shift away from the 'small car' to the mid-sized Sport Utility Vehicles (SUV) with car markers improving the SUV's emissions profile. Mr. Trump seems to believe that doing away with the EPA regulations will revive America's 'gas guzzler' era, boost American manufacturing jobs, and somehow tie in with his administration's rediscovery of Venezuelan oil. These are pipedreams. Auto-manufacturing production lines today are optimised around electrification, hybridisation and emissions controls. With China dominating most of the production value chain, it is unlikely that auto-manufacturers, who have invested over a multi-decadal horizon into clean vehicles – and with the intention to export to countries where emissions norms are only getting stricter by the day – will change tack to a regress. At best, the norms will be a speed bump to electric vehicle rollout and could win Mr. Trump some brownie points with his voter base. The real danger lies in automakers in India citing such regulation as a pretext to weaken fuel efficiency standards. Although India's standards do not yet connect climate goals with cars, the domestic automotive sector should view them as a lodestar.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The U.S. administration revoked the 2009 "Endangerment Finding" issued by the United States Environmental Protection Agency.
- The finding originated from the U.S. Supreme Court judgment in Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency, which held that greenhouse gases (GHGs) qualify as "air pollutants" under the Clean Air Act.
- In 2009, EPA concluded that six GHGs (CO_2, CH_4, N_2O, HFCs, PFCs, SF_6) endanger public health and welfare.
- This formed the legal basis for federal GHG and fuel economy standards (2012–2025) for cars and light trucks.
- The rollback weakens climate regulation in the transport sector and has global implications, including for India.

Key Points

- Legal Basis: Clean Air Act (1970) empowered EPA to regulate air pollutants.
- 2007 Judgment: Supreme Court mandated EPA to determine whether GHGs endanger public health.
- 2009 Endangerment Finding: Recognized climate change as a threat to health and welfare.
- Six GHGs covered: CO_2, CH_4, N_2O, HFCs, PFCs, SF_6.
- Impact on Automobiles:
  - Strengthened Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards.
  - Encouraged electric vehicles (EVs) and hybrids.
  - Promoted regulatory credit markets (benefited firms like Tesla, Inc.).
- Scientific assessments relied heavily on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports.

India-Relevant Dimensions

- India follows BS-VI emission norms (equivalent to Euro 6).
- Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE) standards implemented under the Energy Conservation Act, 2001.
- EV promotion via FAME-II scheme and National Electric Mobility Mission Plan.
- India's Paris commitments:
  - 45% reduction in emissions intensity of GDP by 2030 (from 2005 level).
  - 50% cumulative installed power capacity from non-fossil sources by 2030.

Static Linkages

- GHGs contribute to radiative forcing and global warming.
- Transport sector is a major contributor to CO_2 emissions globally.
- Environmental principles:
  - Precautionary Principle
  - Polluter Pays Principle
  - Intergenerational Equity
- Article 21: Right to clean environment (judicial interpretation).
- Article 48A & Article 51A(g): Environmental protection duties.

Critical Analysis

Implications Globally

- Weakens climate leadership of the U.S.
- Creates regulatory uncertainty in global clean-tech markets.
- May slow EV adoption in the short term.

Implications for India

- Risk of domestic auto industry lobbying for dilution of fuel efficiency norms.
- Could affect global EV supply chains where China dominates battery manufacturing.
- However, export-oriented manufacturing requires compliance with stricter EU norms.

Ethical Dimension

- Raises concerns of intergenerational equity.
- Contradicts global collective action principle under climate regime.

Way Forward

- Strengthen domestic fuel efficiency norms independent of global political shifts.
- Integrate transport emissions explicitly into India's climate targets.
- Accelerate EV infrastructure and battery manufacturing under Atmanirbhar Bharat.
- Enhance carbon pricing and market-based mechanisms.

At global event, India aims to spotlight local solutions

While the previous summits grappled with risks and regulatory frameworks, New Delhi wants to centre 'People, Planet, and Progress'

SOUMYARENDRA BARIK

WHAT DOES the boom of artificial intelligence (AI) mean for the future of work? Is India's IT sector ready for the onslaught? Should India build its own Large Language Models, similar to the likes of ChatGPT and DeepSeek, or focus more on tailored, sector-specific AI applications? Are most Indians skilled enough for an AI-first world? Will AI be detrimental to the environment, with its requirement of large amounts of data that must be stored in data centres?

As the world faces fundamental questions, spurred by the sensational growth in AI services, much of the global conversation around them will happen in India over the next five days, with New Delhi playing host for the India AI Impact Summit 2026. Between February 16 and 20, several world and corporate leaders will try to answer the burning questions facing the world today.

With the summit, India intends to generate actionable recommendations that contribute to long-term AI innovation and governance objectives rather than framing immediate binding regulations.

India, an aspiring voice for Global South

Coming to the Global South for the first time, the summit represents the latest chapter in an evolving international conversation on AI.

What began as the AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park in the UK in November 2023, where 28 countries signed the landmark Bletchley Declaration focusing on identifying AI safety risks, has progressively broadened its scope.

The Seoul Summit in May 2024 expanded discussions to include innovation and inclusivity alongside safety, while the Paris AI Action Summit in February 2025 (which Prime Minister Narendra Modi co-chaired) emphasised practical implementation and economic opportunities, though issues of safety and security were largely sidestepped.

India's pitch is somewhat different. Where previous summits wrestled with catastrophic risks and regulatory frameworks, New Delhi is centring the conversation on what Electronics and IT Secretary S Krishnan calls "People, Planet, and Progress" — to build AI solutions that focus on on-ground issues. The approach reflects India's position both as an aspiring AI power and a voice for the Global South.

According to Abhishek Singh, CEO of IndiaAI Mission, one of the focus areas would be the democratisation of AI, apart from showcasing real-world AI solutions that Indian engineers and talent are building locally.

"The AI that we are using at present is such that it's developed in and by a few countries and the majority of the world is just AI users. If the datasets are not inclusive, bias will be there in the outputs. The issue with regard to democratising AI resources in the form of datasets of compute, models, algorithms and applications becomes a key theme for the summit," Singh told *The Indian Express*.

What to expect from the Summit

Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has billed the summit as the biggest so far, and had last month said the government had received a phenomenal response from across the world.

Governments, industry leaders, researchers, civil society organisations, and international institutions are set to attend the event. It is expected to see participation from over 100 countries, including 15 to 20 heads of government — including French President Emmanuel Macron and Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. More than 50 ministers from various countries, and more than 40 CEOs of leading global and Indian companies, such as Google's Sundar Pichai, Anthropic's Dario Amodei, Microsoft's Brad Smith, and Adobe's Shantanu Narayen (*see box*) will attend. PM Modi will inaugurate the event, and is also likely to host a dinner and address a CEO roundtable. A Chinese delegation is also attending after India sent a formal invitation to Beijing.

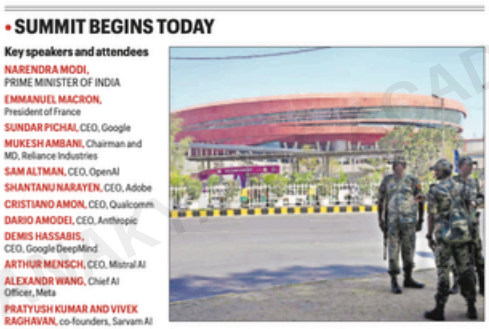
The event will culminate on Friday, with the adoption of a declaration statement. New Delhi may have to be careful in its language as the US and UK declined to sign the declaration at the summit in France last year, due to concerns over Europe's regulatory approach to AI.

There has already been a minor dampener to the event, with Nvidia's CEO Jensen Huang cancelling his India visit and pulling out of the summit at the last minute due to "unforeseen circumstances". Huang, whose company and the graphics processing units that it designs are at the heart of the AI revolution, was among the biggest summit attractions.

India is also likely to see some companies launch domestically developed AI language models. Of the 12 applications to build Large and Small Language Models that India has approved, some are expected to see official launches. This includes sovereign AI models being built by Sarvam AI and BharatGen. There could also be some hardware-related announcements, centred around expanding India's data centre capacity.

The event will include deliberations on multiple themes, with working groups for AI and its impact on work, trust and safety protocols for AI models, and the usage of AI in specific industries.

The summit will feature a startup showcase of more than 500 AI startups and host around 500 sessions alongside the main programme, making it one of the most comprehensive AI-focused global convenings, it said in a press statement.



• SUMMIT BEGINS TODAY

Key speakers and attendees

NARENDRA MODI, PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA
EMMANUEL MACRON, President of France
SUNDAR PICHAI, CEO, Google
MUKESH AMBANI, Chairman and MD, Reliance Industries
SAM ALTMAN, CEO, OpenAI
SHANTANU NARAYEN, CEO, Adobe
CRISTIANO AMON, CEO, Qualcomm
DARIO AMODEI, CEO, Anthropic
DEMIS HASSABIS, CEO, Google DeepMind
ARTHUR MENSCH, CEO, Mistral AI
ALEXANDR WANG, Chief AI Officer, Meta
PRATYUSH KUMAR AND VIVEK RAGHAVAN, co-founders, Sarvam AI
VISHAL SIKKA, founder and CEO, Vianai

Security personnel on duty outside the Bharat Mandapam, a day ahead of the AI Summit in New Delhi. ABHINAV SAHA

Sessions of note

The future of employability in the age of AI
When: Feb 16 (9.30 AM - 10.30 AM); Where: West Wing Room 4 A, Bharat Mandapam
Key speakers: V Anantha Nageswaran, Chief Economic Advisor, India; Sanjeev Bhikchandani, InfoEdge; Anurag Mairal, Stanford University of Medicine; Shashi Shekhar Vempati, AI4India

Fireside chat
When: Feb 19 (12:04 PM - 12:24 PM); Where: Plenary Hall, Bharat Mandapam
Key speakers: Dario Amodei, CEO, Anthropic; Nandan Nilekani, co-founder and Chairman, Infosys

AI for economic development and social good
When: Feb 20 (9.30 AM - 10.30 AM); Where: L1 Meeting Room No. 7, Bharat Mandapam
Key speakers: Ashwini Vaishnaw, IT, I&B, Railways Minister; Anshuman Awasthi, Mercedes-Benz Research & Development India; Karsten Wildberger, Federal Minister for Digital Transformation and Government Modernisation, Germany; Dattatri Salagame, Bosch Global Software Technologies; Sindhu Gangadharan, SAP Labs India

In store

The summit will feature a startup showcase of more than 500 AI startups and host around 500 sessions

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India is hosting the India-AI Impact Summit 2026 in New Delhi (Feb 16–20, 2026).
- Participation from 100+ countries, including heads of state and global tech CEOs.
- The summit builds on earlier global AI governance initiatives:
  - AI Safety Summit (UK, 2023) – Focus on AI safety risks.
  - Seoul AI Summit – Expanded to innovation and inclusivity.
  - Paris AI Action Summit – Emphasis on implementation and economic use.
- India's theme: "People, Planet and Progress" – Development-oriented AI governance.
- Linked to the IndiaAI Mission under MeitY.

Key Points

- IndiaAI Mission (2024):
  - Focus on compute infrastructure, datasets, indigenous AI models.
  - Public-private collaboration model.
- India has approved proposals to build Large Language Models (LLMs) and Small Language Models (SLMs) domestically.
- AI applications focus areas:
  - Agriculture (precision farming)
  - Healthcare diagnostics
  - Governance & public service delivery
  - Climate modelling
- India positioning itself as voice of Global South in AI governance.
- Expansion of domestic data centre capacity to support AI infrastructure.

Static Linkages

- Scientific temper – Article 51A(h).
- Right to Privacy – Fundamental Right (Puttaswamy Judgment, 2017).
- Digital Public Infrastructure (Aadhaar, UPI) – Model for AI-enabled governance.
- National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (NITI Aayog, 2018) – "AI for All."
- Data Protection framework – Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023.
- India's climate commitments under Paris Agreement – relevance to energy-intensive AI.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Enhances India's leadership in emerging technology governance.
- Promotes inclusive datasets to reduce algorithmic bias.
- Boost to domestic semiconductor and data centre ecosystem.
- Supports productivity growth and digital economy expansion.

Concerns

- Job displacement in IT and service sectors.
- Digital divide – AI access may remain urban-centric.
- High energy consumption of AI data centres.
- Risk of regulatory fragmentation globally.
- Dependence on imported GPUs and advanced chips.

Stakeholders

- IT industry & startups.
- Workforce (especially mid-skill employees).
- Government & regulators.
- Global South countries.
- Environmental groups.

Way Forward

- Focus on sector-specific AI solutions (health, agriculture, education).
- Invest in AI skilling & reskilling under Skill India.
- Promote green data centres (renewable-powered).
- Strengthen AI ethics frameworks – transparency & explainability.
- Encourage open-source AI models for affordability.
- Develop semiconductor ecosystem under India Semiconductor Mission.

Maternity Benefit Act is progressive. Empathy is key

VIJAYA KISHORE RAHATKAR

FOR DECADES, India has celebrated the academic brilliance of its women. They consistently top school boards, civil services, medical entrances, and university examinations. And yet, when we look at corporate boardrooms or senior decision-making spaces, their presence thins out sharply. Motherhood, for many women, is the point at which this quiet exit begins.

The Maternity Benefit Act, with its provision of six months of paid leave, is undeniably progressive and among the more generous protections globally. But no law can legislate the emotional reality of a new mother. Many return carrying guilt, anxiety, and exhaustion, and are seen as less reliable. A new mother needs reassurance both at home, where she must be encouraged to believe that seeking professional growth is not selfishness, and within her organisation, where she must feel confident that thinking about her child does not diminish her capability or commitment.

Although the Act extends to almost all wage-earning women except the self-employed, the quality of support they receive varies dramatically. A woman in a permanent government post enjoys not only maternity leave but access to long-term childcare leave of up to 730 days, with full pay for the first year and partial pay thereafter, providing her with a relatively structured path back into her career. In smaller private establishments, while employers may comply with the Act, this does not equate to acceptance. Many women return to find their responsibilities reassigned, their promotion prospects diminished, and their growth trajectory slowed. For the Act to succeed, empathy needs to be woven into organisational behaviour. Women need workplaces that believe ambition and motherhood can coexist with dignity.

One of the most significant barriers for new mothers is the lack of dependable, affordable childcare. Yet this challenge presents an extraordinary opportunity. Millions of unskilled and semi-skilled women in India are seeking employment. Through training, certification, and skilling modules, they can form a new, formalised workforce of caregivers. It has the potential to become a major employment generator for women and a critical support pillar for working mothers. Importantly, empowering one woman to work should not come at the cost of another's exploitation.

In recent years, the rise of "DINK" (Double Income, No Kids) couples has often been portrayed as a lifestyle preference. But for many women, it is a choice born of fear of career stagnation and societal expectations that motherhood is a woman's sole responsibility. While laws can protect wages and jobs, they cannot dictate how families behave. The burden of motherhood grows heavier when a woman is expected to project an image of "effortless coping" as she balances childcare and work pressure. Unless families and workplaces share this load, women will continue to drop out quietly, painfully, and permanently.

The writer is chairperson, National Commission for Women

For the Act to succeed, empathy needs to be woven into organisational behaviour. Women need workplaces that believe ambition and motherhood can coexist with dignity

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Despite high academic achievements, women's participation declines at senior corporate and administrative levels.
- The "motherhood penalty" is increasingly identified as a structural reason for women exiting the workforce.
- The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 expanded paid maternity leave to 26 weeks.
- Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) (PLFS 2022–23) ~37% (15+ years), but formal workforce retention remains low.
- Lack of affordable childcare and workplace bias affect women's career continuity.

Key Provisions & Facts

Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017

- 26 weeks paid leave (for first two children).
- 12 weeks for third child onwards.
- Applicable to establishments with ≥10 employees.
- Crèche facility mandatory for establishments with ≥50 employees.
- Provision for work-from-home (mutual agreement basis).
- Leave for adoptive and commissioning mothers (12 weeks).

Child Care Leave (CCL)

- Central government women employees eligible for 730 days.
- 100% pay for first year; partial thereafter (as per CCS Rules).

Related Schemes

- Palna (National Creche Scheme) under Mission Shakti.
- POSHAN Abhiyaan – maternal & child health support.
- PMMVY – maternity benefit (conditional cash transfer).

Static Linkages

- Article 14 – Equality before law.
- Article 15(3) – Special provisions for women and children.
- Article 42 – Provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.
- Directive Principles – Social justice orientation.
- Demographic Dividend & Human Capital Formation.
- Gender Inequality Index (UNDP).
- Labour Codes (Code on Social Security, 2020).

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Among the more generous statutory maternity leave policies globally.
- Improves maternal & child health outcomes.
- Promotes constitutional vision of social justice.
- Institutional recognition of unpaid care work.

Challenges

- Cost borne by employers → possible hiring bias.
- Limited to formal sector; ~90% women in informal economy lack coverage.
- Weak enforcement of crèche provisions.
- Career stagnation & glass ceiling post-maternity.
- Childcare infrastructure gap.

Way Forward

- Consider social insurance model (shared cost: employer + state).
- Universal childcare infrastructure expansion.
- Incentivize paternity leave for shared caregiving.
- Strict monitoring of crèche compliance.
- Corporate gender-sensitivity audits.
- Skill development of trained childcare workforce.

Global South must seize its AI moment

THE AI Impact Summit, which begins in New Delhi, will be the first such conclave in the Global South. The choice of venue is more than just symbolic. Earlier editions of the summit paved the way for larger conversations on global AI governance. However, the Global South has largely been underrepresented in the norm-setting processes. The Delhi Summit is an opportunity to address this imbalance. It's almost certain that AI will be much more deeply embedded in disciplines central to human well-being — medicine, agriculture, law, even humanities and social sciences — compared to any other technology in the past. Innovation, therefore, cannot remain moored in the languages, insights and datasets of the advanced economies. For countries in large parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, correcting the AI skew is not merely a technical issue — it's closely intertwined with developmental concerns. In a geopolitically volatile world, this equity imperative is also tied to national security concerns.

India's journey offers a persuasive framework for an alternative AI pathway. The country's digital public infrastructure (DPI) — the cornerstone of welfare provisions, ranging from agriculture and food security to subsidies for cooking gas to vaccine delivery — has underlined inclusion and affordability. Instead of focusing only on capital-intensive proprietary frontier models, developed countries could work on building AI layers atop existing DPI systems. When governed responsibly, datasets in such systems can power service optimisation. India's multilingual AI initiative, Bhashini, is a good example. It addresses one of the biggest barriers in welfare delivery — language accessibility. When voice interfaces are integrated with DPI systems, citizens can interact online with government service delivery systems in their own languages. In the linguistically diverse nations of the Global South, such AI tools can become harbingers of good governance.

Close to 90 per cent of AI patents today originate in the US, Europe and China. That's why even as it charts its own course and tries to democratise AI development, the Global South cannot afford to remain disengaged with the advanced economies. In India, like in many other developing countries, innovations — including DPI — have historically been stewarded by the government. State control has come down substantially in the past three decades. But a technology that thrives on experimentation, collaboration, risk-taking, and access to global research networks requires the government to become an enabler, not a controller. At the same time, concerns over privacy, security — national and individual — and fairness are central to AI development. These issues are part of global conversations . The Delhi Summit could help open the way to a richer and more inclusive AI ecosystem.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The AI Impact Summit is being held in New Delhi.
- Focus: Making global AI governance more inclusive, especially for the Global South.
- Earlier global AI discussions were dominated by advanced economies (US, EU, China).
- India is advocating an AI pathway linked to Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and inclusive development.

Key Points

- Nearly 90% of global AI patents originate from the US, Europe and China.
- AI applications are expanding in:
  - Agriculture (precision farming)
  - Healthcare (AI diagnostics)
  - Governance (beneficiary identification, DBT optimization)
  - Education (multilingual tools)

India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)

Core components:

- Aadhaar – Digital identity.
- UPI – Real-time payment system.
- DBT – Direct transfer of subsidies.
- CoWIN – Vaccine management platform.

Features:

- Interoperable
- Open architecture
- Scalable
- Inclusion-focused

Bhashini Initiative

- National Language Translation Mission.
- Enables AI-driven multilingual governance services.
- Improves accessibility in welfare delivery.

Key Governance Concerns

- Data privacy
- Algorithmic bias
- Cybersecurity
- National security implications
- Digital divide

Static Linkages

- Article 14 – Equality before law.
- Article 21 – Right to privacy (Puttaswamy Judgment, 2017).
- Directive Principles – Social and economic justice.
- E-governance reforms (Second ARC recommendations).
- Concept of public goods and digital commons.
- Data protection framework in India.

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Promotes inclusive AI model for Global South.
- Reduces technological dependency.
- Enhances welfare delivery efficiency.
- Strengthens digital sovereignty.

Challenges

- Data misuse risks.
- Regulatory gaps in AI governance.
- Concentration of AI patents in developed countries.
- Infrastructure gaps in rural areas.
- Cyber vulnerabilities in DPI systems.

Way Forward

- Strengthen data protection and AI regulatory framework.
- Promote open-source and collaborative AI models.
- Build AI capacity in Global South through partnerships.
- Encourage government as enabler, not controller.
- Invest in cybersecurity and digital literacy.
- Promote ethical AI principles – transparency, fairness, accountability.

In agriculture, both a good & not-so-good deal

INDIAN AGRICULTURE is not a monolith, it has both dynamic and not-so-dynamic components. The sector's overall average annual growth of 4.4 per cent during 2014-15 to 2023-24 has primarily come from livestock and fisheries, with their respective gross value added rising by 7.2 per cent and 8.9 per cent, according to NITI Aayog member Ramesh Chand. On the other hand, the crops subsector has recorded just 2.8 per cent annual increase. And within that, there's a clear difference between faster-growing horticulture (fruits, vegetables, condiments and spices) and the relatively sluggish field crops segments. It's not for nothing that the nearly-sealed India-US bilateral trade agreement has met with a varied response. The poultry, dairy and aqua industries have largely welcomed it, while soyabean, maize and even sugarcane growers and processors won't be as happy.

For animal farmers — those raising cattle, poultry, fish and shrimp — feed is a significant cost element. Opening the door to imports of red sorghum and distiller's dried grains with solubles from the US can provide access to potentially cheaper and better-quality feed ingredients. That, and India not giving concessions to American dairy or poultry product imports, makes this an unquestionably good deal for the animal husbandry sector. From an equity standpoint, too, livestock farming is a more labour- than land-intensive economic activity, while contributing a higher share of income for marginal agricultural households. Any analysis of the impact of policy — whether trade or subsidies and cash transfers — on "agriculture" must look at different subsectors and the predominant farmer types engaged in each of these.

The crops subsector is more likely to be affected by the increased market access for US farm produce. That has as much to do with agronomy as domestic policy failures. Average corn and soyabean yields in India are a third, or even less, of those in the US. Washington apple yields, at over 48 tonnes per hectare, are way above the corresponding average of 12 tonnes for J&K and 5 tonnes for Himachal Pradesh. Indian maize and soyabean farmers have been denied the right to plant GM seeds — and are now forced to compete with their more productive American counterparts deploying these technologies. Neither has much effort gone into promoting high-density planting, renewal pruning, drip irrigation and precision nutrient management techniques to improve yields and fruit quality in apple orchards. Policy should enable Indian agriculture to be more market-oriented and globally competitive. And some segments already are.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- India and the US are close to finalising a bilateral trade agreement expanding market access for select agricultural products.
- India may reduce tariffs on feed-related imports like Distillers' Dried Grains with Solubles (DDGS) and feed sorghum.
- As per NITI Aayog data (Ramesh Chand), Indian agriculture grew at 4.4% annually (2014–15 to 2023–24), but growth has been uneven:
  - Livestock: ~7.2%
  - Fisheries: ~8.9%
  - Crops: ~2.8%
- Livestock and aquaculture sectors have largely welcomed the deal; maize, soybean, and sugarcane farmers have expressed concerns.

Key Exam-Relevant Facts

- Livestock is a major contributor to agricultural GVA growth.
- Horticulture output exceeds foodgrain production in volume terms.
- Feed accounts for 60–70% of poultry production cost.
- India permits GM cotton but not commercial GM soybean or maize.
- Yield gap:
  - Indian maize & soybean yields are about one-third of US levels.
  - Apple productivity in US (~48 t/ha) significantly higher than J&K (~12 t/ha) and Himachal (~5 t/ha).
- WTO's Agreement on Agriculture allows domestic support under Amber, Blue and Green Boxes.

Static Concepts

- Structural transformation: Shift from crop-dominated agriculture to livestock & high-value sectors.
- Comparative advantage determines gains from trade.
- MSP-driven cereal bias influences cropping pattern.
- Small and marginal farmers (≈86% of holdings) benefit more from livestock due to low land requirement.
- Productivity depends on seed technology, irrigation intensity, and extension services.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Enhances competitiveness of poultry, dairy, and aquaculture sectors.
- Benefits small & marginal farmers dependent on livestock.
- Promotes high-value agriculture and diversification.
- Reduces feed costs → may lower protein food inflation.

Concerns

- Price pressure on maize and soybean farmers.
- Large yield gap due to technology restrictions.
- Policy distortions (MSP bias toward cereals).
- Risk of import dependence for feed inputs.

Core Issue

- Trade liberalisation without domestic productivity reform creates asymmetrical competition.

Way Forward

- Bridge yield gap via:
  - Precision farming
  - High-density planting
  - Scientific irrigation (PMKSY)
- Evidence-based regulatory framework for agricultural biotechnology.
- Diversify incentives toward oilseeds & feed crops.
- Strengthen FPOs for market access.
- Align trade policy with domestic agricultural reforms.
- Invest in R&D through ICAR and digital extension.