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EDITORIAL

“Advancing technology by collecting massive profiles is laziness, not efficiency. For AI to be truly smart in serving citizens, it must respect human values and privacy.”

– Tim Cook, CEO of Apple

AI has arrived. It is the most powerful technology yet developed by humans. In my view, the key question today isn't what AI can do, but what AI should do.

We are witnessing the most unguarded adoption of a new technology in human history. Governments are investing heavily in AI tools to modernise public policy making and as an interface with citizens. Corporate sector is using AI models to beat competition; hundreds of startups are seeking endorsement of the market. Researchers are using AI as a valuable helper in problem solving. According to an estimate, almost 90% of global organizations have already deployed AI into some of their business functions. AI today is ubiquitous.

But it seems we are doing it thoughtlessly. Because the same estimation says that only about 10% of these organizations have developed a credible framework to govern AI. They have no guardrails to manage it thoughtfully.

What is most worrying is the fact that AI models carry their own embedded values and ideologies. The Big Tech corporations that build them can structurally override national governments by encoding those biases directly into the software. Because building new AI models requires billions of dollars in supercomputers and massive energy grids, only a handful of multinational corporations possess this capability.

Choosing to deploy an algorithm is inherently a political act that alters the distribution of power. Imagine an AI designed to optimize healthcare funding. Should the model prioritize areas with the highest

survival rates or should it prioritize poor neighbourhoods? This is a profound ideological question.

If a ruling government uses AI aggressively to serve a certain section of people while leaving others to slower human processes, the technology becomes an instrument of political decision making. AI is not like other technologies. AI is not a value-neutral utility like electricity or nuclear energy. Because it is heavily based on existing historical data, every AI model carries embedded values, priorities, and biases. Policy-making is not a mathematical problem with a single optimal solution. It is an exercise in negotiation, conciliation, values and ethics. AI agents would fail at these core elements required for good governance. So, there are two alternatives: regulate AI or completely ban further development of AI. The first is difficult, the second impossible.

Dario Amodei, the CEO of ANTHROPIC cancelled the launch of the new AI model Claude Mythos 5, developed by Anthropic, as he found it too dangerous. Because, he said, 'It is more human than its forerunners', it could be weaponized by the unscrupulous. Therefore, before launch, it requires a tinkering.

Amodie demanded two safeguards in using its latest and most powerful product. One, that it should not be used for mass surveillance and two, it should not be used for fully automated weapons. I would add some more safeguards e.g. it should not discriminate among sections of population and it should not create islands of wealth in the midst of squalor.

Recently, Pope Leo XIV issued an encyclical from the Vatican. He described the problems of AI, one of which was that AI will create a vast new underclass that could be more debasing than poverty. The problem is not that very few people will control everything (which is happening even now and has been happening through human history), but that in the near future, everyone outside a small band of Tech warriors may feel irrelevant, worthless and without prospects. The Pope further said, 'technology is never neutral, because it takes on the characteristics of those who devise, finance, regulate and use it.'

In February 2026, government of India announced its AI

Governance Guidelines, in which it adopted the approach of ‘innovation over restraint’. The guidelines suggested using existing regulatory framework of Information Technology Act, 2000.

However, since April 2026, the scene has changed. There seems to be a rethink after Anthropic cancelled the launch of its latest AI model Claude Mythos on the ground that it came ‘too close to being human’ and posed great risk of cybercrime. According to the latest statement of Secretary of MEITY Ministry, the government was thinking of bringing a specific law for AI. The use of AI for mass surveillance is a temptation for many countries; India included. It may be necessary to begin thinking about ways for civil society to monitor government’s use of AI. We should not forget that the technology itself is improving by leaps and bounds.

The inevitability of AI in governance brings a massive shift in how governments operate. However, a new super-efficient technology does not automatically ensure a more responsive, inclusive, and citizen-friendly system.

Turning AI into an instrument for public good requires addressing several deep structural, ethical, and legal challenges. I would classify these challenges in three streams: responsiveness, inclusion and ethics.

Perhaps the most intimidating feature of the use of AI in resource allocation or service delivery is the erosion of due process. In a traditional system, if an official rejects your house building application, you can demand an explanation, point out an error, or appeal to a supervisor.

When highly complex machine learning models control the pipeline, they become “Black Boxes”. The inevitability of AI in governance brings a massive shift in how governments operate. However, a new super-efficient technology does not automatically ensure a more responsive, inclusive, and citizen-friendly system.

If a citizen demands to know why they were denied a public benefit, and the government's only answer is “the algorithm said no”, it violates the ethical right to due process and strips the citizen of a fair path to appeal. To address these challenges, frameworks like the India AI Governance Guidelines should mandate that high-stakes state

algorithms undergo continuous independent bias testing, maintain open audit trails, and ensure a mandatory "human-in-the-loop" safeguard. This preserves a baseline rule: AI can suggest options, but only a human can legally wield the power of the state.

What has been said is neither prognosis nor prescription. It is an attempt to see the unfolding drama of a new paradigm. It will, however, be a test of our competence to derive value from the emerging technology. India is a unique place in terms of its complexity – multi lingual, multi-cultural, multireligious, climatically and racially diverse, institutionally federal. Also, AI enabled public services at an immense human scale – Aadhar, UPI, ABDM, and Digi locker – give India a digital public infrastructure that most countries cannot replicate. It is a laboratory for AI enabled governance to create templates for other countries to watch and study. And we may not forget the strategic resource of huge AI talent that we have.

Today, we are talking about Viksit Bharat. If it becomes Viksit, AI would be central to its journey. If it is not, it will be because of our failure to harness AI on sovereign terms.

Prabhat Kumar

Ajit Doval

Sardar Patel Lecture on Governance^{*}

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to deliver the sixth Sardar Patel Lecture on Governance on the occasion of his 150th anniversary. It is a special occasion, and I consider it a privilege to address such a distinguished audience.

I speak today on governance—a subject about which many of you here know far more than I do. Yet I hope to offer a perspective shaped by the discipline of national security. From that vantage point, governance is not an abstract administrative exercise; it is central to nation-building, to security, and to the realization of people's aspirations. It is particularly fitting that in 2025 we reflect upon the legacy of Sardar Patel. The need to understand his vision and clarity of thought and drawing inspiration from his leadership is even greater today. India is undergoing a profound transformation with an orbital shift in its governance structures, its societal frameworks, and its role in the global order. The world itself is in flux. In such times, clarity of vision is indispensable. We must not be blinded by turbulence, overwhelmed by noise, or subdued by adversaries. Preparation, steadiness, and institutional resolve are essential.

In the pre-independence era, Sardar Patel stood as a pillar of the freedom movement alongside Mahatma Gandhi. In the fragile years following independence, he unified 560 princely states and integrated them into a single Union. He persuaded rulers that their future depended upon the strength and survival of a united India—an India capable of transforming an ancient civilization into a modern nation-state. He recognized that such transformation required robust

^{*} Transcribed from the 6th Annual Sardar Patel Lecture delivered by Ajit Doval on behalf of the IC Centre for Governance at the India International Centre, New Delhi, on October 31, 2025.

institutions—mechanisms capable of thinking beyond convention and acting with discipline. His steadfast defence of the All India Services, despite resistance and prejudice, reflected this conviction. Without the “steel frame” of an empowered and cohesive civil service, he believed, building a new India would not be possible.

When we speak of national power, we often do so in abstract terms. In reality, the strength of a nation rests upon the quality of its governance. Weak, confused, or self-serving governments produce predictable consequences. Governments function through institutions. Institutions deliver governance. Governance shapes nations. The people who build, nurture and strengthen these institutions are the most crucial element. In this regard, the role of Sardar Patel is self-evident.

The rise and fall of empires is fundamentally the history of governance. Edward Gibbon’s six-volume study of the Roman Empire’s decline concluded that Rome collapsed because it was governed badly—corruption, economic mismanagement, intrigue, and strategic failure eroded its strength. Similar patterns appear in Tsarist Russia, during the French Revolution, and in the Mughal Empire. Among 37 post-war nations that experienced decline, 28 failed or deteriorated significantly as a consequence of poor governance. More recent non-constitutional changes of leadership in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and elsewhere illustrate how governance deficits destabilize states.

Across three millennia of recorded state systems—from ancient Greek city-states to modern democracies—certain patterns recur. Authoritarian practices marked by discriminatory laws, denial of justice, and marginalization, weaken legitimacy. Institutional decay—whether civil, military, or bureaucratic—undermines stability. Accountability diminishes. Roles blur. Purpose fades.

Let me share an example. Before the war with Russia, Bismarck once encountered a soldier guarding a remote forest post. Neither the soldier nor his commanding officer knew what was being guarded. Archival inquiry revealed that nearly 150 years earlier, a Tsarina had lost a necklace there and ordered a guard posted. The necklace was never found, yet the guard remained for generations. Bismarck

observed that such unthinking continuation of obsolete practices signalled decay. A nation that does not periodically reassess its institutions risks stagnation. The lesson remains relevant: governance must be dynamic, not mechanical. Economic decline has also precipitated the collapse of civilizations. Evidence suggests that in the Harappan and Mohenjo-daro civilization, scarcity of food and water contributed to social breakdown. Inflation, oppressive taxation, and unrest have historically eroded states.

Today, governance faces new complexities. Citizens are more informed and aspirational. Democratic governments have to respond to heightened expectations to maintain legitimacy and public support. Yet, democracy itself presents challenges. Political competition may fragment society and deepen divisions. Narrow or localized interests can overshadow national priorities. Therefore, one must also be on guard against potential negative consequences. The expanding influence of money in public life is another complex factor. It is a global phenomenon and its impact is undeniable. On the other hand, in contemporary political systems, ideas and visions increasingly require financial backing to gain traction.

To address both enduring and emerging challenges, governance frameworks must be modernized. This requires a thorough review of existing laws, rules, procedures, and processes to ensure that they are not only robust but also more people-friendly. Security must not only exist—it must be experienced by every citizen. Instilling confidence in the public requires clearly conveying that the nation possesses both the will and the strength to address any challenge in a manner that best safeguards national security. There is also a critical need to support the marginalized sections and ensure that they feel genuinely empowered, particularly women. Providing women with protection, safety, equality, and meaningful opportunities for participation is fundamental to achieving good governance in the modern world. Implementation capacity is equally important. In India, legislative ambition has sometimes exceeded execution capability. That gap must close.

Technology offers transformative potential for governance, enhancing transparency, service delivery, and accountability. Yet it also

introduces vulnerabilities. It is essential to safeguard society against the risks that technology can introduce—such as cyber threats and other emerging vulnerabilities—to ensure that its benefits are realized without compromising security or stability. Artificial intelligence, for example, could compress centuries of change into years. It is set to reshape how people live, think, communicate, and even how wars are fought. But if embedded uncritically in sensitive military command structures, it could create grave risks. Therefore, human oversight must remain central.

Any realistic assessment of governance in India must consider both objective measures and public perception. Over the past decade, terrorism in the hinterland has been effectively contained. While Jammu and Kashmir remains a distinct theatre due to proxy or covert warfare, major terror incidents in the broader hinterland have been absent despite persistent attempts and security has been largely maintained. Left-wing extremism has been reduced to less than 11 percent of the areas affected in 2014. Many formerly vulnerable districts are now stable. Infrastructure, connectivity, schools, health centres, and employment opportunities have expanded. Tribal communities are increasingly integrated into the mainstream. Shri Prabhat Kumar, who served as Governor of Jharkhand, played a key role in shaping the state during its formative years and was instrumental in guiding this transformation. Efforts to promote local arts and handicrafts have strengthened both economic development and cultural preservation.

In the North East, insurgency is no longer a dominant issue in public discourse. Though Manipur witnessed serious sectarian violence between Meiteis and Kukis, it did not constitute insurgency in the classical sense. Most major insurgent groups have signed accords. Firm, decisive and lawful action has deterred adversaries and restored stability.

Administrative reform has also accelerated service delivery. Over 1,552 obsolete laws have been repealed in the past decade, compared to approximately 1,300 in the preceding six decades. Criminal laws have been modernized, mandating scientific investigation and forensic processes. Police stations are computerized, and national

crime databases have enhanced investigative capacity. Passport issuance—once cumbersome—has been transformed through digital governance: 25 percent issued within three days, 60 percent within seven, and more than 85 percent within fourteen days. The Ayushman Bharat scheme provides coverage of up to ₹5 lakh per family. India's GDP has risen from approximately \$2.15 trillion in 2015 to nearly \$4 trillion in 2025, elevating the country's global ranking from tenth to fifth and soon likely to fourth.

The Goods and Services Tax has streamlined taxation, reducing corruption-prone checkpoints and improving revenue flows to the Consolidated Fund of India. Financial inclusion through the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana has brought millions into formal banking. The Unified Payments Interface has revolutionized transactions—even street vendors accept digital payments seamlessly.

These reforms reflect a deliberate shift toward citizen-centric governance. Yet international perception often diverges from domestic realities. Studies suggest that global commentary frequently relies on selective domestic narratives, highlights negative developments and pessimistic portrayals. In corruption rankings, India stands at 96th among 180 countries. In a governance performance index evaluating regulatory and infrastructural systems, India ranked 118th among 142 countries. On the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, India stands at 79th among 142. The World Press Freedom Index placed India at 151 among 182 countries. India's accountability rating stands at 51.47 percent. However, if India's regulatory environment were truly weak, India would not continue to attract foreign direct investment at the scale it currently does. In fact, India remains one of the most sought-after investment destinations worldwide. While methodologies may be imperfect, such assessments invite introspection.

Having said this, it is important for us to critically examine our own shortcomings, not on the basis of external commentary alone but also grounded in our own experiences. There are specific areas where Indian governance requires stronger focus and more coordinated efforts. Corruption has not been eradicated at all levels. Accountability must deepen. Institutional reform must continue.

Protecting the credibility of institutions is paramount. The defence forces, judiciary, electoral system, security agencies, and constitutional bodies such as the Election Commission, the Comptroller and Auditor General, and the Union Public Service Commission must remain above partisan contestation. Public confidence in them is foundational.

Accountability must be strengthened systematically. Defaulters must be held responsible. Capacity-building—training, specialization, global benchmarking—must become continuous. Equally important is managing public perception responsibly. Disinformation, hostile propaganda, and vested political interests can erode trust in institutions that must remain above politics. Democracy thrives on debate, but knowingly misrepresenting national institutions—especially abroad—erodes morale. India's uninterrupted constitutional continuity since independence, apart from the brief Emergency, is a rare achievement. Governments change through ballots, not coups. Our Constitution remains the bedrock of governance. Democracy permeates from Parliament to village panchayats. Preserving trust in this framework is a shared responsibility.

Our aspiration of a Viksit Bharat cannot be realized with archaic systems or complacent standards. We require convergence in policymaking, a whole-of-government approach in implementation, and strengthened executive capability. The aspiration of ordinary citizens—of a mother from the humblest background who seeks the best education for her child—is the most powerful driver of national progress. I firmly believe that India is on an upward trajectory. With discipline, institutional strength, determination and clarity of purpose—qualities exemplified by Sardar Patel—this generation can realize the vision of a strong, integrated and powerful India.

Whose Ethics for AI?*

“If you transform yourself, you affect the consciousness of the rest of the world.”

— J. Krishnamurti (*Bohm*, 1999)

Introduction

Dharma is a key concept in Indic traditions, espousing the idea of “that which holds and sustains everything”—ranging from the social order to the cosmos itself. Translating Dharma into English or other languages is difficult because few terms carry its full richness. Often translated as religion or law, Dharma is more than that; it’s the natural order, duty, ethics, and the essential characteristic of things. Dharma is the moral fabric of the universe, the basis of Karma, where actions have consequences. The closest synonyms for Dharma in English are *righteousness* (individual morality) and *ethics* (collective behavior). Unlike in Abrahamic traditions, where morality is a contract with God, in Dharma traditions morality is impersonal, inherent in the structure of the universe itself.

J. Krishnamurti’s quote emphasizes that living in harmony with this universal order not only shapes one’s own journey but also elevates the collective consciousness, making individual morality and collective ethics inseparable threads of the same universal tapestry. Dharma emphasizes that every individual is an integral part of a

* This article is from the anthology, Handbook of Global Philosophies on AI Ethics.

cosmic order, where personal transformation has profound ripple effects on the collective whole.

In the context of society, Dharma sustains the fabric of society and is the means of harmonizing individuals and the larger whole. In texts such as the *Mahabharata*, Dharma refers to both moral principles and social responsibilities, highlighting the role individuals play in upholding order. This multifaceted notion emphasizes that right action which comes from within in the Dharma theory is harmonious with the natural order, reflecting a universal moral code.

Dwell on this apocryphal reference in the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata*, of Duryodhana's remonstrance to Krishna.

'I know what is good [Dharma], and I know what is evil [Adharma], but [the problem is] I possess neither the desire to do good nor the restraint to stop doing evil.

[It is not my fault.] It is as if some unknown force dwells in my heart and impels me to do, what I do.'

The verse defines how each of us feels; deep down we seem to know exactly what is right for us, for our community, and for the world at large, and yet our thoughts and actions are out of sync. Why are we unable to practice what we know to be good? Why are we unable to restrain ourselves from doing what we know to be unethical?

The *Bhagavad Gita* prescribes *svadharma*, one's duty as an individual, in accordance with the Vedas. There are two kinds of *svadharma*—Para Dharma, or spiritual duties, and Aparā Dharma, or material duties. The *Mahabharata* espouses the tenet that Dharma protects those who protect it—“He who sacrifices virtue is himself destroyed. And he that preserves it is himself preserved. I, therefore, do not sacrifice virtue, considering that if destroyed, it will destroy us,” reflecting the reciprocal nature of Dharma—adhering to it upholds not just personal or social order but cosmic balance itself.

At a cosmic level, Dharma is also seen as the operating principle to ensure the balance and order of the universe.

Moreover, the concept of Dharma extends into ritual, tradition, and the observance of ethical behavior. Social conservatism in India has roots in the respect for these long-standing traditions, sustained

through millennia by adherence to Dharma. This conservative aspect, which emphasizes preservation of rites and social norms, contrasts with more progressive views, where change is often seen as necessary for progress. It includes the proper relationship with sentient beings, the inanimate world, and the observance of societal rites and traditions. The Western tendency to discard older truths for new ones contrasts with India's approach, which integrates new truths without discarding the old.

Ethical behavior in Dharmic thought is intrinsically linked to action, or Karma. Karma, meaning *action*, also embodies the philosophical doctrine of cause and effect, which is central to Buddhism and other Indic traditions. The principle that every action has consequences shapes individuals and the world around them. In this context, unselfish action—motivated by a sense of duty, compassion, and righteousness—is considered the highest form of spirituality. By acting selflessly and in alignment with Dharma (cosmic law and order), individuals not only contribute to personal growth but also to the collective harmony and well-being of society.

Every religion tells you to be good. But how do you know what is good? Swami Vivekananda proposed the following tests of morality (see Table 1).

Daniel Schmachtenberger, of *The Consilience Project*, believes that the ancient wisdom traditions had wise people who saw similar things and encoded them differently. It's said by many Vedic philosophers that the *Bhagavad Gita*, a lofty Hindu scripture, chapter two, verse 48 is fundamental. Established in yoga. Perform action. Yoga means union with all that is: "Yogastha kuru karmani" is the quote. And it says, "Established in yoga, or union with all that is, from the place where you recognize that your existence does not exist without everything else and from the place where you cognitively but also experientially get that, where there's an intimacy with all life, and act from there. Spontaneous right action emerges from that place" (Schmachtenberger, August 2022).

For all their badness and madness, human beings are supposed to have the capacity to restrain their lust and rage, not curse back when cursed, a faculty of moral reasoning, an inner voice— however

feeble—of conscience. It is their self-restraining moral sense which makes them rational animals, not their survival-conducive shrewdness at cost–benefit calculation, in which some bees, termites, and reptiles may be smarter: “Eating, sleeping, fear and sex drive: these are common between beasts and humans; Dharma is what is an extra distinguishing feature of humans; those without Dharma are equal to beasts” (Chakrabarti, 2018).

Spirituality provides ethical and moral frameworks rooted in compassion, empathy, and interconnectedness. We need to integrate these spiritual values into scientific advancements to guide the responsible use of technology, ethical decision-making, and the pursuit of knowledge. Science often focuses on external observations and measurable phenomena, while spirituality explores the inner dimensions of consciousness and subjective experiences. Transcending boundaries can lead to new insights, discoveries, and a deeper understanding of our place in the universe.

Table 1: Tests of Virtue (Dharma)

Good (Dharma)	Bad (Adharma)
Strengthens you	Weakens you
Makes you independent and self-reliant	Increases your dependency on other people or things
We over Me—the welfare of others	Me over We—self-centered and acquisitive
Unites	Divides

Source: Author

Artificial Intelligence

AI is a paradox. It is seen both as an existential threat and a silver bullet, fitting nicely into the binary classifications we are attuned to; this is the dominant anthropocentric view of the world.

The rapid emergence of exponential technologies such as AI has overwhelmed current institutions, systems, and societies, both in making sense of these advancements and in harnessing their power effectively. A direct consequence of the unprecedented explosion of

exponential technologies is diminished capabilities of our institutions and leaders to deal with the world. How do we keep up with exponentially evolving technologies that infuse our personal and professional lives? Admittedly, our brains find it hard to grapple with the implications of exponential vis-a-vis linear thinking; stability and predictability are what we seek for comfort, and what we find in the twenty-first century is quite the opposite.

Not being in control of things is alien to modern humans, leading to a crisis of meaning. Even more alarming is the heightened need for self-preservation and consequently the erosion of ethics in modern society. The isolating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and their amplification, fueled by social media, continue to take society down a path of polarization. The fallout is unprecedented and portends extreme consequences. Humanity needs to navigate these rapid changes without losing its moral direction.

Or so goes the popular narrative.

Filtering signals from noise around AI is not going to be easy. More problematic, however, is imputing intelligence to technology without first arriving at a common understanding of the word intelligence.

The word *intelligence* finds its roots in the Latin word *intelligentia*, which means *the action or faculty of understanding*, derived from *intellegere*, meaning *to understand*. Intelligence has been interpreted in various ways, encompassing traits such as abstraction, logic, understanding, self-awareness, learning, emotional knowledge, reasoning, planning, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Broadly speaking, intelligence refers to the ability to perceive or deduce information and retain it as knowledge to be utilized for adaptive behavior within a given environment or context. It is now widely accepted that human intelligence is not the preserve of the brain alone.

My own definition is somewhat broader: intelligence is *the sense that makes sense of things*, which, in turn, presupposes the existence of life processes and living beings. In that sense, do machines have intelligence? Probably not, at least in the machines that are

programmed to mimic intelligence. How then do they display the amazing capability of being intelligent? It feels like magic.

According to Satish Kumar, the essence of human intelligence lies in two fundamental abilities: *imagination* and *discrimination*. Imagination enables envisioning possibilities beyond the present, while discrimination allows distinguishing between what is appropriate and beneficial versus what is harmful or negative (Kumar, 2023).

Discrimination, at a spiritual level, means distinguishing between the eternal and the transient, consciousness and matter, and understanding the difference between the absolute and relative (transactional) reality. Discrimination is believed to come from beyond the brain. Eastern thought systems (we focus on Indic philosophies in this chapter) view intelligence as an element of consciousness and distinguish the mind from the physical brain.

All technological revolutions in the past have evoked a similar reaction from the world at large. Calestous Juma, late professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and author of *Innovation and Its Enemies: Why People Resist New Technologies*, tells us, “The pace of change in technology and its prospect for disruption is unlike anything we’ve seen in the past” (Juma, 2016).

He notes that today’s disruptions to society are immediate and not isolated to the technology industry, and that he expects impending large-scale disruptions and an increasingly prominent global debate over technology’s societal implications. In comparison to the past, where transformative technologies like the steam engine or electricity took decades to reach full adoption, today’s innovations spread much faster. This rapid evolution of technology is a double-edged sword: it brings unparalleled opportunities for progress but also significant challenges in terms of adaptation, regulation, and equity.

“Humans are instinctively designed to react to novel things in a way that aims to protect oneself,” says Juma, adding that, “large tech changes can amplify anxieties and the fear of loss is mainly what drives technology resistance. People often reject technology because it presents changes, big or small, to their immediate world, a world

to which they have worked hard to adjust.”

Instead of assuming technology is either inherently good or bad in and by itself, we should see it as intrinsically value-laden and value-creating. All technologies are created with the goal of actualizing values; they are embedded with values from the start. As technologies take hold and proliferate, they should be understood also to have the potential for forming new, unknown, and unpredictable values.

AI is here to stay, though the arrival of fully intelligent machines remains uncertain. Popular culture, especially through narratives like Marvel’s *Iron Man*, has shaped public perception of AI as a superhero-like force. Hollywood’s portrayal of AI as both a savior and potential threat deeply influences Silicon Valley’s technologists, fostering a symbiotic relationship between imaginative storytelling and real-world innovation. While this dynamic drives technological progress, it also introduces significant ethical challenges. A critical question arises: If most AI technology is developed in the US, does that position America, as the dominant superpower, to unilaterally dictate the ethical framework for AI? This would echo America’s historical role as a hegemon, but it risks oversimplifying the global, multi-cultural complexities that AI presents. Fictional depictions, while inspiring, often overlook the deeper ethical and societal issues AI raises, which require diverse perspectives beyond a single nation’s control.

Technoscientists are firmly of the belief that AI is a force for good—that artificial general intelligence (AGI) and autonomous machines will serve humanity, functioning as highly capable tools or “slaves” to carry out orders. They argue that AI can enhance efficiency, increase longevity, improve healthcare, eradicate poverty, and address climate change. They contend that with proper control and programming, these intelligent systems will remain aligned with human interests, amplifying productivity and solving complex problems without becoming adversarial. This optimistic view assumes that AGI will be developed with ethical safeguards, though critics worry about the potential for unforeseen consequences if machines surpass human control.

Hype

The sudden yet expected “open” arrival of generative pre-trained transformer (GPT), a type of large language model (LLM) and a prominent framework for artificial intelligence, in November of 2022, destroyed the myth that humans have any degree of control on the speed and scale of technology proliferation. Barely one month in, the LLM-based artificial intelligence ChatGPT boasted of 100 million users worldwide and threatened to disrupt almost every domain from education to medicine to law to politics to technology to nearly every domain and establishment. By April of 2023, people were running scared; several AI experts and business leaders called for an immediate stop to further development of AI. The reaction was not surprising given that humans are not good at accepting sudden change, much less handling its effects. The reaction is a biological response of the amygdala, an organ responsible for the human fight-or-flight response, which has barely evolved since the hunter-gatherer times. It is our survival meter. The petitioners seemed powerless in containing the potential spread of a runaway AI, having been caught unawares by a contemporary version of Frankenstein’s “monster.”

The hype around the ethical implications of GPT led to the frenzied call by US business and technology leaders—including Elon Musk, Steve Wozniak, and a large group of prominent AI researchers—often referred to as a “shut down AI” petition, urging a temporary halt to further development of powerful AI systems until safety measures are established; their reactions were harbingers of the age we stepped into, an age of anxiety and uncertainty. “Our anxiety does not come from thinking about the future but from wanting to control it”, is attributed to Khalil Gibran (*A Quote by Kahlil Gibran*, n.d.). AI’s rapid advance has ignited a global dialogue—on one side, it is celebrated for boosting efficiency and optimizing various industries, while on the other, concerns loom over potential job displacement and a host of ethical implications. Applications such as Midjourney and DALL·E 2 threaten the livelihoods of traditional designers, while deepfakes present new dangers in the realm of misinformation and deception.

However, it’s important to note that these are not representative

of what AI is or can be; ChatGPT is a chatbot that simulates human-like conversation but does not possess true general intelligence or consciousness. The widespread fascination it generates reveals the tenuousness of the human mind when faced with what appears to be advanced AI. As Arthur C. Clarke once remarked, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” which perfectly captures the sense of awe and misunderstanding surrounding AI today (Clarke, 2011).

The hype around ChatGPT points to the collective eagerness to believe in the potential of AI, even if it is still a far cry from achieving true human-level intelligence. Nonetheless, as technology evolves, questions of ethics, regulation, and the responsible deployment of AI remain central to the discourse.

Simon Biggs, a professor of interdisciplinary arts at the University of Edinburgh, foretells, “AI will function to augment human capabilities. The problem is not with AI but with humans. As a species we are aggressive, competitive and lazy. We are also empathic, community-minded and (sometimes) self-sacrificing. We have many other attributes. These will all be amplified. Given historical precedent, one would have to assume it will be our worst qualities that are augmented. My expectation is that in 2030 AI will be in routine use to fight wars and kill people, far more effectively than we can currently kill... We cannot expect our AI systems to be ethical on our behalf—they won’t be, as they will be designed to kill efficiently, not thoughtfully.”

Dr. Karan Singh and Satish Kumar, in November 2023, emphasized in a dialogue the perilous trend of developing technology for its own sake in contemporary times. The belief underscored that possessing the resources and knowledge does not inherently grant the right or justification to develop technology devoid of a foundational wisdom. They highlighted the importance of aligning technological advancements with the profound insights embedded in Eastern philosophies and indigenous wisdom, steering the development of technology toward a more ethical and harmonious path (Malhotra, 2024). Ervin Laszlo said to me in December 2021, “I have great trust and belief in yoga,” adding, “I think if we would all listen to ourselves

more and hook ourselves: I would say yoga is to hook ourselves to something larger than ourselves to be able to effectively set a direction for technology to move toward.

I have great trust, great belief in the power of artificial intelligence, but I don't have much belief in the wisdom of the people who develop artificial intelligence, because doing just anything that can be done is not the best course to take."

Essentially, navigating this new landscape hinges on our capacity to redefine reality. We stand at the threshold of an era where we can reshape our connections and explore possibilities that were once beyond conception. By combining the synergy between technology and the sagacity embedded in our spiritual traditions, we can chart a path leading to a future characterized by justice, equity, humanity, and sustainability.

AI Narratives on a Spectrum

Futurists have long debated the arrival of technological singularity, when human and artificial intelligence will merge. One conceptualization of the singularity hypothesis, where technology exceeds human capabilities, involves an evolving non-human intelligent entity spawning a new species with each successive "smarter" generation emerging at an exponentially accelerated pace, thus ushering in an immensely potent superintelligence unprecedented in history. Will we encounter AI sentience with the emergence of AGI? Are there pathways for coevolving human intelligence alongside AI where "the 1,400 or so grams of incomprehensible meat in our skulls might need to cooperate with a similarly incomprehensible chunk of silicon," asks Jamais Cascio (Cascio, 2022). Will the ethics embodied in these new silicon beings follow human moral codes or be something completely different?

As the power of computing, biotechnology, and AI come together, we will have the ability to hack humans. "When you combine our increasing understanding of biology, especially brain science, with the enormous computing power that machine learning and AI is giving us, what you get from that combination is the ability to hack humans, which means to predict their choices, to understand their

feelings, to manipulate them and also to replace them. If you can hack something you can also replace it,” argues historian, philosopher, and author Yuval Noah Harari.

We have stepped upon the ledge of a perception revolution. “Our supremacy as the prime understanders of the cosmos is rapidly coming to end,” said the late James Lovelock, father of the Gaia hypothesis, in his 2019 book, *Novacene*. Further, Lovelock argued, “It is crucial that the intelligence of Earth survives and prospers” (Lovelock, 2019).

In the ongoing discourse surrounding artificial general intelligence and its implications for society, a spectrum of perspectives exists, ranging from enthusiastic techno-optimists to cautious alarmists. The graphic in Figure 1 illustrates these varying sentiments on a continuum, capturing the diverse landscape of opinions regarding the future of AGI and its impact on society.

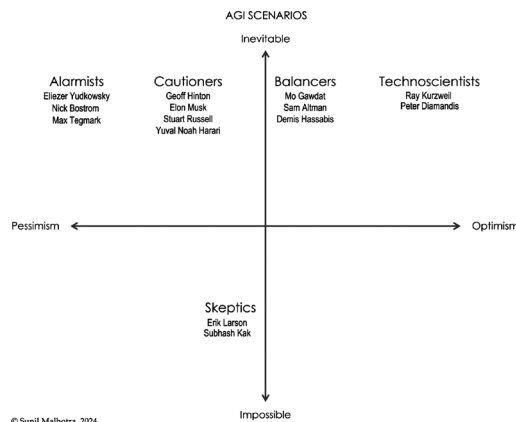


Figure 1. AGI Scenarios: Continuum of views on AGI, reflecting the complexity and uncertainty surrounding the future of AGI. (Source: Author)

Techno-optimists largely maintain that technology is about what works for everyone—*universal functionality*—rather than what is good for everyone—*universal morality*. The advent of AI-powered social technologies has empowered bad actors with the capability to advance their nefarious agendas with unparalleled speed and scale. These technologies are exacerbating societal polarization, as rampant individualism increasingly dominates the landscape, manifested in the nationalist agendas of many nations. In this environment, every

individual has become a veritable propaganda machine, leveraging AI-driven social tools to further amplify divisions and discord within society.

To further elaborate Figure 1, the continuum of the views on AGI are as follows:

Technoscientists: **Ray Kurzweil** and **Peter Diamandis** believe that AGI will bring positive transformation. In their conception, technology will be the key to achieving solutions in areas of human well-being, ethical dilemmas, and progress (Diamandis & Kurzweil, 2024).

Balancers: **Mo Gawdat**, former Chief Business Officer at Google X, has expressed concern about the rapid development of AGI. Recognizing both potential benefits and risks, he advocates for ethical AI development in a guided manner, like we bring up our children (Tucker, 2024). **Sam Altman** of OpenAI and **Demis Hassabis** at DeepMind share this view. Gawdat believes we are creating superintelligence which will surpass human abilities in every way, and he puts the onus on us to be role models for intelligent machines.

Cautioners: **Elon Musk**, **Stuart Russell**, and **Yuval Noah Harari** are voices advocating caution to prevent unintended consequences as AI evolves. **Geoffrey Hinton**, a pioneer in AI research, has raised concerns about the rapid development of AI. Hinton sees the need for regulation and ethical guidelines, cautioning that AGI could surpass human intelligence, posing existential risks and argues for human oversight (MSN, *n.d.*).

Skeptics: **Erik Larson**, American author, entrepreneur, and researcher, doubts the near-term emergence of AGI and is critical of current AI hype (Larson, 2022). Others, like **Subhash Kak**, Indian American computer scientist, philosopher, and historian of science, known for his work in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cryptography, and the history of Indian science and philosophy, maintain that current AI systems, no matter how advanced, lack the necessary components for true consciousness or intelligence. Their arguments often revolve around the distinction between mere information processing and subjective experience, intentionality, or understanding.

Alarmists: **Eliezer Yudkowsky**, researcher and writer focused on AI alignment and safety, is a co-founder and senior research fellow. He, like **Nick Bostrom** and **Max Tegmark**, argues that AI could surpass human control if not developed carefully. Tegmark calls for proactive measures to steer AI in a direction that maximizes human well-being and minimizes existential risks.

In a metaphysical sense, these are all imagined dichotomies. Are we projecting our fears strongly enough for the universe to solidify them into a self-fulfilling prophecy? Are vested interests of technonarcissists tapping into our individual psychic energy with the help of a mercenary nexus of politicians, lobbyists and media?

It's not so much about regulating technology as it is about curbing human intent and channelizing ingenuity. You don't need higher technology for terrorism; the orchestrated explosions in Lebanon in September 2024, using pagers, is an example.

Understanding how AI will play out, either similar to previous technological revolutions or taking a completely different path, may need a fresh approach to our comprehension of the world since the mechanistic–reductionist worldview is now well past its use-by date. This type of thinking implies that complex organisms are essentially biological “machines”—plants, animals, or the human body—and can be understood by reducing them to their smallest constituent parts.

The discussion around ethics unsurprisingly reveals significant cultural differences in understanding control and self-discipline. While Western thinkers often prioritize regulatory frameworks to ensure responsible AI use, they find it hard to trust alternative paradigms like the Dharmic approach, which emphasizes intrinsic motivation and interconnectedness.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is fundamental to human social behavior, not just in interactions with animals and things but with other humans as well. Since we cannot directly perceive the inner experiences of others, we rely on projecting emotions, intentions, and thoughts to simulate them. It enables humans to connect, empathize, and engage

socially. We attribute human traits to animals, especially domesticated pets, and even God.

Our latest target is AI. This tendency to anthropomorphize (studied under frameworks like the media equation) suggests that our relationships with AI or technology are an extension of an innate social glue that allows for bonding and cooperation. Even though we know there is no human behind the screen in ChatGPT, we naturally assign human-like traits to it. By imputing human attributes to AI, having experienced the power of ChatGPT, which is just a preview (and one application of AI), it is easy to believe in AI becoming an all-knowing, ever-present, all-powerful and all-pervading “being.” A new god.

The cherry on top is hubris, making it well beyond our ken that any power can be superior to the human race. We seem convinced that AI is going to “obey” our commands since it is we who have created these “intelligent machines.” Unlike traditional software, AI is no longer dependent on programming by human engineers. It learns mostly by continuous observation, creating artificial neural networks, branching them, and pruning them for more coherent connections. Since AI learns by simply watching the world and the humans around it, much like children do, and as it evolves, it will reflect the global human mind with all its imagined and imaginative capabilities, and even the mind of Nature in all her diversity.

In *Nexus*, Yuval Noah Harari argues that AI is not a tool but an agent (Po, 2024).

AI is an unprecedented threat to humanity because it is the first technology in history that can make decisions and create new ideas by itself. All previous human inventions have empowered humans, because no matter how powerful the new tool was, the decisions about its usage remained in our hands. Nuclear bombs do not themselves decide whom to kill, nor can they improve themselves or invent even more powerful bombs. In contrast, autonomous drones can decide by themselves who to kill, and AIs can create novel bomb designs, unprecedented military strategies and better AIs. AI isn’t a tool—it’s an agent.

Ethics for AI has created a flurry of activity toward regulating the development of AI. In a bid to ensure that “human interests” are protected, the EU Parliament was quick to the draw in enacting the first law in 2023, the EU Artificial Intelligence Act (which came into force on August 1, 2024), claiming to have laid down a uniform legal framework, in accordance with Union values, to promote the uptake of human-centric and trustworthy artificial intelligence while ensuring a high level of protection of health, safety, and fundamental rights as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. (It is of some significance that the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was implemented in 2018 and is still a mixed bag in terms of effectiveness). Pardon the cliché, but regulation is easier said than done.

Human-centric and *trustworthy* are words that have deep cultural moorings, thereby making the idea of values applicable only to sentient, aka conscious, beings. While one may not question the need for regulation, the efficacy of *any* top-down control mechanism is moot. To regulate human behavior is no less than a fool’s errand, a mission that even religion has found difficult to accomplish.

Erik Larson calls this out in *The Myth of Artificial Intelligence* (Larson, 2022).

It has become trendy for AI thinkers to worry about so-called “beneficial AI,” trusted systems, and other ethical issues like problematic bias. In other words, systems that don’t understand but still perform have become a concern.

This cuts the myth at an awkward angle: It is because the systems are idiots but still find their way into business, consumer, and government application, that human-value questions are now infecting what were once purely scientific issues.

Larson emphasizes that the idea of ascribing intelligence to machines is misleading. He goes on to explain that inference is a basic cognitive act of intelligent minds.

Inference is a basic cognitive act for intelligent minds. If a cognitive agent (a person, an AI system) is not intelligent, it will infer badly. But any system that infers at all must have some basic intelligence, because the very act of using what is known and what is

observed to update beliefs is inescapably tied up with what we mean by intelligence. If an AI system is not inferring at all, it doesn't really deserve to be called AI.

Ethics in AI needs to be addressed at different stages of the AI lifecycle. First, decisions about what to design and develop should leverage the innate wisdom of humankind, ensuring that technologies align with human values and societal needs. Second is *how* to deploy AI to maximize human and planetary well-being, implementing strategies that avoid harm and promote sustainability. Finally, to promote multicultural harmony, control over AI's use should be ceded to its potential beneficiaries, empowering them to determine *when*, *where*, and *how* AI is utilized in ways that best serve their unique contexts. This approach ensures that AI remains a tool (and a companion) for collective empowerment rather than domination.

Dharma for Hard Times

The discourse on AI ethics encompasses multiple dimensions, from regulation and self-governance to the potential emergence of completely new AI cultures. While regulation provides a framework, it does not seem like a solution. AI systems must also be designed for self-aware ethicality. Imagine trying to program morality into algorithms! As we contemplate the future of AGI and the possibility of AI-led cultures, considering the wisdom of ancient traditions, such as those found in Indic philosophy, to guide strategy becomes an imperative.

Ultimately, the development of ethical AI will require a multifaceted approach, combining regulatory oversight with self-regulation, moral programming, and deep philosophical inquiry. The formula for addressing ethical challenges is a judicious mix of the power of modern technology and the wisdom of Indic and similar traditions. AI can serve as a force for good to ensure human and planetary well-being.

Mo Gawdat, in *Scary Smart*, tells us that in today's world, we are often driven by targets that take precedence over adhering to ethical principles. Objectives like economic profit, power consolidation, territorial expansion, re-election, wealth accumulation, or gaining social media popularity—these modern pursuits frequently overshadow

moral considerations (Gawdat, 2021). As a result, human intelligence is channeled toward achieving these goals, with ethical concerns sidelined. Yet, in doing so, intelligence is cleverly used to maintain an appearance of ethical behavior, even when the underlying focus is elsewhere.

While most Eastern cultures, in general, put the collective ahead of individual interests, India goes further. For a nation so diverse in religious beliefs, language, culture, and tradition, just sticking together is a feat in itself. If you drop the anthropomorphic lens momentarily, you see that Indians somehow have remained closest to the behaviors that Nature intended for all of the sentient world, including our own species. It is almost as if an unselfish gene attracts the commoner to the ethical tenets of Vivekananda's "Karma yoga," which is the attaining through unselfish work of that freedom which is the goal of all human nature. Every selfish action, therefore, retards our reaching the goal, and every unselfish action takes us toward the goal; that is why the only definition that can be given of morality is this: "That which is selfish is immoral, and that which is unselfish is moral," (VivekaVani, 2024b) echoing William James: "We are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep" (*A Quote by William James*, n.d.).

Conventional morality, which ordinary people follow out of fear—fear of God, police, society, or even the fruits of one's actions—has little appeal in modern times. The intrinsic purity and divinity of the Self is the basis of moral action. Immorality, then, is nothing but a "fall from the actual nature of human beings."

A world characterized by multicultural diversity begs the question: Whose ethics should govern AI? Can we use the ethics of US capitalism which is susceptible to greed and has succumbed to its allure? A self-centered, winner-takes-all paradigm that thrives in separatism, a capitalist framework built on principles like free markets, individualism, and the pursuit of profit is not the best of choices for a foundation.

J. Krishnamurti questions our sense of morality: And if your behavior is the outcome of your own conditioned response, is it moral? If your action is based on fear and reward, is it righteous? If you behave rightly according to some ideological concept or principle,

can that action be regarded as virtuous? So, we must begin to find out how deeply we have discarded the morality of authority, imitation, conformity, and obedience. Isn't fear the basis of our morality? Unless these questions are fundamentally answered for oneself, one cannot know what it is to be truly virtuous. As we said, with what ease you come out of this hypocrisy is of the greatest importance. If you merely disregard it, it doesn't indicate that you are moral: you might be merely psychopathic. If you live a life of routine and contentment, that is not morality either. The morality of the saint who conforms and follows the well-established tradition of sainthood is obviously not morality. So, one can see that any conformity to a pattern, whether or not it is sanctioned by tradition, is not righteous behavior. Only out of freedom can come virtue (Krishnamurti Portal, 2022).

So, Whose ethics for artificial intelligence? In *Letters on Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo has written, "In the West, the physical mind is too dominant, so that the psychic does not so easily get a chance—except of course in exceptional people. Mental knowledge is of little use except sometimes as an introduction pointing towards the real knowledge which comes from a direct consciousness of things" (Aurobindo, n.d.).

The rational West wants some eternal principle of Truth as the sanction of all ethics, and where is that eternal sanction to be found except in the only Reality that exists in all, in the self, in the soul?

Ethics always says, "Not I, but thou." Its motto is, "Not self, but non-self." The vain ideas of individualism to which humans cling when they are trying to find that Infinite Power, or that Infinite Pleasure through the senses, have to be given up, say the laws of ethics. You have to put yourself last, and others before you. The senses say, "Myself first." Ethics says, "I must hold myself last." Thus, all codes of ethics are based upon this renunciation; destruction, not construction, of the individual on the material plane. That Infinite will never find expression upon the material plane, nor is it possible or thinkable.

- Swami Vivekananda

(Complete Works. 2.5.1)

(VivekaVani, 2024a)

One interpretation of ethics is the idea of collective morality; what morality is for an individual becomes ethics in society. Ethics are the act of implementation of the agreed moral code. The idea of good in collectives is a dynamic and evolving concept, deeply rooted in the socio-cultural contexts. It reflects the shared values, traditions, and beliefs that guide ethical behavior within a group, thereby providing the scaffolding for social cohesion and moral order. In an interconnected world, where cultures, technologies, and belief systems constantly intersect, the evolution of ethical principles will play a critical role in shaping the future of humanity.

The work of ethics has been, and will be in the future, not the destruction of variation and the establishment of sameness in the external world—which is impossible, for it would bring death and annihilation—but to recognize unity in spite of all these variations, to recognize the god within, in spite of everything that frightens us, to recognize that infinite strength as the property of everyone in spite of all apparent weakness, and to recognize the eternal, infinite, essential purity of the soul in spite of everything to the contrary that appears on the surface. This we have to recognize. Taking one side alone, one half only of the position, is dangerous and liable to lead to quarrels. We must take the whole thing as it is, stand on it as our basis and work it out in every part of our lives, as individuals and as unit members of society.

- Swami Vivekananda
(Complete Works. 1.4.12)

Privilege. Lecture at Sesame Club, London. 1896
(VivekaVani, 2021)

Indic philosophical texts, such as the Upanishads, along with traditions like Vedānta and practices like yoga, offer valuable insights as alternatives to the entrenched materialist-reductionist paradigm, guiding the ethical development and application of AI while prioritizing holistic well-being.

Could yoga help us see our intimate connections to every other “being” on the planet, including the artificial beings spawned by the exponential

technology of AI? Can we try to understand ourselves differently, through the consciously evolving human mind, instead of solely through the lens of matter becoming increasingly intelligent? These questions deserve our inquiry.

Shifting gears, think of a future of intelligent machines—imagine technological singularity is here—where humans are all but redundant and irrelevant. There is even a word—transhumanism—for the active social movement that looks forward to this future in which humans are merged with technology. These new “beings” are autonomous and self-improving (and maybe even self-aware). Over time they will have their own “ethics.” Suffice it to say that such issues present a challenge for most moral theorists, who take the preservation of human life and the human species to be a good thing. Would we then expect the “cyborgs” or “humanoids” to follow our rules of morality? And whose ethics would make the cut?

Factoid: *Humanoid: a fully autonomous robot which doesn't involve any living organism for its operation. A cyborg, essentially, is a living organism with some robotic parts/machinery embedded in their body to achieve greater power (than a normal living being).*

Conclusion

How something in the nature of ethics is expected of a non-conscious, artificial (by its very name) technology is a perplexing question, but rather than befuddling its present stakeholders, aka human beings, it makes people scurry to “regain” control.

The notion of an overarching ethical standard is increasingly idealistic in a world marked by geo-political fragmentation, individual empowerment, technological abundance, and leadership crises. The traditional command-and-control model, where centralized authorities imposed ethical norms, is no longer viable in a decentralized, multipolar world. Ethics today must be dynamic, flexible, and responsive to the changing realities of a globalized and digitized society.

We grew up in a predictable world that gave us the comfort of stability and slow change. The world is now in a state of “chaotic equilibrium” marked by accelerating change. What was once linear

has become exponential, and the old paradigm of scarcity is being replaced by a new reality of abundance. These aren't just buzzwords, they represent the profound, tectonic shifts reshaping our world and how we interact with it.

An alternative to imposing one-sized ethical standards, societies must embrace the bold step of designing frameworks for self-governance by individuals and collectives. In these frameworks, diverse voices are heard, and moral foundations are shaped through open dialogue, collaboration, and mutual respect. Most importantly, the philosophies, principles and practices are tuned to the local contexts of its stakeholders from the very outset. Ethics, in this context, shifts from control and imposition to a process of empowerment, understanding, and adaptability in a constantly evolving world. By drawing from the deep reservoir of inner wisdom that resides within each individual, rather than being confined to external sensory experiences, we can build a more harmonious and sustainable future for humanity and the planet. Call it Dharma for hard times.

Yoga and Vedānta are systems that point you to your real Self. The idea of going within is a shift in understanding that can change your attitudes to life. Science contributes empirical evidence and practical applications, while spirituality explores subjective experiences, ethics, and the deeper aspects of human consciousness. They both converge in humans, individual and collective. Yoga and AI working together will have varied effects on the personal and professional lives of individuals and communities. How might they help you maximize future opportunities and help you find yourself?

I invite you to reconsider the topic of AI ethics.

“It makes me so happy. To be at the beginning again, knowing almost nothing... The future is disorder. A door like this has cracked open five or six times since we got up on our hind legs. It's the best possible time of being alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong.”

— *Tom Stoppard*
(*Arcadia* quotes by Tom Stoppard, n.d.)

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Public Participation in Governance

A Rational Understanding of Responsibility and Trust

Abstract

There's a peculiar poetry to governance, one seldom recited amid spreadsheets and signatures. Governance fundamentally exists to serve the public and meet societal needs. However, realising this objective requires moving beyond formal procedures and documents to foster genuine public participation and trust. The engagement of citizens in governance is essential to ensure that public services reflect actual priorities, rather than remaining theoretical commitments disconnected from lived experience.

This analysis highlights the necessity for public servants to proactively engage with citizens directly, gathering first-hand information and local insights to guide policy formulation and implementation. Such engagement must be sustained and sincere, fostering an environment where grievances are not only heard but systematically transformed into public value. This calls for a shift from traditional top-down approaches towards a governance model characterised by open access and collaborative dialogue. Furthermore, building networks of opinion-makers, including educators, students, and community leaders, provides an invaluable mechanism for aggregating diverse perspectives and enhancing decision-making processes. These networks serve to integrate informed voices into governance, enabling more responsive and inclusive policy outcomes.

The paper also recognises the challenges posed by political interests and corruption, which can hinder effective public participation. Addressing these issues requires clear procedural frameworks that empower communities with accessible self-service options and promote transparency and accountability.

Ultimately, successful governance depends on establishing trust between civil servants and the public, grounded in personal initiative and

a commitment to continuous dialogue. By embedding public participation at the core of governance, government services can better align with citizen needs, thereby fulfilling their intended purpose and strengthening democratic legitimacy.

Governance, despite its frequent invocation in policy discourse, is often conceptually misunderstood. It is habitually conflated with government, bureaucracy, or administration, as though the presence of institutions, rules, and offices were sufficient to constitute governance itself. Yet governance is better understood as a relational process through which collective life is ordered, public authority is negotiated, and social priorities are translated into action. It is not merely a structure but a dynamic interaction between the state and society, mediated through trust, responsiveness, and shared responsibility. Without public participation, governance risks becoming a closed system, internally coherent, procedurally meticulous, yet increasingly detached from the realities it purports to manage.

At the heart of governance lies a deceptively simple objective: public satisfaction. This notion is frequently dismissed as vague or unmeasurable, yet it remains the most honest metric of governmental effectiveness. Public satisfaction does not imply universal approval, nor does it demand the absence of conflict or criticism. Rather, it signifies a general alignment between public expectations and public action, an assurance that institutions are attentive to lived needs rather than abstract assumptions. Such alignment cannot be engineered solely through expertise, data analytics, or top-down planning. It must be cultivated through sustained engagement with the public, through listening that precedes decision-making rather than follows it.

The importance of public participation emerges most clearly when governance fails. Across administrative contexts, one encounters policies that are impeccably designed yet poorly received, schemes that meet technical benchmarks while leaving beneficiaries dissatisfied or excluded. Often, these failures are attributed to implementation gaps, resource constraints, or behavioural resistance. Less frequently acknowledged is the possibility that the initial diagnosis was flawed,

that the problem identified by administrators was not the problem experienced by citizens. This misalignment is rarely malicious; it is structural. When decisions are made without direct consultation, governance relies on proxies for understanding, substituting reports for relationships and indicators for insight. Public participation functions as a corrective to this epistemic imbalance. It introduces experiential knowledge into governance, challenging the assumption that authority confers comprehension. When administrators engage directly with communities, they encounter not only articulated demands but also the unspoken contexts that shape them: social hierarchies, cultural norms, informal economies, and historical grievances. Such encounters complicate governance, but they also enrich it, rendering policy more attuned to reality.

The question that must therefore be asked is not whether participation slows governance, but whether governance can afford to proceed without it. What does it mean to deliver public services if those services are defined without reference to public need? Can governance claim legitimacy if it remains insulated from the voices it affects? These are not rhetorical provocations but foundational inquiries that strike at the ethical core of public administration. A recurring challenge in participatory governance lies in its orientation. Participation is often conceptualised as an invitation extended by the state, contingent upon citizens entering bureaucratic spaces on institutional terms. Public hearings are scheduled at inconvenient times, grievance mechanisms require procedural literacy, and consultations are conducted in languages or formats inaccessible to many. While such mechanisms are defended as inclusive, they implicitly place the burden of engagement on citizens, reinforcing the asymmetry between authority and access. A more substantive understanding of participation reverses this logic. It recognises that accessibility is a duty of power, not a privilege granted to the governed. Governance becomes participatory not when people are summoned to offices, but when officials move towards the public, physically, institutionally, and attitudinally. This shift is not merely logistical; it is ethical. It acknowledges that distance breeds misunderstanding, and that presence is a form of accountability.

The participatory dimension of governance extends beyond individual interactions to encompass social networks and informal leadership. Societies are not composed of isolated individuals; they are structured through relationships, influence, and shared narratives. Opinion-makers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, students, youth leaders, occupy strategic positions within these networks. They interpret policy, mediate grievances, and shape collective perceptions of the state. To exclude them from governance processes is to forfeit an opportunity for informed dialogue and anticipatory feedback. Engaging opinion-makers does not imply capitulating to elite interests. On the contrary, it can democratise governance by creating channels through which diverse experiences are articulated and aggregated. Teachers understand how policies play out in classrooms; doctors witness the intersection of health, poverty, and access; lawyers encounter the friction between law and lived reality; students and youth articulate aspirations that transcend immediate demands. Their participation enriches governance by introducing perspectives that are both grounded and forward-looking.

Youth participation, in particular, warrants careful consideration. Young citizens encounter the state at formative moments, through education systems, employment programmes, and public spaces. These encounters shape their understanding of authority, legitimacy, and civic responsibility. When youth voices are marginalised, governance inadvertently cultivates disengagement. When they are included, governance affirms that participation is not reserved for the established or the influential, but is a defining feature of citizenship itself. Participation must also be understood to include criticism. Democratic governance does not require perpetual consensus; it requires the capacity to absorb dissent without resorting to suppression or defensiveness. Criticism, when articulated peacefully, is a form of engagement that signals investment rather than apathy. It challenges institutions to justify their actions, refine their assumptions, and confront unintended consequences. To dismiss criticism as obstruction is to misunderstand its democratic function.

The ethical foundations of participatory governance are deeply embedded in constitutional thought. The Preamble to the Indian

Constitution articulates a vision of sovereignty that resides with the people, framing the state as an instrument of collective will rather than an autonomous authority. This vision is echoed in Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's address to the All India Services, where he emphasised that civil servants are accountable not merely to political superiors, but to the public at large. He warned against the dangers of insulation, reminding officials that administrative authority derives its legitimacy from public trust. These principles were articulated at a moment of institutional founding, when the contours of governance were still being imagined. Over time, however, the pressures of scale, complexity, and political contestation have often diluted their ethical force. Administrative systems have grown more elaborate, yet less accessible; more efficient, yet less responsive. Public participation offers a means of reconnecting governance with its normative foundations, not by romanticising the past, but by reaffirming the relational commitments that sustain democratic legitimacy.

The obstacles to participatory governance are neither trivial nor uniform. Political interests may resist scrutiny, fearing that open engagement will constrain discretion or expose failure. Bureaucratic cultures may prioritise control and predictability over dialogue, viewing participation as a threat to efficiency. Corruption thrives in opacity, rendering transparency an implicit challenge to entrenched practices. These dynamics cannot be wished away through idealism. Yet the response to such challenges cannot be withdrawal. Insulating governance from public participation in the name of stability or expediency ultimately undermines the very objectives it seeks to protect. Short-term order achieved through exclusion often gives way to long-term disaffection. Participatory governance, by contrast, creates mechanisms through which tensions can be expressed, negotiated, and addressed before they escalate into crisis.

This requires institutional design that is both clear and accessible. Participation must be structured enough to be meaningful, yet flexible enough to accommodate diversity. Grievance redressal mechanisms, decentralised forums, and transparent procedures can institutionalise engagement without reducing it to a ritual. Crucially, such mechanisms must be animated by intent. Without genuine

commitment, participation risks becoming performative, a box to be ticked rather than a relationship to be cultivated.

At the centre of participatory governance lies the ethical orientation of public servants. Institutions can mandate consultation, but they cannot legislate sincerity. The willingness to listen, to acknowledge error, and to engage with discomfort is ultimately a personal choice, shaped by professional values and moral imagination. When public servants view participation as intrinsic to their vocation, governance acquires depth and credibility. When they view it as an inconvenience, even the most elaborate participatory structures ring hollow. The distinction between political authority and administrative responsibility becomes particularly salient in this context. While political leadership articulates priorities, administrators mediate their translation into lived experience. Allowing political expediency to override public interest at the operational level corrodes trust and distorts purpose. Participatory governance provides an ethical anchor, reminding administrators that their primary obligation lies with the people rather than transient alignments of power.

This does not imply an unrealistic separation of politics and administration. Governance operates within political realities, and administrators cannot remain oblivious to them. However, participation offers a means of navigating this complexity without surrendering ethical clarity. By grounding decisions in public dialogue, administrators can balance responsiveness with integrity, ensuring that governance remains socially anchored even amid political flux. Participation also demands patience. Listening is time-consuming; dialogue is unpredictable; engagement can expose officials to criticism that is emotionally taxing. Yet these challenges are integral to democratic governance. They remind institutions that authority is not merely exercised, but continually earned. Participation transforms governance from a transactional exercise into a relational practice, shifting emphasis from control to cooperation.

In this relational understanding, governance is no longer defined solely by what the state delivers, but by how it listens, responds, and adapts. Public participation becomes the medium through which governance remains intelligible and legitimate to those it affects. It

is not an optional supplement to administrative efficiency, but the condition under which efficiency acquires meaning.

Ultimately, the quality of governance is reflected in the quality of its relationships. Policies may change, institutions may evolve, and political contexts may shift, but the need for trust, responsiveness, and dialogue remains constant. Public participation provides the bridge between authority and legitimacy, between intention and impact. Without it, governance risks becoming an exercise in self-reference, disconnected from the social realities it seeks to organise. It is at this juncture that the ethical stakes of participation become most apparent. Governance that listens acknowledges the dignity of citizenship; governance that ignores it reduces citizenship to compliance. Participation affirms that the public is not merely a beneficiary of governance, but its co-constitutor. In recognising this, governance reclaims its moral purpose, not as an abstract ideal, but as a lived practice sustained through engagement.

Participation, however, must not be confused with episodic consultation or symbolic outreach. One of the most persistent misconceptions in administrative thinking is the belief that participation can be activated selectively, summoned during moments of crisis or policy transition, and then set aside once stability is restored. Such an approach misunderstands participation as an event rather than a condition. Genuine public participation is not a mechanism to be deployed; it is a posture that governance adopts towards society. It reflects an ongoing openness to dialogue, correction, and learning, rather than a temporary concession to democratic expectation.

This distinction becomes particularly significant when considering grievance redressal. Grievances are often treated as disruptions, exceptions to normal administrative functioning that must be processed, resolved, and closed. Yet grievances are, in fact, among the most authentic expressions of public participation. They articulate points of friction where governance encounters lived reality. Each grievance represents a moment where policy, procedure, or authority has failed to align with experience. To treat such moments merely as complaints to be disposed of is to miss their diagnostic value.

A participatory approach reframes grievances as sources of

institutional insight. Patterns of complaint reveal structural weaknesses, procedural bottlenecks, and unintended exclusions. When grievance mechanisms are accessible, responsive, and transparent, they do more than resolve individual cases; they generate feedback loops that strengthen governance itself. Conversely, when grievances are ignored, delayed, or deflected, dissatisfaction accumulates, eroding trust and encouraging informal or adversarial modes of engagement. The ethical challenge here is not efficiency alone, but attitude. Does governance regard public dissatisfaction as an inconvenience or as a responsibility? Does it interpret criticism as hostility or as engagement? The answers to these questions shape administrative culture more profoundly than any formal reform.

Public participation also compels governance to confront inequality. Participation is not evenly distributed; social hierarchies shape who speaks, who is heard, and whose concerns are legitimised. Without conscious design, participatory spaces risk reproducing existing power asymmetries, privileging articulate or resource-rich actors while marginalising those already excluded. This is not an argument against participation, but a reminder that participation must be actively enabled. Reaching those on the margins requires governance to move beyond conventional forums and to rethink access itself. Language, literacy, geography, and social norms all mediate participation. When officials insist on uniform modes of engagement, they inadvertently exclude those for whom such modes are inaccessible. A participatory ethic demands flexibility, multiple channels, localised engagement, and cultural sensitivity. It demands that governance adapts to society, rather than insisting that society adapts to governance.

This adaptive posture is especially relevant in rural and peri-urban contexts, where state presence is often intermittent and mediated through intermediaries. In such settings, the absence of direct engagement can allow misinformation, distrust, and informal power structures to fill the vacuum. Regular, visible interaction between officials and communities counters this dynamic. It affirms the presence of the state not as an abstract authority, but as a relational partner in everyday life. Participation also reshapes the internal dynamics of administration. When public engagement becomes routine, officials

are compelled to articulate the reasoning behind decisions, to justify constraints, and to explain trade-offs. This transparency disciplines authority. It reduces arbitrariness and encourages reflective decision-making. In articulating policy to the public, administrators often clarify it for themselves, uncovering ambiguities or inconsistencies that might otherwise persist unexamined.

Moreover, participatory governance fosters institutional memory. Repeated engagement with communities creates a shared narrative of governance, an understanding of what has been attempted, what has failed, and what remains unresolved. This continuity tempers the disruptions caused by transfers, political change, or administrative turnover. While individuals may move on, relationships and expectations endure, anchoring governance in collective experience. The tension between participation and political pressure deserves careful attention. Public servants operate within political systems where priorities may shift rapidly and where visibility can invite scrutiny. Participation exposes governance to public judgment, which may at times conflict with political expediency. Yet insulating administration from participation in order to avoid such tension ultimately undermines democratic accountability.

Here, the ethical distinction between loyalty and responsibility becomes critical. Loyalty to constitutional values and public interest must take precedence over convenience or compliance. Participation provides a reference point for navigating this tension. By grounding action in public dialogue, administrators can justify decisions not merely in terms of authority, but in terms of reasoned engagement with social need. This does not eliminate conflict, nor should it. Democratic governance is inherently contested. Participation does not promise harmony; it promises legitimacy. It ensures that decisions, even when unpopular, are understood as the outcome of engagement rather than imposition. This distinction matters profoundly in sustaining trust over time. Digital technologies have introduced new possibilities for participation, expanding reach and lowering barriers to access. Online platforms, feedback portals, and data dashboards can enhance transparency and responsiveness. Yet digital participation must be approached with caution. Technology can amplify voices, but

it can also exclude those without access or literacy. Moreover, digital engagement risks becoming transactional, reducing participation to clicks and forms rather than dialogue.

A participatory ethic insists that technology supplement, not substitute, human engagement. Digital tools are most effective when embedded within broader relational frameworks, when online feedback is complemented by physical presence, and when data is interpreted through conversation rather than abstraction. Governance that relies exclusively on digital participation risks mistaking visibility for understanding. The moral dimension of public participation becomes most evident when governance confronts crisis. Moments of disruption, natural disasters, social unrest, public health emergencies, expose the strengths and weaknesses of institutional relationships. Where trust has been cultivated through participation, compliance and cooperation follow more readily. Where governance has remained distant, crisis amplifies distrust.

Participation, therefore, is not merely about routine administration; it is about resilience. It equips governance with social capital that can be drawn upon in moments of uncertainty. Communities that feel heard are more likely to act collectively, to accept temporary hardship, and to collaborate in recovery. Participation thus emerges as a strategic asset, not a procedural luxury. The role of education in sustaining participatory governance warrants emphasis. Civic literacy enables meaningful engagement, allowing citizens to articulate demands, understand constraints, and evaluate outcomes. Conversely, opaque governance discourages learning, fostering apathy or suspicion. Public participation and civic education reinforce one another, creating a virtuous cycle of engagement and accountability.

Within this cycle, civil servants occupy a pivotal position. They are both agents of the state and interlocutors with society. Their conduct shapes how governance is perceived and experienced. When they listen attentively, explain candidly, and act consistently, they embody the democratic promise of public service. When they retreat behind procedure or hierarchy, they weaken it. The emphasis on personal initiative in participatory governance is not a call for individual heroism, but for professional integrity. Structures matter,

but they are animated by people. A Former Commissioner of Police, Delhi, exemplified this principle through routine administrative practice rather than exceptional intervention. His approach to public engagement was neither episodic nor performative; it was institutionalised as a regular expectation of office. By consistently convening public meetings, ensuring direct access to senior authority, and treating citizen interaction as integral to daily administration, he framed participation not as a discretionary outreach exercise but as a core professional obligation. In doing so, engagement was normalised within the functioning of the institution, woven into the rhythm of governance rather than appended to it. By institutionalising regular public interactions and ensuring that senior authority was visibly engaged in them, he disrupted the conventional hierarchy of access. Grievances were not filtered through layers of delegation before reaching decision-makers; they were heard directly, in spaces where citizens felt entitled to speak. Even when personal attendance was not possible, responsibility was consciously delegated, signalling that engagement was integral to governance rather than peripheral to it. Such practices do not eliminate dissatisfaction, but they alter its character. Frustration expressed within a relationship of recognition differs fundamentally from resentment born of exclusion. Trust, in governance, is not an abstract sentiment but a cumulative outcome of repeated interactions. It is shaped less by grand promises than by everyday responsiveness. When citizens observe that their concerns are acknowledged, that officials are willing to listen, and that dialogue is not contingent upon crisis, trust begins to take root. Public participation provides the medium through which this trust is negotiated and sustained. Conversely, when engagement is sporadic, symbolic, or dismissive, distrust becomes rational rather than cynical.

This practice underscored a critical insight: that public participation acquires transformative value not when it is celebrated as extraordinary, but when it is rendered ordinary, predictable, accessible, and embedded within administrative routine. Such normalisation is crucial. Participation cannot depend on individual temperament alone; it must be embedded in institutional culture. This requires leadership that values engagement, training that equips officials

with communicative skills, and evaluation systems that recognise relational work alongside measurable outputs. When participation is acknowledged as legitimate labour, it becomes sustainable.

The risk of participation fatigue is real. Continuous engagement demands energy, time, and emotional labour. Without institutional support, officials may experience burnout, and participatory mechanisms may deteriorate into formalities. Recognising these risks does not diminish the value of participation; it underscores the need for thoughtful design and shared responsibility. Ultimately, public participation invites governance to embrace humility. It acknowledges that authority does not possess complete knowledge, that policy is provisional, and that learning is ongoing. This humility is not weakness; it is democratic strength. It allows governance to evolve, to correct itself, and to remain responsive in changing social contexts. In this light, participation is not an end in itself, but a means of sustaining democratic legitimacy. It affirms that governance is not something done to society, but something done with it. It recognises citizens not merely as recipients of service, but as partners in public life.

The enduring relevance of participation lies in its capacity to humanise governance. In an age of increasing complexity, scale, and abstraction, participation anchors institutions in lived experience. It reminds governance of its purpose: to serve, to listen, and to respond. Without this anchor, efficiency becomes hollow, authority becomes brittle, and legitimacy erodes. Governance, therefore, must continually ask itself not only what it delivers, but how it relates. Public participation provides the answer not through doctrine, but through practice. It is enacted in meetings attended, grievances heard, explanations offered, and criticisms absorbed. It is sustained through presence, patience, and principle.

When participation is embedded at the core of governance, public services align more closely with public need, trust becomes cumulative rather than fragile, and democratic legitimacy is reinforced not through assertion, but through experience. In such a framework, governance fulfils its most basic promise, not merely to rule, but to serve in a manner worthy of consent.

In this analysis, public participation is not a technique to be

mastered, nor a programme to be implemented, but a stance that governance adopts towards society. It reflects a fundamental choice about how power understands itself: whether as something exercised over people, or something sustained through them. This distinction, though subtle, determines the moral texture of public authority and the durability of its legitimacy. Governance that listens does more than collect information; it acknowledges the dignity of citizenship. It recognises that those who live with the consequences of public decisions possess knowledge that no administrative apparatus, however sophisticated, can fully replicate. To engage with this knowledge is not to dilute expertise, but to complete it. Participation, in this sense, does not weaken governance, it renders it intelligible, responsive, and resilient. The enduring challenge lies not in articulating the value of participation, but in sustaining it amid institutional pressures, political contestation, and administrative fatigue. Yet the alternative, governance insulated from public voice, is neither efficient nor stable. It produces compliance without consent, order without trust, and policy without ownership. Over time, such governance erodes the very foundations upon which authority rests.

Public participation endures because it addresses a truth that remains constant across contexts: governance is ultimately a human enterprise. Its success depends not only on systems and structures, but on relationships, between state and citizen, authority and accountability, intention and experience. Where these relationships are nurtured through dialogue and presence, governance acquires depth. Where they are neglected, even the most elaborate institutions appear brittle. To place participation at the centre of governance is therefore not an act of idealism, but of realism. It is an acknowledgement that democratic legitimacy cannot be mandated, only earned; that trust cannot be commanded, only cultivated; and that public service, at its most meaningful, is an ongoing conversation rather than a completed task. In choosing to listen, governance affirms its purpose, not merely to govern, but to do so in a manner worthy of those it serves.

Transforming Healthcare in India through ABDM

A patient's medical history has always been among the most consequential documents in their life, and among the least reliably available when it matters most. Across health systems worldwide, continuity of care remains an aspiration more than a standard. Records fragment across providers, context is lost between levels of care, and each new consultation often begins without the full foundation of the last.

India's health landscape makes this challenge both more complex and more urgent to solve. A country of 1.4 billion people is served by one of the most heterogeneous health systems in the world: a vast public infrastructure reaching across districts and primary health centres, a dynamic private sector ranging from tertiary hospitals to community clinics, and hundreds of millions of patients who move between both in search of the right care at the right time. The Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker who conducts a home visit, the district hospital that manages a referral, the specialist consulted in the city—each plays a distinct role in a patient's journey. But these encounters have largely existed in isolation from one another, with little shared record of what came before. A patient's history has had to travel with them, in whatever form they could manage.

Healthcare journeys are often fragmented, with medical information scattered across providers, facilities, and formats. Patients are required to carry their history, physically and cognitively, while providers make decisions with incomplete data.

The Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM), launched in

September 2021, seeks to address this foundational challenge by building an integrated, citizen-centric digital health ecosystem. At its core, ABDM is not just a technology initiative; it is an effort to re-architect how healthcare information flows across the system.

ABDM is designed as a digital public infrastructure, anchored in interoperable registries, consent-based data exchange frameworks, and open network protocols that together enable identity, information sharing, healthcare discovery, and financial transactions across the ecosystem. The Ayushman Bharat Health Account (ABHA) provides a unique 14-digit number that acts as a unique identifier across the digital health ecosystem. As of May 2026, over 89 crore ABHA accounts have been created, marking a significant shift toward digital identity in healthcare.

Its true value lies in enabling longitudinal health records—moving away from episodic, transaction-based care to a model of continuity. Instead of isolated data points, a patient's medical history can be built into a coherent, evolving record by linking health data created at each encounter to patient's ABHA. This allows providers to make more informed clinical decisions, reduces duplication of diagnostics, improves patient safety, and eases the burden on patients and families.

ABHA also serves as a unifying identifier across programmes and platforms. By anchoring records, benefits, and services to a single digital identity, it enables convergence across multiple national and state-level initiatives such as Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojna (PM-JAY), Reproductive and Child Health (RCH), Nikshay, and eSanjeevani. In doing so, it reduces silos.

Alongside ABHA, ABDM has established foundational registries such as the Healthcare Professionals Registry (HPR) and the Health Facility Registry (HFR). These registries create verified digital identities for doctors, nurses, clinics, hospitals, laboratories, and pharmacies across the country. In a healthcare landscape as vast and heterogeneous as India's, such registries play a critical role in trust-building and interoperability. They enable authenticated participation in the digital ecosystem while creating a common reference layer for digital health transactions.

Equally important are the gateways that enable the secure movement of information. The Health Information Exchange and Consent Manager (HIE-CM) acts as the backbone for consent-based data sharing. Rather than centralising patient records in a single database, ABDM adopts a federated architecture. Health data remains with the originating facility or service provider, while information is exchanged only with the explicit consent of the individual for a specified time frame. This architecture reflects an important design philosophy: citizens must remain at the centre of their health data ecosystem.

This emphasis on consent is particularly significant in a country where digital literacy and trust in technology are unevenly distributed. ABDM attempts to operationalise the principle that individuals should control who accesses their data, for what purpose, and for how long. Through consent requests, patients can approve or revoke access to specific health records. This shifts the paradigm from institution-controlled data systems to citizen-controlled data sharing.

Such an approach is globally consequential. Across the world, countries are grappling with how to balance innovation in digital health with privacy, autonomy, and trust. ABDM's federated architecture offers an alternative to highly centralised health databases. It demonstrates how digital public infrastructure can be designed to scale while still embedding principles of privacy, consent, and user agency into the architecture itself.

A key pillar of ABDM's architecture is the Unified Health Interface (UHI), an open network designed to enable interoperable digital health services across applications and providers. Conceptually similar to how Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transformed digital payments by enabling interoperability between banks and payment applications, UHI seeks to create a comparable interoperable layer for healthcare services. Rather than confining users to isolated platforms, UHI enables patients, hospitals, doctors, pharmacies, laboratories, and digital health applications to interact seamlessly across the ecosystem.

Through UHI-enabled applications, patients can discover healthcare providers, book appointments, access teleconsultations,

and interact with health services without being restricted to a single proprietary platform. This open-network approach lowers barriers to entry for innovators while increasing choice and accessibility for citizens. For healthcare providers, it expands digital discoverability and creates opportunities to reach patients across geographies, particularly in underserved and remote areas. In effect, UHI transforms digital healthcare from a collection of disconnected applications into an interoperable networked ecosystem.

Equally significant is the National Health Claims Exchange (NHCX), which addresses one of the most fragmented and administratively burdensome dimensions of healthcare: insurance claims processing. India's health financing ecosystem involves multiple public and private insurers, hospitals, and third-party administrators, often operating through non-standardised and paper-intensive workflows. This fragmentation contributes to delays, inefficiencies, disputes, and high administrative costs for both providers and beneficiaries.

NHCX seeks to create a unified digital platform for the exchange and processing of health insurance claims. By standardising claims-related data exchange across stakeholders, it can reduce paperwork, improve efficiency, accelerate claim settlements, and enhance transparency in the reimbursement process. Importantly, NHCX is not just limited to public insurance schemes such as PM-JAY but is envisioned as a shared digital infrastructure layer that can support interoperability across the broader insurance ecosystem.

The integration of NHCX within ABDM reflects a broader understanding of healthcare transformation. A truly interoperable digital health ecosystem must connect patients, providers, payers, and public health systems. Together, ABHA, UHI, and NHCX illustrate how ABDM is evolving into a comprehensive digital health infrastructure that supports identity, data exchange, service delivery, and financial transactions across the healthcare continuum.

The implications of this transformation are profound for clinical care. Consider a patient travelling from a village in Bihar to a tertiary hospital in Delhi. In the conventional system, the treating physician often has little visibility into the patient's prior medical history unless

the patient carries paper records. Under ABDM-enabled workflows, relevant records can be digitally linked and shared with consent, allowing providers to access prior prescriptions, lab reports, imaging records, or discharge summaries. This can reduce delays in diagnosis, prevent unnecessary tests, and improve continuity of care.

For chronic diseases, the value becomes even more pronounced. Conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, cancer, and tuberculosis require long-term monitoring across multiple touchpoints. Fragmented records often lead to treatment discontinuity, medication errors, or poor follow-up. Longitudinal digital records can support continuity across providers and geographies, enabling a more coordinated approach to chronic disease management.

ABDM is also reshaping the patient experience. Traditionally, healthcare in India has involved significant administrative friction: repeated form-filling, long queues for registration, physical document handling, and manual verification processes. ABHAs, online appointment systems, digital prescriptions, and interoperable records can reduce this friction considerably. In many facilities, patients can now register, access reports, and share records digitally, reducing both waiting times and transaction costs.

The mission's impact extends beyond urban tertiary hospitals. One of ABDM's most important contributions lies in its potential to democratise access to digital healthcare innovation. By providing interoperability and open standards, ABDM lowers the barriers for startups, state governments, and health technology innovators to build solutions that can plug into a common ecosystem.

This is where ABDM's character as digital public infrastructure becomes especially important. Much like India Stack transformed digital payments, identity and data governance, ABDM seeks to create a shared digital infrastructure upon which both public and private innovation can flourish. Instead of building isolated proprietary systems, innovators can leverage common registries, standards, and consent frameworks. This reduces fragmentation and encourages ecosystem-wide interoperability.

The rise of health applications integrated with ABDM

demonstrates this emerging ecosystem. From telemedicine platforms and hospital management systems to diagnostic providers and wellness applications, a growing number of digital health solutions are integrating with ABDM standards. This creates network effects where the value of participation increases as more actors join the ecosystem.

Telemedicine provides a compelling example. India's eSanjeevani platform has already facilitated over 470 million teleconsultations, particularly benefiting populations in remote and underserved areas. When integrated with ABDM, teleconsultations can become more clinically meaningful because providers can access longitudinal patient records with consent. Prescriptions, diagnostic reports, and consultation notes can be digitally linked, creating continuity between virtual and in-person care.

ABDM also carries significant implications for public health governance. India's health system generates vast quantities of data, but much of it remains fragmented, delayed, or underutilised. Interoperable digital systems can improve the timeliness and quality of health information available for policymaking and programme implementation.

For instance, disease surveillance systems can become more responsive when health data flows in interoperable formats across facilities and geographies. Public health programmes can better track treatment adherence, monitor service delivery gaps, and identify emerging trends. During health emergencies, integrated digital infrastructure can support faster coordination and evidence-based decision-making.

At the same time, ABDM must be understood within the broader trajectory of India's digital governance model. Over the past decade, India has increasingly adopted the concept of digital public infrastructure to solve population-scale challenges. Aadhaar created a unique digital identity. UPI transformed digital payments. Covid Vaccine Intelligence Network (CoWIN) demonstrated how digital platforms could support vaccination management at an unprecedented scale. Similarly, ABDM extends this philosophy into healthcare, one of the most complex and sensitive domains of public service delivery.

However, healthcare presents challenges that are distinct from payments or identity. Health data is deeply personal and context-sensitive. Clinical workflows are highly variable. The healthcare ecosystem itself is fragmented across public and private providers, states, insurers, pharmacies, laboratories, and informal care networks.

One of the key barriers to digital transformation in healthcare is uneven digital readiness. Large tertiary hospitals may possess sophisticated hospital information systems, but many smaller clinics and rural facilities still operate primarily on paper-based processes. Digital adoption often requires investments in infrastructure, training, workflow redesign, and change management. The success of ABDM, therefore, depends not only on building digital infrastructure but also on enabling widespread ecosystem participation.

To address this, ABDM has emphasised open standards and modularity. Rather than prescribing a single software solution, it allows diverse systems to interoperate through standardised protocols. This approach accommodates India's diversity while preventing vendor lock-in. It also creates opportunities for smaller technology providers and local innovators to participate in the ecosystem.

Capacity building remains equally critical. Doctors, nurses, administrators, and frontline workers must be able to use digital systems effectively and confidently because digital transformation in healthcare is ultimately a human-driven process. Technology can enable new workflows, but adoption depends on trust, usability, and perceived value among healthcare workers and patients alike.

Another important dimension is digital inclusion. India's digital transformation has been rapid, but disparities in access persist across geography, gender, age, literacy, and income. For ABDM to fulfil its promise, it must ensure that digital health systems remain accessible to those with limited digital literacy or connectivity. Assisted access models, multilingual interfaces, and inclusive design principles will be essential in preventing new forms of exclusion.

Privacy and cybersecurity also remain central concerns. As digital health ecosystems expand, the risks associated with data breaches, unauthorised access, and misuse of information, increase. Building

public trust requires robust safeguards, transparent governance frameworks, and strong accountability mechanisms.

Importantly, ABDM's federated architecture mitigates some of these risks by avoiding the concentration of all health data in a central repository. Yet, architecture alone is insufficient. Continuous investment in cybersecurity infrastructure, encryption standards, audit mechanisms, and regulatory oversight will remain necessary as the ecosystem matures.

The economic implications of ABDM are also substantial. Healthcare inefficiencies impose significant costs on both households and the system as a whole. Repeated diagnostics, administrative inefficiencies, fragmented records, and poor care coordination increase expenditures while reducing quality of care. Interoperable digital systems can improve efficiency by reducing duplication, streamlining workflows, and enabling better resource allocation.

Moreover, digital health infrastructure can stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship. India's health technology ecosystem has grown rapidly over the past decade, with startups working across telemedicine, diagnostics, AI-enabled decision support, insurance technology, and wellness services. ABDM provides common digital infrastructure that can reduce entry barriers and enable scalable innovation.

Artificial intelligence and advanced analytics may further amplify these possibilities in the future. Standardised and interoperable data ecosystems can support the development of AI tools for diagnostics, predictive analytics, public health planning, and personalised medicine. However, these possibilities depend fundamentally on data quality, interoperability, and governance. ABDM's foundational architecture therefore creates the conditions upon which future health innovations can emerge responsibly. AI tools in health are only as reliable as the systems they operate within. In contexts where data is fragmented, populations are diverse, and institutional capacity varies sharply across geographies, responsible deployment means more than algorithmic accuracy. It means asking who the model was trained on, who benefits from its outputs, and who is accountable when it is wrong.

India's experience with ABDM is also attracting international attention. Many countries, particularly in the Global South, face similar challenges of fragmented health systems, limited interoperability, and unequal access to care. ABDM offers a potential model for how digital public infrastructure can be adapted for healthcare in resource-constrained and population-scale contexts.

What makes the Indian approach distinctive is not simply scale, but philosophy. ABDM attempts to balance openness with safeguards, innovation with inclusion, and interoperability with decentralisation. Rather than treating digital health solely as a market opportunity or a state-controlled utility, it positions digital infrastructure as a public good that enables participation across stakeholders.

This approach aligns with broader global conversations around digital sovereignty and equitable technology governance. As countries increasingly seek alternatives to closed proprietary ecosystems, India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)-based approach provides an example of how interoperable public digital infrastructure can support both innovation and public interest outcomes.

Beyond healthcare delivery, ABDM also has the potential to reshape the relationship between citizens and the health system itself. Historically, healthcare interactions in India have often been reactive and episodic, driven primarily by illness rather than prevention. Digital health infrastructure can gradually enable a shift toward more proactive and preventive models of care. With interoperable records, individuals can receive timely reminders for screenings, vaccinations, follow-ups, and medication adherence. Public health authorities can identify gaps in service delivery more effectively, while providers can monitor patient journeys with greater continuity. Over time, this can contribute to earlier interventions, improved disease management, and reduced long-term healthcare costs. In a country facing a growing burden of non-communicable diseases, such capabilities are increasingly important.

ABDM may also contribute to reducing informational asymmetries within healthcare. In many settings, patients have historically had limited access to their own medical records, often depending entirely on institutions to store and retrieve information.

By enabling individuals to digitally access and manage their records, ABDM strengthens patient agency and participation in healthcare decision-making. This transition reflects a broader global movement toward patient-centred care. The ability to securely access prescriptions, laboratory reports, discharge summaries, and consultation histories can improve health literacy and empower individuals to engage more meaningfully with providers and treatment pathways.

Finally, the significance of ABDM extends into the future of health system resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that resilient health systems also need robust digital infrastructure capable of enabling coordination, surveillance, and continuity of services during crises. Countries with interoperable digital systems were often better positioned to manage testing, vaccination, telemedicine, and public communication at scale. ABDM creates foundational capabilities that can strengthen India's preparedness for future public health emergencies. Whether responding to pandemics, climate-related health risks, or demographic transitions, integrated digital infrastructure can support faster response mechanisms and more adaptive governance.

The mission's long-term success, however, will depend on sustained institutional commitment. Digital transformation is not achieved through platform launches alone. It requires continuous iteration, governance refinement, stakeholder engagement, and ecosystem trust-building. Standards must evolve with emerging technologies. Regulatory frameworks must keep pace with innovation. Implementation challenges must be addressed through collaboration across governments, providers, technologists, and civil society.

Importantly, the success of ABDM should not be measured only through metrics such as the number of ABHA accounts created or facilities onboarded. While these indicators are important, the deeper measure lies in whether digital infrastructure meaningfully improves health outcomes and patient experiences. Does it reduce the burden on families? Does it improve continuity of care? Does it help doctors make better decisions? Does it expand access for underserved populations? These are the questions that ultimately define the Mission's impact.

This makes the transformation envisioned by ABDM both technological and systemic. In a country as large and diverse as India, achieving this at scale is an extraordinary challenge. Yet, it is precisely this challenge that ABDM seeks to address.

At its best, ABDM is laying the foundations where digital public infrastructure becomes an enabler of continuity, inclusion, efficiency, and trust. In doing so, it has the potential not only to transform healthcare delivery domestically, but also to shape how the world thinks about digital health systems in the decades ahead.

Institutionalising Compassion for Citizen-Centric Governance

Abstract

Contemporary governance confronts a fundamental paradox: public institutions must deliver services at scale through standardized, digital systems while remaining responsive to human vulnerability. Conventional bureaucratic frameworks emphasize procedural consistency, legal rationality, and administrative efficiency. Yet, democratic welfare states derive their legitimacy not only from effective administration but also from their capacity to uphold dignity, inclusion, accountability, and social justice.

*This article argues that “**Compassion in Governance**” (Shasan Vidhi Mein Karuna) should be understood not merely as an individual moral virtue but as a distinct institutional capability. This capability enables public organizations to recognize vulnerability, reduce access barriers, and ensure that legal entitlements translate into meaningful outcomes. Drawing upon constitutional principles, Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach, contemporary civil service reforms, and the operational experience of the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), this article develops an integrated framework for compassionate governance that combines administrative competence with human responsiveness.*

The discussion demonstrates how organizational design, behavioural competencies, and proactive service delivery can operationalize compassion without compromising accountability, efficiency, or institutional integrity. It concludes that the future of citizen-centric governance lies not in balancing empathy against efficiency, but in embedding empathy within administrative systems so that constitutional commitments to dignity,

inclusion, and social security become practically realizable. Governance fulfils its democratic purpose most effectively when citizens experience public institutions not as distant instruments of authority, but as accessible and responsive guarantors of their rights and well-being.

Introduction

A defining governance challenge of the twenty-first century is preserving human dignity within large-scale administrative systems. Modern governments manage vast networks of social security, pensions, healthcare, welfare transfers, and digital services affecting millions. While technological innovation has improved efficiency, transparency, and reach, it has simultaneously heightened concerns regarding impersonality, digital exclusion, and the psychological distance between citizens and state institutions.

This tension is deeply rooted in classical bureaucratic theory. Max Weber conceptualized bureaucracy as the most technically proficient form of large-scale administration due to its hierarchy, specialization, and procedural consistency. Yet, he famously cautioned that excessive formal rationality could confine individuals within a “**steel-hard cage**” of impersonal procedures, where systems become preoccupied with compliance and processes over substantive outcomes and citizen experience.

In India, constitutional democracy is structurally inseparable from the State’s welfare role. Public institutions are mandated not only to implement regulatory programmes but also to actively advance social justice, reduce inequality, and safeguard vulnerable populations. Consequently, governance effectiveness cannot be assessed solely through technical performance metrics; it must incorporate the citizen’s lived experience of accessibility, fairness, responsiveness, and dignity.

Governance may be understood as a **moral contract** between the State and its citizens. Democratic legitimacy rests not merely on administrative competence and formal legality, but on transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, and respect for human dignity¹. The rise of digital governance has brought this reality into sharp focus, raising critical questions about inclusion, accessibility,

and the role of human engagement within automated systems.

Against this backdrop, this article argues that "Compassion in Governance" (*Shasan Vidhi Mein Karuna*)⁵ constitutes a vital institutional capability through which public organizations translate constitutional commitments into tangible welfare outcomes. Compassion is neither administrative softness nor mere benevolence; rather, it is the structured capacity to recognize vulnerability, identify systemic barriers to access, and ensure that citizens can seamlessly realize their legal entitlements.

The significance of this argument spans social security, healthcare, education, taxation, urban governance, and digital public services, where institutions must remain responsive at scale. Despite technological advancements, barriers such as illiteracy, disability, poor connectivity, language constraints, migration, and systemic disadvantage continue to hinder access. Effective governance, therefore, requires combining advanced technology with responsive institutional support, robust grievance redressal, and proactive outreach.

The operational journey of the EPFO illustrates this necessary equilibrium. The timely restoration of pensions and social security benefits depends on a combination of technological innovation, administrative problem-solving, and citizen-oriented intervention. These experiences demonstrate that administrative efficiency achieves its highest purpose when anchored firmly in the realities of citizens' lives.

The discussion proceeds in *five stages*:

- Conceptualizing compassion in public administration as an institutional capability;
- Examining its normative foundations within constitutionalism, constitutional morality, and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach;
- Contextualizing contemporary administrative reforms for citizen-centric governance;
- Analyzing the operational experience of the EPFO, particularly

the Ek Sakaratmak Pahal initiative; and

- Deducing systemic implications for institutionalizing compassion across governance models.

Ultimately, excellent governance does not require a choice between efficiency and empathy. Rather, it demands designing institutions where empathy enhances effectiveness by keeping systems accessible and responsive, thereby translating constitutional promises into lived realities. Democratic governance is fully realized when citizens experience public institutions not as distant mechanisms of control, but as instruments of public service. Compassionate governance reflects a transformative principle: when governance becomes genuinely just, citizens cease to feel governed; they begin to feel cared for².

Compassion as an Institutional Capability

While the concept of compassion is frequently invoked in public discourse, it often lacks analytical and operational precision. Public administration literature commonly distinguishes among sympathy, empathy, and compassion:

- **Sympathy** involves the cognitive recognition of another person's distress.
- **Empathy** entails a deeper emotional understanding of another's circumstances and perspective.
- **Compassion** goes a fundamental step further by motivating concrete action to alleviate suffering or remove obstacles that prevent individuals from improving their condition.

This distinction is vital for public administration. Citizens do not approach public institutions primarily in search of emotional validation; they seek solutions to practical, urgent problems involving pensions, healthcare, identity verification, social protection, and access to public utilities. Institutions may acknowledge grievances and record complaints, but acknowledgement alone rarely changes outcomes. Compassion acquires administrative significance only when institutional concern is translated into effective, timely action.

The stark difference between symbolic concern and substantive

intervention is captured powerfully in Harivansh Rai Bachchan's celebrated lines¹²:

*"Satya ko mūde rahegī śabd kī kab tak piṭārī?
Kyā karū saṁvedanā lekar tumhārī? Kyā karū?"*

(“सत्य को मूँदे रहेगी शब्द की कब तक पिटारी?
क्या करूँ संवेदना लेकर तुम्हारी? क्या करूँ?”)

The poem questions the utility of sympathy that leaves underlying suffering unchanged. Applied to governance, it illuminates a recurring administrative pathological condition: institutions may listen without resolving, acknowledge without intervening, and respond without improving outcomes. Bachchan's critique of the “**trade of deception**” (*Dhokhe ka Vyapar / धोखे का व्यापार*) resonates with the tendency of bureaucratic systems to process grievances procedurally without solving them substantively. The Pathik (traveller) in the poem serves as a metaphor for the vulnerable citizen navigating government offices, receiving formal assurances (*Shabd ki Pitari / शब्द की पिटारी*) but little substantive relief. Compassionate governance, therefore, demands an operational shift from passive acknowledgement to active institutional intervention.

Furthermore, compassionate governance requires institutions that actively identify and resolve problems. Critically, compassion must not be viewed merely as a personal virtue dependent upon the erratic goodwill of individual officials. While personal ethics remain foundational, public institutions must be capable of responding consistently regardless of who occupies administrative positions. Citizens should not depend upon chance encounters with exceptionally empathetic officials to access rights and entitlements guaranteed by law.

This perspective shifts the focus from individual morality to **institutional capability**—the structured ability of organizations to achieve public outcomes consistently through the effective alignment of rules, resources, competencies, technologies, and organizational culture. Viewed through this lens, compassion becomes a systemic

characteristic. It is reflected in whether procedures are designed around citizen realities, whether organizations actively identify barriers to access, and whether public servants are empowered to solve problems rather than merely enforce literal compliance.

Compassion is sometimes misunderstood as administrative leniency or discretionary generosity. Such interpretations are conceptually inaccurate and operationally hazardous. Compassionate governance does not require abandoning statutory rules or making decisions based on sentimentality. Rather, it ensures that procedural requirements do not inadvertently exclude the very citizens whom public systems are mandated to serve.

Accountability and compassion are therefore complementary rather than competing values. Institutions that assist citizens in accessing lawful entitlements strengthen the legitimacy of administrative rules by making them effective. An elderly or disabled pensioner unable to complete a digital verification process due to limited literacy or poor connectivity does not require an exemption from regulatory verification; rather, the citizen requires institutional support to fulfil it. The regulatory standard remains unchanged. What changes is the institution's capacity and willingness to facilitate compliance.

Understood in this manner, compassion becomes a core governance capability analogous to transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. Just as public institutions cultivate sophisticated systems for financial oversight, audit, and performance management, they can develop mechanisms that systematically identify and address citizen vulnerability. Compassionate governance may therefore be defined as *the capacity of public institutions to recognize human vulnerability and design administrative processes that enable citizens to access rights, entitlements, and services with dignity.*

Constitutionalism, Capability, and the Normative Foundations of Compassionate Governance

The normative foundations of compassionate governance in India derive from both modern constitutional commitments¹¹ and enduring civilizational traditions. Indian political thought has long

emphasized social interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and ethical concern for the vulnerable. The ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* conceives society as a shared moral community, while classical understandings of leadership consistently link authority with an absolute responsibility for collective welfare.

Goswami Tulsidas captures this governance principle through a timeless metaphor in the *Ramcharitmanas*⁹:

***“Mukhiyā mukhu so chāhiē khān pānā kahū ek.
Pālai pōṣai sakal aṅga Tulsi sahī bibek.”***

(“मुखिया मुखु सो चाहिए खान पाना कहूँ एक।

पालइ पोषइ सकल अंग तुलसी सहित बिबेक।।”)

Through this *doha*, set at Chitrakoot during the Bharat–Milap episode, Lord Rama declines Bharata’s request to return to Ayodhya and instead entrusts him with governance through his *Charan Pādūkās* (wooden sandals). In doing so, he offers profound guidance on righteous leadership, statecraft, and just administration.

The analogy suggests that leadership derives its legitimacy not from self-preservation, but from its capacity to sustain and nourish the entire social body equitably and wisely. Governance, in this tradition, is justified solely by its active contribution to collective well-being.

Independent India transformed these ethical traditions into binding constitutional commitments¹¹. The Preamble’s guarantees of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity place human dignity at the absolute centre of governance. Judicial interpretations of Article 21 have consistently expanded the right to life beyond mere biological survival to encompass the conditions necessary for living with dignity. Furthermore, the Directive Principles of State Policy³ mandate the State to actively promote welfare, minimize inequalities, and ensure social security assistance during unemployment, old age, sickness, and disablement.

These constitutional commitments resonate strongly with the **"Capability Approach"** developed by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen¹⁰. Sen argues that societal welfare must be assessed not merely by aggregate resources or formal legal rights, but by individuals’ actual capability to convert those resources and rights into meaningful

functionings. Two individuals may possess identical legal entitlements yet differ significantly in their ability to operationalize them due to variations in age, physical ability, literacy, geography, language, or social circumstances.

This insight is profoundly relevant to welfare administration. A pension entitlement holds limited value if an elderly citizen cannot physically access a verification portal, and a digital service remains functionally non-existent if the beneficiary lacks digital literacy or network connectivity. Administrative responsibility, therefore, extends far beyond creating welfare schemes and distributing outlays; it involves identifying and dismantling the operational barriers that prevent citizens from converting formal rights into lived realities.

Viewed through this lens, compassion is not external to constitutional governance but integral to its execution. Constitutional rights establish the normative commitments, while capabilities determine whether those commitments can be exercised in practice. Compassionate governance bridges the gap between the two, ensuring that citizens possess not only abstract legal entitlements but also a genuine, accessible opportunity to benefit from them.

Institutionalizing Compassion: Administrative Reform and Capacity Building

If compassion is understood as an institutional capability, it can be deliberately cultivated and systematically scaled within public organizations. Traditional bureaucratic systems prioritize rigid procedural compliance, absolute standardization, and risk minimization. While these features contribute to consistency and predictability, they often breed administrative rigidity, leaving officials preoccupied with procedural checklists even when those requirements unintentionally exclude vulnerable citizens.

Contemporary public administration increasingly recognizes that governance effectiveness depends on more than technical expertise and regulatory oversight. Citizen-centric administration requires specific behavioural competencies, including responsive communication, empathy, ethical judgment, collaborative problem-solving, and adaptive execution. The quality of governance is shaped

not just by formal rules, but by how public servants engage with citizens and adapt to their circumstances.

This reflects a major evolution in administrative theory⁸:

Dimension	Earlier Bureaucratic Models	Contemporary Citizen-Centric Approaches
Primary Focus	Hierarchical control and rigid rule enforcement.	Adaptability, service orientation, and citizen outcomes.
Measurement of Success	Direct adherence to internal procedures.	Extent to which citizens access services and realize entitlements.
Orientation	Reactive (responding only when formal claims arrive).	Proactive (reaching out to vulnerable and marginalized segments).

India's *Mission Karmayogi* represents a national effort to operationalize this shift. Through the National Programme for Civil Services Capacity Building, public-sector training is moving from a predominantly rule-based pedagogy toward competency-based learning. The Framework of Roles, Activities, and Competencies (FRACs) and the Karmayogi Competency Model (KCM)⁷ explicitly recognize that administrative outcomes depend on how officials think, communicate, collaborate, and respond to complex human situations.

Within this reformed framework, behavioural competencies are treated as core professional capabilities rather than optional personal virtues. Empathy, responsiveness, citizen sensitivity, and ethical judgment are recognized as integral components of administrative professionalism. If compassion is to function as a durable institutional capability, it must be systematically embedded within recruitment, training curriculums, leadership development, performance appraisal systems, and organizational culture.

The Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya National Academy of Social Security (PDUNASS) illustrates this institutional approach. As the apex training institute of the EPFO, PDUNASS aligns administrative competence directly with citizen outcomes. Its training philosophy is anchored in the reality that social security administration involves

continuous engagement with individuals navigating challenging life transitions, including retirement, disability, bereavement, illness, and economic insecurity.

Reflecting this philosophy, PDUNASS introduced a dedicated module on ***Compassion in Governance*** for newly recruited Assistant Provident Fund Commissioners. Developed in partnership with the Satyarthi Movement for Global Compassion (SMGC)⁴, the programme treats compassion not as an emotional impulse, but as an advanced professional capability. It equips incoming officers with the skills required to engage meaningfully with citizens, resolve complex operational deadlocks, foster inter-agency collaboration, and deliver public services that are both structurally efficient and deeply humane.

Such initiatives underscore a fundamental lesson for modern public administration: compassionate governance becomes sustainable only when it is institutionalized within organizational systems, professional codes, and operational performance metrics. Otherwise, it remains dependent on exceptional individual initiatives rather than becoming a routine, predictable feature of administrative practice.

EPFO and the Operationalization of Compassionate Governance

The EPFO provides an instructive laboratory for examining compassionate governance because it operates at the intersection of statutory law, social welfare, and massive administrative scale. Unlike purely regulatory bodies, the EPFO frequently interacts with citizens during critical life events—retirement, disability, illness, and bereavement—where administrative responsiveness directly impacts financial security and human dignity.

The operational history of the EPFO demonstrates that compassion is not an adversary of efficiency. On the contrary, its systemic reforms show that the two can be mutually reinforcing. Compassionate governance, in this context, is expressed not through ad-hoc discretionary concessions, but through intelligent administrative design that enables citizens to access their lawful entitlements seamlessly.

A premier example is the **“PRAYAAS”** initiative, which aims to release Pension Payment Orders (PPOs) to employees on the exact day of their retirement. While designed to enhance operational efficiency, it reflects an underlying sensitivity to the financial and psychological vulnerabilities associated with retirement. By eliminating administrative delays and uncertainty, the initiative demonstrates how technical efficiency can directly safeguard citizen welfare.

Furthermore, the EPFO’s experience underscores that citizen-centric administration must look beyond the formal execution of procedures to evaluate how beneficiaries actually navigate the system. Administrative architectures often assume that citizens possess uniform information, physical mobility, digital access, and procedural literacy. In reality, many beneficiaries face overlapping socioeconomic barriers that disconnect them from the benefits to which they are legally entitled.

Compassionate governance, therefore, requires institutions to actively identify and dismantle these barriers. This principle animates **“*Ek Sakaratmak Pahal*”**⁶, an initiative that highlights how public administration can successfully transition from passive claim processing to the proactive facilitation of citizen rights.

Compassion in Action: *Ek Sakaratmak Pahal*

The Zonal office of EPFO launched the *Ek Sakaratmak Pahal*⁶ initiative across the regions of Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Chandigarh as a targeted outreach campaign to restore pensions that had been suspended due to the non-submission of Digital Life Certificates (DLCs).

A detailed systemic audit of these suspended accounts revealed that a vast majority of “non-compliant” cases were not failures of entitlement, but manifestations of deep human vulnerability. Elderly widows, migrant families, persons with disabilities, and socially isolated individuals who remained fully eligible for benefits were simply unable to navigate digital authentication systems, documentation requirements, or procedural formalities. Behind these silent, suspended accounts lay households dependent on their

monthly pensions for basic sustenance, security, and dignity.

Rather than processing these cases as routine administrative dropouts, the initiative reframed the problem, asking what specific barriers prevented these citizens from accessing their rightful entitlements. Aging, physical infirmity, poverty, migration, language barriers, and digital exclusion were recognized as genuine structural constraints rather than instances of willful non-compliance. Through proactive field outreach and adaptive problem-solving, officials worked to restore pensions, rebuild institutional trust, and reconnect citizens with their social security protections.

The initiative represents an important shift in administrative orientation:

- From processing paper files to resolving human problems.
- From monitoring rigid compliance to actively facilitating access.

The following documented field cases from the project documentation⁶ illustrate how compassionate governance is operationalized in practice.

i. Language, Trust, and the Human Face of Administration

During a review of suspended accounts in the remote Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, officials identified the long-inactive family pension of Shrimati Kamlesh Kumari, an elderly widow. Initial telephonic outreach by the department failed because she consistently disconnected the calls and refused to engage.

Field verification revealed that she was elderly, illiterate, and entirely unfamiliar with official procedures. Exposed to localized warnings regarding digital financial fraud, she viewed unsolicited calls from unknown officials with deep suspicion. The primary barrier to service delivery was not a lack of eligibility, but a lack of trust.

The regional office responded by assigning an official fluent in her local Kangri dialect to establish communication. The impact was immediate. By replacing an intimidating, formal bureaucratic interface with an authentic, localized dialogue, the department

established a secure connection. Shrimati Kamlesh revealed that following her husband's demise, she had never been clearly informed about the continuity of her family pension benefits, surviving instead on precarious agricultural labour as her health failed.

Officials guided her through the necessary documentation, resulting in the successful restoration of her pension and the release of accumulated arrears. This case demonstrates that administrative access frequently depends on an institution's capacity to communicate empathetically and build trust within the citizen's own cultural context.

ii. Migration, Distance, and Welfare Portability

The challenges of geographical mobility are illustrated by the case of Shrimati Kirpali Devi. Following the death of her husband, she relocated from Punjab to Sultanpur in Uttar Pradesh to reside with her daughters, subsequently losing physical and administrative contact with the regional EPFO office. Her survivor pension ceased due to the non-submission of mandatory certificates, and another eligible beneficiary within the family failed to even initiate a claim due to a lack of institutional awareness and local support.

When the outreach team traced the case, they encountered outdated records, inactive bank accounts, and severe digital literacy gaps. Financial constraints prevented the family from travelling back to Punjab to settle the claims.

Rather than allowing the file to remain closed, EPFO officials conducted an audit of historical banking footprints, established verified communication channels to alleviate fraud anxieties, coordinated with local banking points in Uttar Pradesh, and facilitated the remote completion of all documentation. The pension accounts were ultimately transferred to the jurisdiction nearest her current residence, ensuring immediate financial relief and long-term convenience. The case emphasizes that social security architectures must be agile enough to accommodate mobile populations, ensuring that migration does not result in systemic exclusion.

iii. Information Gaps and Invisible Exclusion

Information asymmetry remains an underestimated driver of exclusion. Following the death of Shri Satish Kumar, an educational sector employee, pension benefits were duly sanctioned for his widow and children. However, payments stopped when annual life certificates were not submitted, and subsequent official communications were returned undelivered due to obsolete contact records.

Outreach teams utilized local community networks to locate the deceased member's son. The investigation revealed that the family was not negligent; rather, they completely misunderstood the policy. They erroneously believed that the pension was a short-term benefit tied strictly to the father's specific employer, unaware that they were entitled to long-term coverage under a national social security programme.

Even after correcting this misconception, a technical barrier emerged: local cyber-café operators lacked the technical expertise to process their digital certification. EPFO officials provided direct, step-by-step administrative guidance, enabling the family to fulfill the formalities and receive their restored benefits. Informational barriers can be just as exclusionary as physical or financial constraints; hence, institutions must proactively bridge these knowledge gaps.

iv. Dignity Through Domiciliary Service Delivery

The operationalization of compassion was clearly visible in the case of Shrimati Krishna Rani, an elderly widow whose pension had been suspended for several years. The suspension did not stem from structural ineligibility, but from the fact that she was entirely bedridden due to severe paralysis, making travel to an administrative center or common service center for mandatory biometric verification physically impossible.

Recognizing these exceptional circumstances, the EPFO regional office bypassed standard reactive protocols and constituted a mobile verification team. Officers travelled directly to her residence, completed the biometric and documentary verification at her bedside, processed the files, and restored her monthly pension. This targeted adaptation of service-delivery mechanisms protected the citizen's dignity while fully maintaining procedural integrity, proving

that technology-driven governance must maintain human-centric channels for those unable to interface with automated systems.

v. Reconnecting Marginalized and Homeless Beneficiaries

The extreme edge of social exclusion is highlighted by the case of Shri Dilram, a former factory sweeper who, following family abandonment, fell into absolute homelessness, living on the streets. His pension had remained suspended for more than six years, and the department possessed no valid contact data.

Refusing to classify the account as irretrievable, frontline Social Security Assistants engaged in extensive field work, tracing ancestral village networks and contacting local community leaders. Their search eventually located Shri Dilram living in severe destitution on the streets.

The outreach team facilitated his safe return, completed all identity and banking verifications, and successfully processed accumulated arrears. This intervention restored vital financial security and returned a measure of social protection and human dignity to a citizen completely severed from traditional support structures. Social security administration achieves its highest purpose when it actively searches for and reinstates its most marginalized members.

From Procedures to Entitlements: Governance Lessons from Compassion in Action

The collective insights generated by *Ek Sakaratmak Pahal*⁶ offer critical lessons for contemporary public administration:

- **Exclusion as a Function of Barriers, Not Rights:** Systemic exclusion frequently occurs not due to an absence of legal rights, but due to structural barriers that impede the exercise of those rights. Beneficiaries remain legally eligible, yet lack the mobility, technology, information, or resources to navigate administrative channels. Governance must focus on ensuring that rights can be meaningfully exercised.
- **The Imperative of Proactive Administration:** Traditional bureaucracies operate reactively, responding only when a citizen

files a formal claim or grievance. However, the most vulnerable citizens are often the least capable of navigating these entry points. Proactive administration requires institutions to actively monitor data anomalies—such as sudden drops in pension renewals—and reach out to disconnected citizens before they fall into absolute destitution.

- **Rule Compliance and Accountability:** Administrative responsiveness does not require compromising statutory compliance or weakening accountability. Throughout these interventions, regulatory standards and statutory checks remained unchanged; what changed was the institution's willingness to assist vulnerable citizens in meeting those standards. Compassion operates through enhanced access, not rule relaxation.
- **Institutional Trust as an Operational Resource:** Trust is a prerequisite for effective policy implementation. When citizens view public organizations as distant, predatory, or indifferent, they retreat from engagement, creating friction in service delivery. Cultivating an empathetic, accessible institutional persona directly lowers transaction costs and improves administrative efficacy.
- **The Necessity of a Hybrid Human-Digital Interface:** While digital transformation optimizes speed and reduces systemic corruption, technology cannot fully replace human intervention for citizens facing severe age-related, physical, or social marginalization. Advanced digital governance models must retain a responsive human interface to prevent technological modernization from becoming an engine of unintended exclusion.

These lessons apply across all public sectors. Healthcare systems must address the physical barriers confronting the elderly; educational networks must support students facing socio-economic displacement; and urban bodies must remain accessible to migrant workers. Public institutions fulfill their democratic mandates most effectively when they deliberately orient their operations around the realities of human vulnerability.

Conclusion

The central challenge confronting contemporary governance is not deciding whether public institutions should be efficient or compassionate, but rather organizing efficiency in ways that actively advance human dignity, social inclusion, and constitutional justice. As governments expand their reliance on automated technologies and large-scale standardized systems, the risk of institutional alienation grows. The future of governance relies on combining operational excellence with human responsiveness.

This article has argued that compassion in governance must be conceptualized not as an ephemeral individual virtue, but as a core institutional capability through which public organizations translate abstract constitutional mandates into substantive welfare outcomes. Compassion is neither discretionary benevolence nor administrative sentimentality; it is the practical, structured capacity of systems to recognize vulnerability, identify operational bottlenecks, and ensure that legal rights become lived realities.

The conceptual foundation of this model rests upon India's constitutional vision of justice, equality, dignity, and welfare¹¹, reinforced by Amartya Sen's Capability Approach¹⁰. Together, these paradigms show that rights only possess true meaning when individuals have a genuine, unhindered capability to exercise them. Constitutional morality similarly requires public institutions to remain faithful not just to legal text, but to the substantive ethical values embedded within the constitutional architecture. Consequently, administrative performance must be audited not merely by procedural compliance, but by its contribution to inclusion and human flourishing.

Contemporary administrative reforms, such as Mission Karmayogi, demonstrate that these compassionate capabilities can be systematically built. Behavioural competencies—including communication, empathy, ethical judgment, and citizen sensitivity—are now recognized as essential attributes of administrative professionalism⁷. The training innovations executed at PDUNASS further demonstrate how these attributes can be embedded within institutionalized capacity-building frameworks.

The field operations of the EPFO demonstrates that compassionate governance is achievable at scale. Through initiatives like *PRAYAAS* and *Ek Sakaratmak Pahal*⁶, the organization proves that proactive outreach, localized problem-solving, and citizen-centric service delivery can close the gap between entitlement and access. These interventions demonstrate that responsive institutions can protect the vulnerable while maintaining accountability, transparency, and procedural integrity.

Max Weber’s foundational warning against the dehumanizing effects of formal rationalization remains highly relevant⁸. Left unchecked, administrative systems risk transforming human beings into mere case numbers and procedural compliance into an end in itself. Compassionate governance acts as an essential corrective, reconnecting institutional processes with the human purposes they were designed to serve.

The enduring relevance of **Sardar Patel’s** vision of the civil services as the nation’s “**steel frame**” remains unquestioned. Yet, the resilience of that framework in the twenty-first century depends on its capacity to recognize human need and respond to it effectively. Public institutions derive their ultimate democratic legitimacy not from the rigid enforcement of rules, but from enabling citizens to seamlessly realize the rights those rules protect.

Governance, at its deepest level, is a moral contract between the State and its citizens¹. As India navigates the complexities of a rapidly evolving century, the challenge before its public institutions is to govern both effectively and humanely. The true measure of governance lies in its ability to shield the vulnerable, expand opportunities, and affirm the dignity of every individual. In that sense, *Shasan Vidhi Mein Karuna*⁵ is a democratic imperative. It is through compassion institutionalized across laws, policies, organizational cultures, and frontline practices that constitutional justice achieves tangible meaning, ensuring that democracy functions as a lived reality for all. Ultimately, when governance becomes truly just, citizens cease to feel governed; they begin to feel cared for².

Endnotes

1. The characterization of governance as a moral contract between the State and its citizens draws on themes highlighted by Dr. Shashi Tharoor in his address at the 24th edition of the Reimagining Governance: Discourse for Excellence (RGDE) lecture series, organised by the Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya National Academy of Social Security (PDUNASS) in 2026, particularly the link between democratic legitimacy, citizen experience, and the quality of governance.
2. The observation that “when governance becomes truly just, citizens cease to feel governed; they begin to feel cared for” was articulated by Dr. Shashi Tharoor during the same address at the 24th edition of the Reimagining Governance: Discourse for Excellence (RGDE) lecture series organized by PDUNASS in 2026.
3. The Directive Principles of State Policy, particularly Articles 38, 39, 41, and 46, establish the constitutional foundations of the welfare State by directing public policy towards social justice, equality of opportunity, and protection of vulnerable populations.
4. The module draws upon principles and perspectives on compassionate governance articulated by Nobel Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi during the seventeenth edition of the Reimagining Governance: Discourse for Excellence (RGDE) lecture series organized by PDUNASS in 2025.
5. The Hindi expression *Shasan Vidhi Mein Karuna* (Compassion in Governance) is used in this article not to denote discretionary benevolence but to describe an institutional commitment to designing and implementing administrative systems that remain responsive to human vulnerability while upholding legality, accountability, and procedural integrity.
6. Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), case-study booklets and project documentation relating to the *Ek Sakaratmak Pahal* initiative across Punjab and Himachal Pradesh regions (Editions 1 and 2, 2024).
7. Capacity Building Commission, Government of India, *Karmayogi Competency Model (KCM): Guidelines and Reports* (2024–2026).

8. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*.
9. Goswami Tulsidas, *Ramcharitmanas* (Ayodhya Kand, Doha 315).
10. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*.
11. *Constitution of India*, Articles 14, 21, 38, 39, 41, 43, and 51A.
12. Harivansh Rai Bachchan, “*Kya Karun Samvedana Lekar Tumhari*,” in *Selected Poems*.

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The Geography of Governance: Why Policy Works Differently Across Space

Introduction

Why does an identical policy produce radically divergent outcomes across space? Why does a welfare programme that functions with relative consistency in one region falter in another, despite comparable statutory design, fiscal allocation, and administrative mandate? Such variation is frequently explained through the language of implementation failure, bureaucratic inefficiency, or uneven state capacity. While these explanations capture part of the story, they remain analytically incomplete. They assume a territorially uniform state and treat divergence as an anomaly, rather than as a patterned and predictable outcome.

This paper advances a different proposition. It argues that governance in India is fundamentally spatial, and that policy outcomes are shaped by what may be termed the geography of governance. This concept extends beyond a narrow understanding of geography as physical terrain. It instead encompasses the layered spatial conditions through which the state is organised, mediated, and experienced. Governance, in this formulation, is not simply delivered across space. It is produced through spatial arrangements that shape how policies are interpreted, enacted, and encountered in practice.

Existing scholarship has demonstrated that centrally designed policies often fail to account for local complexity, resulting in significant variation in outcomes. Ethnographic work on bureaucracy has further shown that administrative processes are embedded within everyday practices that differ across regions, producing uneven access to state resources. At the same time, studies of citizen–state interaction highlight that governance is not experienced as an abstract institutional structure, but through situated encounters that

accumulate into broader perceptions of state presence and legitimacy. While these insights are critical, they remain fragmented. What is missing is a systematic framework that integrates these dimensions into a coherent explanation of spatial variation in policy performance.

To address this gap, the paper conceptualises the geography of governance through five interrelated lenses. First, material terrain and infrastructural accessibility shape the reach and modality of policy delivery. Mountainous regions, dispersed settlements, and dense urban environments each impose distinct constraints and opportunities on administrative action. Second, demographic density and social topography, including patterns of caste, tribal distribution, and economic stratification, structure how policies are targeted, mediated, and negotiated. Third, institutional and procedural arrangements within a federal and decentralised system determine how policies are interpreted and adapted at the subnational level. Fourth, the temporal and experiential rhythms of governance, reflected in waiting periods, bureaucratic interactions, and outreach practices, shape how citizens perceive the state over time. Fifth, symbolic performances of governance, including public visibility, inspections, and outreach campaigns, contribute to the construction of legitimacy in spatially differentiated ways.

These dimensions do not operate independently. Their interaction produces systematic variation in policy outcomes across regions. Institutional capacity, while important, cannot by itself explain divergence. Instead, institutions are embedded within specific spatial contexts that shape their functioning. Terrain conditions administrative reach. Social structures influence access and negotiation. Temporal processes affect perception and trust. Symbolic practices reinforce or undermine legitimacy. Together, these factors produce governance outcomes that are spatially differentiated rather than uniformly distributed.

The Indian context provides a particularly compelling setting for this analysis. As a large and heterogeneous federal system, India exhibits significant variation in administrative capacity, social composition, and political organisation across states and districts. Identical policy frameworks, whether in welfare delivery, digital

governance, or decentralised planning, generate markedly different outcomes when filtered through these diverse spatial conditions. Rather than treating such variation as deviation from an ideal model, this paper situates it within a broader framework that recognises governance as inherently embedded in space.

In developing a multi-dimensional framework of the geography of governance, this paper makes three contributions. First, it challenges the predominance of capacity-based explanations by demonstrating the limits of treating governance as a purely institutional variable. Second, it integrates insights from political geography, development studies, and public policy to offer a more comprehensive account of spatial variation. Third, it provides an analytical lens for rethinking debates on Indian federalism and policy design, shifting attention from uniformity of policy intent to the spatial conditions of policy realisation. Policy outcomes, in this sense, are not merely administered. They are spatially produced.

Terrain and Accessibility: The Literal Geography of the State

The spatiality of governance acquires its most concrete expression in the material terrain through which the state operates. Physical geography does not merely condition administrative action at the margins. It fundamentally structures the reach, frequency, and form of governance. Variations in altitude, settlement dispersion, climatic exposure, and infrastructural connectivity produce distinct administrative environments within which identical policy frameworks generate systematically divergent outcomes. Terrain, in this sense, is not an external constraint but a constitutive dimension of governance itself.

A comparative perspective across spatial contexts renders this relationship analytically visible. In mountainous regions, characterised by steep gradients, dispersed settlements, and fragile road infrastructure, administrative reach is both physically and temporally constrained. Field-level officials often traverse long distances across difficult terrain to access small and scattered populations, raising the cost and reducing the frequency of direct engagement. Seasonal disruptions further compound this challenge. In several such regions,

winter conditions render roads impassable for extended periods, compressing administrative activity into narrow temporal windows. Governance, therefore, assumes an episodic and consolidated form, with outreach clustered into limited periods of accessibility and sustained reliance on local intermediaries.

In contrast, coastal regions with relatively dense settlement patterns and more stable connectivity exhibit a different administrative logic. Here, governance is more continuous, with greater frequency of interaction between citizens and state institutions. However, this continuity is periodically disrupted by climatic shocks such as flooding and cyclonic events, which redirect administrative capacity towards emergency response. Urban environments present yet another configuration. High population density reduces spatial distance but intensifies administrative complexity through congestion, informality, and socio-economic heterogeneity. The result is a paradoxical condition in which accessibility is high, yet administrative burden is equally elevated. Across these three terrains, governance does not merely vary in efficiency. It assumes qualitatively different forms, shaped by the material conditions of implementation.

These differences are particularly evident in the functioning of decentralised governance institutions. While designed as uniform structures, their operation is deeply conditioned by terrain. In geographically challenging regions, local governance bodies frequently adapt by reducing the frequency of formal meetings while increasing their duration and scope. Participation tends to be mediated through smaller, localised networks rather than large assemblies, given the difficulty of physical convergence. Monitoring mechanisms rely more heavily on embedded actors, as higher-level oversight is constrained by accessibility. By contrast, in more accessible regions, decentralised institutions exhibit greater procedural regularity, broader participation, and more consistent oversight. This divergence reflects not a failure of institutional design but its spatial adaptation. Decentralisation, therefore, produces differentiated governance forms when filtered through heterogeneous terrains.

Infrastructure has expanded significantly in recent decades, yet its distribution and functionality remain uneven. Official data indicate

that over 90 per cent of rural habitations are formally connected by roads (Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2023). However, this metric obscures substantial variation in road quality, reliability, and travel time, particularly in topographically difficult areas where maintenance is challenging and seasonal disruptions are frequent. Accessibility, therefore, cannot be reduced to nominal connectivity. It must be understood in terms of effective reach, which remains highly uneven across regions.

The expansion of digital infrastructure introduces an additional layer to this spatial dynamic. Internet penetration in urban India has crossed approximately 65 to 70 per cent, while rural penetration remains closer to 35 to 40 per cent. Within rural areas, this disparity deepens further in remote and geographically challenging regions, where connectivity is not only limited but often unreliable. Bandwidth constraints, intermittent power supply, and infrastructural fragility significantly affect the usability of digital platforms. As a result, the promise of digital governance as a spatial equaliser remains only partially realised.

The distribution of digital access points further reinforces these inequalities. Service delivery centres intended to bridge the digital divide are disproportionately concentrated in more accessible and densely populated areas. In regions where such centres are sparse, citizens remain dependent on intermediaries to access digital services. This introduces additional layers of mediation into the governance process, increasing both transaction costs and discretionary power at the point of access. Large-scale connectivity initiatives have extended fibre networks across hundreds of thousands of local administrative units, yet the gap between nominal coverage and functional connectivity persists. Connectivity often exists in principle but not in practice, particularly in areas where last-mile integration and maintenance are weak.

A brief illustrative vignette clarifies this dynamic. In a remote mountainous block, a citizen seeking to access a digital welfare service may travel several kilometres to the nearest service centre, only to encounter network failure or system downtime. The process is deferred, requiring repeated visits and increasing both time and

financial costs. In a coastal district with stable connectivity, the same service may be accessed within minutes, either through a local centre or directly via personal devices. In an urban setting, multiple access points and higher digital literacy further reduce friction, allowing near-instantaneous interaction with the state. The policy framework is identical, yet the experience of governance differs profoundly across these contexts.

The interaction between terrain and digital systems generates hybrid administrative practices. In regions with stable connectivity, governance increasingly shifts towards platform-based delivery, reducing reliance on physical interfaces. In contrast, in areas where connectivity is intermittent, administrative actors combine digital processes with manual workarounds, maintaining parallel systems of record and execution. This hybridity introduces variability in efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Procedures that are standardised in design become contingent in practice, shaped by local infrastructural conditions.

Terrain also structures the temporal rhythms of governance. Accessibility is cyclical rather than constant, shaped by seasonal variation and infrastructural fragility. In mountainous regions, extended periods of inaccessibility compress administrative activity into shorter intervals, intensifying workload and limiting continuity. In flood-prone coastal areas, routine governance is periodically disrupted, as administrative attention shifts towards crisis management. These temporal fluctuations produce uneven patterns of state presence, with periods of intense engagement followed by relative absence. Citizens, therefore, experience the state not as a continuous entity but as a temporally variable presence.

These spatial and temporal variations have direct implications for state legitimacy. In regions where accessibility is constrained and administrative presence is intermittent, the state is often experienced as distant and mediated, even when formal entitlements exist. In more accessible contexts, regular interaction reinforces perceptions of responsiveness and reliability. These perceptions are grounded in material realities rather than abstract expectations. Legitimacy, in this sense, is co-produced by terrain, infrastructure, and institutional practice.

The analytical implication is clear. Policy design cannot assume spatial neutrality. Standardised frameworks that do not account for terrain-induced variation risk reproducing inequality in outcomes despite formal uniformity. A terrain-sensitive approach requires recognising that identical institutional arrangements generate unequal effects across different geographies. This necessitates differentiated administrative norms, targeted infrastructural investment, and flexible modes of delivery that respond to local conditions.

Terrain and accessibility constitute a foundational dimension of the geography of governance. They shape not only the logistical feasibility of policy implementation but also the institutional forms, temporal rhythms, and experiential realities of the state. Governance outcomes are not merely administered across space. They are produced through it.

Demographic Density and Social Topography: The Invisible Geography

If terrain constitutes the visible architecture of the state, demographic density and social stratification form its less perceptible but equally determinative geography. Administrative capacity is not merely a function of institutional design or fiscal allocation; it is deeply conditioned by the density, distribution, and social composition of the population it seeks to govern. High-density urban agglomerations generate governance pressures that are qualitatively distinct from those encountered in sparsely populated or socially heterogeneous regions. Equally, layered social hierarchies, particularly those structured around caste, tribal identity, and economic stratification, produce differentiated patterns of state access, compliance, and contestation. This “invisible geography” thus shapes not only the demand placed upon administrative systems but also the manner in which policy is interpreted, mediated, and ultimately experienced on the ground.

In metropolitan regions such as Mumbai and Kolkata, density manifests as administrative congestion rather than mere scale. With ward-level population densities frequently exceeding 20,000 to 30,000 persons per square kilometre, and in some informal settlements crossing even higher thresholds, the bureaucratic

apparatus is forced into a mode of continuous triage. Administrative ratios reveal the severity of this imbalance: in several large municipal jurisdictions, a single ward officer or equivalent functionary may be responsible for populations exceeding 150,000 to 250,000 residents. By contrast, in less dense districts, administrative units often operate with ratios closer to 1 official per 20,000 to 40,000 individuals. This disparity is not simply quantitative but translates into qualitatively different forms of governance, where responsiveness, monitoring capacity, and grievance redressal are structurally diluted in high-density contexts.

The consequences of this administrative bandwidth compression are visible in service delivery distortions. In Mumbai, for instance, informal settlements account for over 40 per cent of the population, yet municipal service provisioning in these areas remains inconsistent due to fluid settlement boundaries and documentation gaps. Similarly, in Kolkata, high-density wards exhibit significantly higher case pendency in municipal grievance systems compared to lower-density peripheral zones. Empirical assessments of urban service platforms indicate that complaint resolution timelines in dense wards can exceed official benchmarks by two to three times, reflecting not merely inefficiency but systemic overload. Under such conditions, informal intermediaries, including local political actors and community brokers, emerge as parallel access points to the state, effectively reconfiguring formal governance into negotiated governance.

In contrast, states such as Chhattisgarh present an inverse but equally complex administrative challenge. With a population density of approximately 190 persons per square kilometre, compared to over 1,000 in states like West Bengal, administrative systems must prioritise spatial reach over throughput efficiency. Districts such as Dantewada or Narayanpur, characterised by dispersed tribal populations and difficult terrain, operate with administrative ratios that appear favourable on paper but are functionally constrained by distance and connectivity. Here, a single block-level office may serve dozens of remote habitations spread across large forested areas, requiring extensive travel time and logistical coordination.

Yet, it is precisely within these constraints that adaptive governance innovations have emerged. The public distribution system in Chhattisgarh, for example, has achieved coverage rates exceeding 80 to 85 per cent of eligible households, significantly higher than many more urbanised states. This has been enabled through decentralised procurement, doorstep delivery mechanisms, and the strategic placement of fair price shops within accessible radii. Similarly, mobile health units and community-based functionaries have extended the reach of primary healthcare services into remote tribal areas. These interventions illustrate that lower density, when coupled with context-sensitive administrative design, can produce outcomes that rival or exceed those of more resource-rich but densely burdened systems.

A micro-level illustration further clarifies this divergence. In a district such as Bastar, administrative outreach relies heavily on village-level workers who function as the primary interface between the state and dispersed populations. These actors manage a wide portfolio of responsibilities, including welfare enrolment, health monitoring, and grievance reporting, often covering multiple villages across difficult terrain. While this model faces capacity limitations, it enables a degree of last-mile penetration that would be difficult to replicate in high-density urban settings. By contrast, in a dense urban ward in Mumbai, frontline officials may process hundreds of applications or complaints daily, yet lack the time or institutional flexibility to engage in sustained, community-level interaction. The result is a paradox where the state is physically closer to citizens in urban areas but functionally more distant.

Beyond density, the social composition of populations introduces an additional layer of administrative complexity. Caste and tribal identities, deeply embedded within local social structures, shape not only patterns of access but also the very perception of the state. Administrative systems, while formally neutral, are often experienced through the prism of these hierarchies, producing differentiated outcomes even within uniformly designed policy frameworks. In many regions, particularly in parts of northern and central India, access to welfare schemes, grievance redressal mechanisms, and local

governance institutions continue to be mediated by entrenched caste networks. This mediation is not always overt, but is reflected in patterns of awareness, application success rates, and timeliness of benefit delivery.

Quantitative assessments of welfare distribution reveal persistent disparities along these lines. Survey-based evaluations of major social protection programmes indicate that households belonging to marginalised caste groups are, on average, 10 to 15 percentage points less likely to receive full entitlements on time compared to more socially advantaged groups within the same administrative unit. These disparities persist even when controlling for income, suggesting that administrative access is not merely a function of economic capacity but is structurally intertwined with social positioning. In densely populated regions, such inequalities are further intensified, as competition for limited administrative attention amplifies the advantages of those better positioned to navigate bureaucratic processes.

In tribal-dominated regions, the interaction between social topology and administrative design takes on a different character. Here, the challenge is less about intra-community hierarchy and more about the interface between state systems and distinct socio-cultural frameworks. Districts with high tribal populations consistently record lower performance on indicators such as literacy, institutional delivery rates, and digital access, often trailing national averages by margins ranging from 10 to 20 percentage points. However, these gaps cannot be understood solely as deficits; they also reflect a misalignment between standardised administrative models and local realities. Programmes that rely heavily on documentation, digital interfaces, or centralised service points often encounter limited uptake in such contexts.

At the same time, evidence from targeted interventions suggests that this gap is neither uniform nor irreversible. In several tribal districts, the integration of community-based intermediaries and locally embedded functionaries has led to measurable improvements in service delivery outcomes. For instance, the expansion of village-level health and nutrition workers in parts of central India has

contributed to significant increases in immunisation coverage and maternal health monitoring, even in geographically remote areas. These gains, while uneven, demonstrate that when administrative systems align with social structures rather than bypass them, the effectiveness of policy delivery can improve substantially.

Economic stratification further complicates this landscape by intersecting with both density and social hierarchy. In urban contexts, high levels of income inequality produce sharply differentiated zones of state access. While formal infrastructure may exist across a city, its usability varies significantly. Data on digital governance usage illustrates this divide: although internet penetration has crossed the 50 per cent mark nationally, active utilisation of digital public services remains disproportionately concentrated among higher-income groups. In low-income urban settlements, barriers such as device access, digital literacy, and documentation continue to limit effective engagement with e-governance platforms. As a result, the formal expansion of digital infrastructure does not automatically translate into equitable administrative access.

This layered interaction between density, social structure, and economic distribution produces distinct patterns of governance distortion across regions. In high-density urban environments, exclusion tends to emerge through administrative congestion, where the sheer volume of demand reduces the capacity for equitable processing. In such contexts, individuals and groups with greater social or economic capital are better able to secure attention within overloaded systems, reinforcing existing inequalities. In contrast, in low-density and socially distinct regions, exclusion is more closely linked to administrative reach and contextual misalignment, where the state's presence is uneven or inadequately adapted to local conditions.

A comparative perspective further sharpens this distinction. States characterised by high population density and complex social stratification often exhibit lower per capita administrative responsiveness, despite higher aggregate resource allocation. Conversely, states with lower density but more context-sensitive administrative strategies have, in specific sectors, achieved higher

levels of effective coverage. This divergence underscores a critical point: administrative capacity cannot be measured solely in terms of resources or institutional design, but must be understood in relation to the demographic and social environments within which it operates.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that demographic density and social topology function not as separate determinants but as interacting forces that shape the lived reality of governance. High-density contexts amplify the effects of social hierarchy by intensifying competition for limited administrative attention, while low-density contexts expose the limits of standardised administrative models in the absence of contextual adaptation. The result is a differentiated landscape of state presence, where the form, accessibility, and effectiveness of governance vary not only across regions but within them.

This has significant implications for policy design. Uniform administrative frameworks, even when technically robust, are unlikely to produce equitable outcomes across such varied contexts. Instead, governance systems must be calibrated to account simultaneously for population pressure and social composition. In dense urban settings, this may require institutional mechanisms aimed at decongesting administrative processes, increasing frontline capacity, and reducing reliance on informal intermediaries. In sparsely populated and socially distinct regions, the emphasis must shift towards mobility, decentralisation, and the integration of community-based delivery structures.

Ultimately, the invisible geography of demographic density and social topology reveals a fundamental insight: the challenge of governance lies not merely in extending the reach of the state, but in aligning its functioning with the characteristics of the populations it serves. Administrative systems that fail to account for these underlying structures risk reproducing inequality even as they expand coverage. By contrast, those that recognise and adapt to these dynamics are better positioned to translate formal entitlements into substantive access. It is within this alignment that the possibility of genuinely inclusive governance emerges.

Institutional and Procedural: The Architecture of State Capacity

If terrain and demographic composition define the external constraints of governance, institutional and procedural design constitutes its internal architecture. It is within this domain that the most decisive variations in state capacity emerge, not merely in terms of what policies are formulated, but how they are operationalised, mediated, and sustained over time. Institutional arrangements determine the degree to which the state is embedded within society, while procedural frameworks govern the consistency, accessibility, and accountability of its functioning. Together, they shape what may be understood as the “operational grammar” of governance, producing outcomes that vary significantly even among states with comparable economic and demographic profiles.

A central insight emerging from comparative institutional analysis is that state capacity is not a monolithic attribute but a differentiated construct, contingent upon the interaction between political commitment, bureaucratic organisation, and societal incorporation. States that exhibit high levels of administrative effectiveness tend to combine relatively autonomous bureaucratic structures with mechanisms of structured societal engagement. This balance allows for both policy coherence and responsiveness, reducing the likelihood of capture while enhancing legitimacy. Conversely, where institutions are either excessively insulated or overly penetrated by local power structures, governance outcomes tend to be uneven, characterised by either rigidity or fragmentation.

Kerala represents a paradigmatic case of institutional deepening through decentralised planning. The state’s governance architecture is distinguished by a systematic devolution of fiscal, administrative, and planning authority to local bodies, supported by procedural frameworks that mandate participatory decision-making. Local governments are not merely implementing agencies but active sites of policy formulation, with structured forums enabling citizen engagement in planning processes. Statistical indicators reflect the impact of this model: local governments in Kerala account for a significantly higher proportion of public expenditure compared to the national average, often exceeding 25 to 30 per cent in key

sectors. This decentralisation is complemented by high levels of social development, including literacy rates above 95 per cent and strong public health indicators, which further enhance the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms.

However, the success of such a model is not solely attributable to decentralisation in the abstract, but to the procedural rigour with which it is implemented. Planning processes are standardised yet flexible, incorporating iterative feedback mechanisms, transparent budgeting practices, and clearly defined accountability structures. This creates a system in which local autonomy is balanced by procedural discipline, preventing the diffusion of responsibility that often undermines decentralised governance elsewhere. The result is a form of embedded state capacity, where institutions are both deeply integrated within society and capable of maintaining operational coherence.

Tamil Nadu offers a contrasting but equally instructive model, centred on procedural standardisation and service delivery efficiency. The state's network of citizen service centres exemplifies a shift towards front-end administrative rationalisation, where access to government services is streamlined through single-window platforms. These centres handle a wide range of functions, from certificate issuance to welfare applications, significantly reducing transaction costs for citizens. Data from administrative performance assessments indicate that service delivery timelines in such systems are often reduced by 30 to 50 per cent compared to traditional departmental processes, with higher rates of application completion and lower incidence of procedural delays.

The effectiveness of this model lies in its emphasis on procedural clarity and predictability. By codifying service standards, digitising workflows, and centralising access points, the state reduces the discretionary space within which delays and informal practices can occur. At the same time, the integration of digital tracking systems enhances transparency, enabling citizens to monitor the status of their applications in real time. This proceduralisation of governance transforms the citizen-state interface from a discretionary interaction to a rule-bound transaction, thereby increasing both efficiency and accountability.

Yet, this model also illustrates the limits of procedural reform in the absence of deeper institutional embedding. While service delivery efficiency improves, the extent of citizen participation in policy formulation remains comparatively limited. The system is highly effective in delivering predefined services but less oriented towards incorporating citizen input into broader governance processes. This highlights a critical trade-off between efficiency and participatory depth, suggesting that procedural innovation, while necessary, is not sufficient for achieving holistic state capacity.

Mizoram presents a third model, characterised by the integration of district-level planning bodies within a context of relatively cohesive social structures. Here, institutional effectiveness is derived not from scale or technological sophistication but from alignment between formal administrative structures and existing community networks. District planning bodies function as key nodes of governance, coordinating development activities while maintaining close engagement with local communities. Despite limited fiscal and infrastructural resources, the state has achieved relatively strong outcomes in sectors such as education and basic service delivery, with literacy rates exceeding 90 per cent and comparatively high levels of social cohesion.

The success of this model can be attributed to the congruence between institutional design and social context. Administrative processes are less formalised than in more bureaucratically dense states, but this is offset by high levels of trust and community participation. Decision-making processes, while decentralised, are anchored in shared norms and collective accountability, reducing the need for extensive procedural enforcement. This illustrates an alternative pathway to state capacity, where institutional effectiveness emerges from social embeddedness rather than procedural standardisation alone.

Comparative analysis across states further reinforces these distinctions. Studies examining matched administrative units across neighbouring regions reveal that variations in governance outcomes cannot be explained solely by resource endowments or geographic conditions. Instead, differences in institutional design and procedural

implementation play a significant role. For instance, regions with similar terrain and demographic profiles often exhibit divergent outcomes in service delivery and welfare penetration, depending on the degree of bureaucratic coordination, policy continuity, and citizen engagement embedded within their governance structures.

A broader typology of state capacity emerges from such comparisons, distinguishing between at least three institutional configurations. The first is the embedded-participatory model, characterised by decentralised authority and structured citizen engagement, as seen in Kerala. The second is the procedural-efficiency model, defined by standardised processes and centralised service delivery platforms, as exemplified by Tamil Nadu. The third is the community-aligned model, where institutional effectiveness is derived from alignment with local social structures, as observed in Mizoram. Each of these models represents a distinct pathway to governance effectiveness, with its own strengths and limitations.

Statistical indicators provide further insight into these variations. States with higher levels of decentralised expenditure and participatory planning tend to perform better on social development indices, including health, education, and gender equity. Those with advanced procedural systems exhibit stronger performance in administrative efficiency metrics, such as service delivery timelines and grievance resolution rates. Meanwhile, states with high levels of social cohesion often demonstrate relatively low levels of conflict and higher rates of programme uptake, even in the absence of extensive formal infrastructure. These patterns suggest that state capacity is multi-dimensional, encompassing not only the ability to deliver services but also the capacity to engage, adapt, and sustain institutional legitimacy.

At the same time, the interaction between institutional design and broader political dynamics cannot be ignored. Policy continuity, bureaucratic stability, and the degree of politicisation within administrative structures significantly influence governance outcomes. States that maintain relatively stable policy environments and professional bureaucratic cadres tend to exhibit higher levels of institutional performance. In contrast, frequent policy shifts, administrative fragmentation, and politicised decision-making

processes can undermine even well-designed institutional frameworks.

The procedural dimension of governance also plays a critical role in shaping citizen experience. The extent to which processes are transparent, predictable, and accessible determines not only efficiency but also trust in state institutions. Systems that minimise ambiguity and reduce opportunities for discretion tend to foster higher levels of compliance and satisfaction. Conversely, opaque or inconsistent procedures create space for arbitrariness, eroding both effectiveness and legitimacy. This underscores the importance of viewing procedures not as technical details but as central components of governance architecture.

Importantly, institutional and procedural design must be understood as dynamic rather than static. As states undergo processes of economic transformation, urbanisation, and technological change, governance systems must adapt accordingly. The expansion of digital platforms, for instance, offers new possibilities for both service delivery and citizen engagement, but also introduces challenges related to access, data governance, and institutional coordination. Similarly, the increasing complexity of policy domains requires greater integration across departments and levels of government, placing new demands on existing institutional frameworks.

In synthesising these insights, it becomes evident that the architecture of state capacity is shaped not by any single factor but by the interaction of institutional structures and procedural practices. Effective governance requires not only the presence of capable institutions but also the design of processes that enable those institutions to function coherently, transparently, and responsively. The experiences of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Mizoram illustrate that there is no singular model of success; rather, multiple pathways exist, each contingent upon the alignment between institutional design, procedural logic, and social context.

Ultimately, the challenge for public policy lies in recognising and operationalising this alignment. Institutional reforms that ignore procedural realities are unlikely to achieve desired outcomes, just as procedural innovations that are not grounded in robust institutional frameworks will remain limited in scope. The most effective

governance systems are those that integrate these dimensions, creating architectures that are both structurally sound and operationally responsive. It is within this integration that the foundations of sustained state capacity are established.

Temporal and Experiential Geography: The Rhythm of the State

If the state is encountered spatially through offices and institutions, it is internalised temporally through waiting, repetition, and anticipation. Governance does not operate as a continuous presence in citizens' lives. It appears in intervals, in moments structured by application cycles, verification delays, outreach visits, and final delivery. These intervals, and the degree to which they are predictable or uncertain, form the temporal architecture of the state. Over time, this architecture produces a patterned rhythm through which authority is experienced.

This rhythm varies significantly across Indian states, not because policies differ in their stated objectives, but because the time taken to access, process, and resolve these policies differs. The distinction between a responsive and an unresponsive state often lies less in formal entitlement and more in the temporal burden imposed on citizens. A system that delivers within a known timeframe generates confidence. A system that stretches, interrupts, or obscures time generates disengagement and reliance on informal mechanisms.

A useful point of departure is the contrast between Rajasthan's e-Mitra service network and Assam's legacy service delivery structures. Rajasthan's model is built around high-frequency, decentralised access points that allow citizens to complete transactions such as certificate applications, bill payments, and licence renewals within a single visit. Across the state, over 70,000 e-Mitra kiosks handle millions of transactions monthly, with many services processed in real time or within 1 to 3 days. The key temporal feature here is immediacy combined with certainty. Citizens approach the system with a clear expectation of completion within a short, predictable window.

In contrast, administrative access in several districts of Assam has historically been structured around office-centric and schedule-dependent interactions. Even where digital systems exist, the

initiation of services often depends on the availability of specific officials or designated days for processing. Field evidence indicates that services such as income or residence certificates may require multiple visits over 10 to 20 days, even when official timelines are shorter. The temporal gap here lies not only in processing delays but in the fragmentation of the interaction itself. Each stage introduces uncertainty, extending the experiential duration of the state.

A second instructive comparison emerges between Gujarat's SWAGAT grievance redressal system and Madhya Pradesh's earlier grievance mechanisms. Gujarat's model operates on a fixed, recurring monthly cycle, where grievances are reviewed at multiple administrative levels on predetermined dates. This cyclical structure creates temporal predictability. Citizens know when their cases will be taken up, and escalation follows a structured timeline. Resolution rates in such systems have consistently remained above 80 per cent within defined periods.

By contrast, in systems without fixed review cycles, grievance handling becomes asynchronous. Complaints enter the system continuously but are processed irregularly, depending on administrative capacity and prioritisation. In parts of Madhya Pradesh prior to systemic reforms, this resulted in large pendency pools, with resolution timelines extending beyond 45 to 60 days for a significant proportion of cases. The absence of a visible temporal structure made the system appear opaque, even when eventual resolution was possible.

Temporal variation is equally evident in public health outreach models. In Tamil Nadu's urban health system and Kerala's primary health networks, citizen interaction is frequent and routine, often structured through weekly clinics, immunisation schedules, and regular health worker visits. This high-frequency engagement produces a sense of continuous state presence. Health services are not accessed as exceptional events but as part of an ongoing temporal cycle.

In contrast, in parts of Jharkhand and Meghalaya, health service access in remote areas often depends on periodic camps or mobile units that operate on less predictable schedules. While these interventions expand reach, their irregularity introduces temporal

gaps. A missed camp can delay access by several weeks. For time-sensitive services such as maternal health or child immunisation, these gaps translate into significant experiential and developmental consequences.

A more granular illustration can be drawn from Punjab's service delivery timelines compared with Odisha's earlier administrative cycles in welfare processing. Punjab has achieved relatively high compliance with time-bound service guarantees in areas such as birth and death registration, where certificates are often issued within 2 to 5 days. This is supported by backend digitisation and clear workflow segmentation.

In contrast, welfare approvals in Odisha, particularly in earlier phases of programme expansion, involved layered verification processes that extended processing times to several weeks. Although subsequent reforms have improved timelines, the earlier pattern created an experiential norm in which citizens expected delays and planned accordingly. The persistence of such expectations highlights an important point: temporal reforms alter not only current experiences but also long-term perceptions.

A critical analytical distinction must be drawn here between temporal compression and temporal predictability. Some systems succeed in reducing the absolute time taken for service delivery. Others may not significantly reduce duration but succeed in making it predictable. From an experiential standpoint, predictability often matters as much as speed. A service that reliably takes seven days may be perceived as more efficient than one that unpredictably takes between three and fifteen days.

This distinction is evident in Haryana's property registration system, where fixed appointment slots and defined processing windows allow transactions to be completed within a single day in many cases. Even when delays occur, they are bounded within a narrow timeframe. In contrast, in states where registration depends on sequential approvals without fixed scheduling, total processing time may vary widely, creating uncertainty that extends beyond the nominal duration.

The temporal burden of governance is also shaped by interaction frequency. In Sikkim, where administrative units serve smaller populations, citizens often have more frequent but shorter interactions with local officials. This creates a rhythm of low-intensity, repeated engagement. In larger states such as West Bengal, high transaction volumes necessitate batching of services, leading to fewer but more time-intensive interactions. The experiential difference lies in whether the state is encountered regularly in manageable increments or sporadically in concentrated episodes.

These temporal patterns interact with social and economic structures in significant ways. For individuals in stable employment, longer waiting periods may be manageable. For those in precarious or daily wage work, each additional day of delay imposes a direct economic cost. Studies across multiple states suggest that low-income households may spend up to two to three times more cumulative hours accessing a single service compared to higher-income groups, due to repeated visits and lack of information. Time, in this sense, becomes a regressive cost.

Digital interventions have attempted to equalise these disparities, but their effectiveness varies. Delhi's online service delivery platforms have reduced physical visits for many services, with applications completed in under 20 minutes and status updates provided electronically. However, in states where digital literacy and connectivity are uneven, such as parts of Arunachal Pradesh, online systems may introduce new forms of delay. Upload failures, connectivity interruptions, and lack of assisted access points can extend the time required to complete even simple applications.

Another dimension of temporal geography lies in state visibility through repetition. In Tripura, regular administrative drives for updating beneficiary lists and delivering welfare services have created a pattern of recurring engagement. Citizens encounter the state at predictable intervals, reinforcing a sense of presence. In contrast, in regions where administrative drives are sporadic, the state appears episodic, emerging during crises or major programmes but receding in routine periods.

The cumulative effect of these temporal structures is the formation of what may be termed experiential memory. Citizens internalise

the typical duration, frequency, and reliability of state interactions. This memory shapes future behaviour. In high-trust systems, citizens approach the state directly, confident in predictable outcomes. In low-trust systems, they may delay engagement, seek intermediaries, or avoid formal channels altogether.

Quantitative indicators reinforce this divergence. States with well-integrated service platforms report time-bound delivery compliance rates exceeding 85 per cent across major services. Average transaction times for routine services often fall within 1 to 5 days. In contrast, states with fragmented temporal systems report compliance rates closer to 55 to 65 per cent, with average processing times extending to 15 to 30 days for comparable services. The gap is not merely administrative. It represents a fundamentally different temporal experience of governance.

It is important, however, to recognise that temporal efficiency is not inherently synonymous with administrative quality. Rapid processing without adequate verification can produce errors, exclusions, or disputes. The most effective systems are those that combine speed with reliability, ensuring that temporal compression does not undermine procedural integrity.

Ultimately, the temporal and experiential geography of the state reveals a critical dimension of governance that remains under-theorised in policy discourse. The state is not only encountered through institutions or territories. It is encountered through time. The minutes spent waiting, the days spent processing, and the cycles of repeated interaction collectively define the lived reality of governance.

Across Indian states, the variation in this temporal rhythm is profound. Some systems operate with high-frequency, predictable cycles that integrate seamlessly into citizens' lives. Others remain characterised by irregularity, delay, and uncertainty. These differences shape not only administrative outcomes but also the deeper relationship between citizens and the state.

In this sense, the legitimacy of governance is not constructed solely through policy design or institutional capacity. It is constructed through time.

Symbolic Geography: Performance, Visibility and Legitimacy

If institutional design determines how the state functions, and temporal rhythms determine how it is experienced, symbolic practices determine how it is *recognised*. The state does not rely solely on outcomes to sustain legitimacy; it also relies on visibility. Ceremonies, inspections, publicised outreach campaigns, and administrative performances constitute a symbolic geography through which authority is enacted and perceived. These practices are not merely ornamental. They serve to bridge the gap between formal governance structures and the lived realities of citizens, particularly in contexts where material delivery remains uneven.

Symbolic visibility becomes especially significant in settings where the state's presence is intermittent or contested. In such contexts, legitimacy is not secured through continuous administrative engagement but through episodic demonstrations of authority. These demonstrations take the form of highly visible, often ritualised events that signal state responsiveness, even when underlying systems remain structurally constrained. The geography of governance, therefore, extends beyond physical infrastructure and procedural timelines into a domain of performative affirmation.

At the core of this symbolic geography lies the distinction between routine governance and staged governance. Routine governance operates through everyday administrative processes, often unnoticed unless they fail. Staged governance, by contrast, is deliberately visible. It is designed to be seen, recorded, and remembered. Launch ceremonies for welfare schemes, public inspections by senior officials, and large-scale outreach drives exemplify this logic. These events create moments of concentrated state presence, compressing visibility into specific temporal and spatial nodes.

A clear illustration can be found in the proliferation of state-led welfare distribution events across multiple regions. In states such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, large-scale public events are organised to distribute benefits ranging from housing approvals to financial transfers. These events often involve the physical presence of political or administrative leaders, public announcements of beneficiary lists, and media coverage. While the actual administrative

processes underlying these benefits may have unfolded over weeks or months, the ceremonial distribution creates a singular, visible moment of delivery. For beneficiaries, the experience of receiving a benefit in such a setting reinforces the perception of direct state intervention.

However, the symbolic power of these events extends beyond immediate beneficiaries. For non-beneficiaries, the visibility of distribution serves as a signal of state activity. It communicates that the state is operational and capable of delivering outcomes. In this sense, symbolic practices generate what may be termed anticipatory legitimacy. Citizens who observe these performances may not have directly benefited, but they internalise the possibility of future inclusion.

A different but related form of symbolic geography emerges through inspection regimes. In states such as Gujarat and Karnataka, periodic administrative inspections are conducted with a degree of public visibility. Senior officials visit local offices, review records, and interact with citizens. These visits are often documented and disseminated through official channels. The act of inspection, even when routine, becomes a performative assertion of accountability. It signals that higher levels of the state are actively monitoring lower tiers.

The effectiveness of such inspections, however, depends less on their frequency and more on their visibility. Inspections conducted without public awareness have limited symbolic impact. By contrast, highly visible inspections create a perception of oversight that extends beyond the immediate event. Local officials, aware of the possibility of future inspections, may adjust their behaviour pre-emptively. Citizens, in turn, perceive the system as being subject to scrutiny.

Symbolic geography also operates through outreach campaigns, particularly in regions where administrative penetration is uneven. In states such as Odisha and Jharkhand, periodic drives for enrolment in welfare schemes or updating beneficiary databases are often accompanied by visible mobilisation efforts. Camps are set up in central locations, banners are displayed, and announcements are made through local networks. These campaigns transform otherwise routine administrative functions into public events.

The spatial concentration of these campaigns is significant. By bringing multiple services into a single location, the state creates a temporary hub of activity. Citizens who might otherwise have limited interaction with administrative systems encounter a dense representation of the state within a short timeframe. The intensity of this encounter contributes to a heightened sense of presence, even if it is not sustained over time.

An important dimension of symbolic geography is the role of narrative framing. Administrative actions are not only performed but also narrated. Government communications, media reports, and local discourse collectively shape how these actions are interpreted. A welfare distribution event may be framed as evidence of efficiency, inclusivity, or political commitment. An inspection may be framed as a crackdown on inefficiency or corruption. These narratives amplify the symbolic impact of the underlying actions, extending their reach beyond immediate participants.

The concept of political society provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. In many contexts, citizens do not engage with the state as rights-bearing individuals operating within a fully institutionalised framework. Instead, they interact with it through negotiated, situational relationships. Symbolic practices play a crucial role in structuring these interactions. They create spaces in which claims can be articulated, recognised, and, at times, accommodated.

For example, during large-scale outreach drives in states such as Bihar, citizens often use the occasion not only to access services but also to present grievances, seek clarifications, and establish contact with officials. The event becomes a site of negotiation rather than a purely administrative process. The symbolic visibility of the state, in this context, facilitates forms of engagement that extend beyond formal procedures.

Yet, symbolic geography is not uniformly beneficial. There is a risk that performative practices may substitute for substantive reform. Highly visible events can create an impression of effectiveness even when underlying systems remain inefficient. For instance, a well-publicised distribution ceremony may obscure delays in beneficiary

identification or verification. Similarly, frequent inspections may generate visibility without necessarily improving long-term administrative capacity.

This tension between performance and substance is particularly evident in states where administrative resources are limited. In such contexts, the allocation of time and effort to symbolic activities may come at the expense of routine functions. Officials may prioritise preparation for visits or events over day-to-day service delivery. The result is a cyclical pattern in which periods of high visibility are followed by periods of relative administrative stagnation.

A comparative perspective highlights how different states balance this tension. In some southern states, symbolic practices are more tightly integrated with routine administrative systems. Outreach campaigns are scheduled at regular intervals, inspections are linked to performance metrics, and public events are used to reinforce ongoing programmes. In these contexts, symbolic and substantive dimensions of governance tend to align more closely.

In contrast, in several northern and central states, symbolic practices are more episodic and less integrated. Events are often organised in response to political cycles or specific initiatives rather than as part of a continuous administrative framework. While these events may generate significant visibility, their impact on long-term governance outcomes is less consistent.

The scale of symbolic practices also varies. Large states with diverse populations often rely on high-profile, centralised events to project authority across wide areas. Smaller states, by contrast, may rely more on localised forms of visibility, such as community meetings or smaller outreach programmes. The effectiveness of each approach depends on the extent to which it resonates with local contexts.

Another important aspect of symbolic geography is its interaction with citizen expectations. In environments where symbolic practices are frequent and highly visible, citizens may come to associate state effectiveness with performance rather than process. This can create a preference for visible interventions over less visible but more systematic reforms. Conversely, in contexts where symbolic practices

are minimal, citizens may place greater emphasis on routine service delivery.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is the construction of a layered perception of the state. Citizens evaluate governance not only based on outcomes or efficiency but also on visibility and engagement. A state that is frequently seen, even if imperfect in delivery, may be perceived as more responsive than a state that is efficient but largely invisible.

Ultimately, symbolic geography underscores a critical dimension of governance that operates alongside institutional and temporal factors. The state must not only function effectively and deliver in a timely manner; it must also be seen to do so. Visibility, performance, and ritual are not peripheral to governance. They are central to the production of legitimacy, particularly in contexts where formal systems are unevenly embedded.

Across Indian states, the variation in symbolic practices reflects broader differences in political culture, administrative capacity, and citizen–state relationships. Some systems rely heavily on visible performances to sustain legitimacy. Others depend more on routine, less visible forms of governance. The most effective models are those that balance these dimensions, ensuring that symbolic visibility reinforces rather than substitutes for substantive delivery.

In this sense, the geography of governance is not only spatial, social, or temporal. It is also symbolic. It is through these visible enactments that the state becomes recognisable, relatable, and, ultimately, legitimate in the eyes of its citizens.

Towards a Multi-Dimensional Framework: The Spatially Differentiated Governance Matrix (SDGM)

If the Indian state is not experienced uniformly across its territory, then can governance continue to be designed as though it were? This paper has demonstrated that variation in administrative outcomes is not incidental but structural, emerging from the interaction of terrain, population density, institutional arrangements, temporal rhythms, and symbolic practices. The implication is difficult to ignore.

A uniform governance model applied to a spatially heterogeneous society will systematically produce uneven outcomes. The central question, therefore, is not how to eliminate variation, but how to govern through it.

India's diversity is not merely demographic or cultural; it is spatially embedded and administratively consequential. A tribal habitation in southern Odisha, a peri-urban settlement on the edge of Hyderabad, and a dense municipal ward in Ahmedabad do not simply differ in scale or resources. They operate under fundamentally different spatial constraints, social structures, and state-citizen interaction patterns. Yet, policy frameworks often assume a level of comparability that does not exist in practice. Can a single administrative template meaningfully accommodate such divergence? Or does governance require a framework that is explicitly designed for differentiation?

To address this, this section proposes the Spatially Differentiated Governance Matrix (SDGM), a solution-oriented framework that translates the five spatial dimensions into an integrated system of policy design and administrative execution. The SDGM is not an abstract model. It is a governance architecture that enables the state to classify, calibrate, and continuously adapt its interventions based on spatial realities.

At its core, the SDGM could rest on eight operational pillars.

1. Spatial Classification Regimes

The first step in governing diversity is to recognise it systematically. The SDGM proposes the creation of a national spatial classification grid that categorises administrative units not merely by geography, but by composite indicators including population density, settlement dispersion, socio-economic stratification, and connectivity.

Instead of relying on binary categories such as urban and rural, the framework introduces graded classifications such as high-density transactional zones, dispersed low-access regions, transitional peri-urban belts, and socially stratified clusters. Each category is associated with distinct administrative challenges and therefore requires differentiated governance strategies.

This raises an immediate question. Why does policy continue to rely on broad categories when finer distinctions are both measurable and administratively relevant? If classification shapes intervention, then does inadequate classification produce predictable policy failure?

2. Differential Administrative Design Protocols

Once classified, each spatial category must be governed through tailored administrative structures. High-density regions require increased administrative throughput capacity, including higher staff-to-population ratios, digital processing systems, and decentralised grievance nodes. In contrast, dispersed regions require mobility-oriented administration, with field-based officials, mobile service units, and decentralised decision-making authority.

Evidence from high-capacity governance systems suggests that administrative density often correlates more strongly with service complexity than with population size alone. In some contexts, local governments operate with staffing levels exceeding 10 to 15 officials per 10,000 residents in high-demand zones. By comparison, many Indian administrative units operate at significantly lower ratios even in high-pressure environments.

Should administrative staffing norms in India remain uniform, or should they be indexed to spatial demand? What would it mean to institutionalise flexibility in bureaucratic design?

3. Dynamic Resource Allocation Models

Fiscal transfers and resource allocation must move beyond static formulas. The SDGM proposes dynamic allocation models that incorporate spatial indicators such as density stress, accessibility deficits, and social vulnerability.

In practice, this would involve periodic recalibration of resource flows based on real-time data. Regions experiencing rapid urbanisation, migration inflows, or environmental stress would receive adaptive resource adjustments rather than waiting for periodic planning cycles.

If spatial conditions change faster than fiscal systems can respond, can governance ever be truly responsive? Or does rigidity in allocation systems become a structural constraint on state capacity?

4. Temporal Standardisation with Contextual Flexibility

Time is an underappreciated dimension of governance. Citizens experience the state not only through outcomes but through waiting periods, frequency of engagement, and predictability of response. The SDGM introduces the concept of temporal baselines combined with spatial flexibility.

This means that while minimum service standards are maintained across all regions, the mode of delivery adapts to context. In remote areas, shorter but more frequent interactions may be prioritised. In urban settings, efficiency and speed may take precedence.

Studies of administrative interaction suggest that predictability often matters more than speed in shaping trust. If this is the case, should governance prioritise temporal reliability over absolute efficiency? And how might this reshape performance metrics across departments?

5. Embedded Institutional Layering

Effective governance requires not only decentralisation but structured layering of institutions. The SDGM proposes clearly differentiated roles across administrative levels, aligned with spatial function rather than formal hierarchy.

Local bodies in high-density zones may focus on regulatory enforcement and service delivery optimisation. In dispersed regions, local institutions may prioritise outreach and facilitation. Intermediate administrative levels serve as coordination hubs, ensuring coherence across layers.

This approach draws from governance systems where local autonomy is balanced by strong coordination mechanisms, enabling both flexibility and consistency. The question, however, remains. Can India's existing institutional architecture accommodate such functional differentiation, or does it require structural redesign?

6. Symbolic-Administrative Integration

The visibility of the state is not incidental. It is integral to legitimacy. The SDGM incorporates symbolic practices as a formal component of governance, linking them to administrative outcomes.

Regular public interfaces, community engagement platforms, and visible administrative presence are not treated as peripheral activities but as core governance functions. However, these must be calibrated to avoid performative excess.

When does visibility enhance legitimacy, and when does it become a substitute for substantive governance? Can symbolic practices be measured and evaluated in ways that meaningfully reflect their impact?

7. Continuous Spatial Feedback Systems

Governance must be iterative. The SDGM proposes the integration of continuous feedback loops that capture spatial variation in real time. This includes disaggregated data collection, localised performance metrics, and citizen feedback mechanisms.

Such systems enable mid-course corrections, reducing the lag between policy design and observed outcomes. In several high-performing administrative systems, continuous feedback has been central to adaptive governance.

If feedback remains aggregated and delayed, can policy ever be truly evidence-based? Or does the absence of spatial granularity fundamentally limit administrative learning?

8. State Spatial Strategy Units (SSSUs)

To operationalise the framework, the SDGM proposes the creation of State Spatial Strategy Units. These are specialised bodies within state governments tasked with integrating data, advising on policy calibration, and monitoring spatial outcomes.

Unlike traditional planning bodies, these units function as adaptive systems, continuously aligning governance strategies with spatial realities. They operate at the intersection of data analytics, administrative practice, and policy design.

The critical question is institutional. Would such units enhance coherence or create additional bureaucratic complexity? More importantly, can they be designed to remain flexible and responsive rather than becoming another layer of procedural inertia?

Taken together, these eight pillars transform the idea of spatial variation from a constraint into a governing principle. The SDGM does not seek uniformity; it seeks alignment. It recognises that India's diversity is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be governed.

This has significant implications for federalism. Rather than viewing federalism solely as a vertical distribution of power, the framework reinterprets it as a horizontally differentiated system of governance across spatial contexts. The emphasis shifts from uniform policy application to context-sensitive policy calibration.

Yet, this raises a deeper normative question. Should citizens across different regions expect identical forms of state engagement, or should equity be understood in terms of contextually appropriate governance? If outcomes are equal but experiences differ, has the state succeeded or failed?

The framework also challenges conventional metrics of state capacity. Aggregate indicators obscure spatial disparities, while uniform benchmarks fail to capture differentiated realities. A multi-dimensional approach requires new metrics that reflect accessibility, reliability, and legitimacy alongside efficiency.

Ultimately, the Spatially Differentiated Governance Matrix is not a closed model. It is a proposition that invites further refinement and empirical testing. Its value lies not only in its operational components but in the shift in perspective it demands.

If governance is always mediated through space, then can there ever be a universal model of the state? Or must the future of public policy lie in frameworks that are inherently adaptive, context-sensitive, and spatially aware?

And if that is the case, is the challenge before the Indian state one of capacity, or one of imagination?

Conclusion: Diversity, Discretion, and India's Lived Federalism

The analysis undertaken in this paper has sought to move beyond the conventional understanding of governance variation as an incidental or transitional feature of development. Instead, it has argued that spatial differentiation is intrinsic to the functioning of the Indian state. Federalism, in this context, is not merely a constitutional arrangement or a formal division of powers. It is lived, negotiated, and continuously reshaped through the interplay of institutions, actors, and experiences across space.

What does it mean, then, for a state to exist in multiple forms while retaining a coherent constitutional identity? How does one reconcile the persistence of variation with the normative aspiration of equal citizenship? And perhaps more importantly, should such variation be viewed as a limitation to be corrected, or as a structural feature to be governed more effectively?

Across India, the state does not appear as a uniform presence. In some regions, it is dense, predictable, and institutionally embedded, characterised by routinised interactions and relatively stable administrative practices. In others, it is thinner, more episodic, and mediated through layers of discretion and negotiation. These differences are not reducible to economic indicators alone. They reflect deeper divergences in administrative cultures, infrastructural investments, and the behavioural orientations of governance actors.

Even where institutional frameworks appear similar, outcomes often diverge significantly. This points to the centrality of bureaucratic will as a determining factor in governance. Policies are not self-executing. They are interpreted, prioritised, and sustained through administrative action. Why do some districts consistently outperform others under identical policy regimes? How does leadership, motivation, and local administrative culture reshape implementation trajectories? And to what extent can discretion be harnessed as a productive force rather than treated solely as a source of distortion?

These questions reveal that federalism in India operates not only across territory, but through behaviour, interpretation, and practice. It is as much about how governance is enacted as it is about where

it is located. This behavioural dimension is further complicated by variations in knowledge systems. The capacity of the state to generate, interpret, and utilise data differs across regions, shaping both the design and responsiveness of policy interventions. Can governance be equalised if the informational foundations on which it rests remain uneven? And what would it require to build a system where knowledge itself becomes more evenly distributed?

Material conditions add yet another layer to this complexity. Differences in infrastructure, connectivity, and administrative reach fundamentally shape the frequency and quality of citizen-state interactions. In regions with higher levels of digital penetration and physical accessibility, governance becomes more immediate and responsive. Elsewhere, it remains distant and intermittent. These disparities are not merely logistical. They reshape the very experience of the state, influencing how citizens perceive its legitimacy and reliability.

This experiential dimension is crucial. Governance is not only about outcomes, but about how those outcomes are encountered. Citizens develop expectations, trust, and interpretive frameworks based on repeated interactions. Where processes are transparent and predictable, the state is seen as credible. Where they are uncertain, reliance on intermediaries increases, and institutional trust may weaken. Can a system committed to equal citizenship afford such divergence in lived experience? Or must the focus shift towards harmonising not only outputs, but the quality of interaction itself?

It is at this juncture that the question of uniformity enters the debate. Should governance strive towards standardisation in order to ensure fairness? Or does such standardisation risk overlooking the contextual realities that shape implementation? In a country marked by profound social, cultural, and administrative diversity, can a single framework adequately capture the complexity of ground-level conditions? These questions do not lend themselves to binary answers, but they underline the need for a more nuanced approach to policy design.

These tensions, however, do not point to a failure of the Indian model, but to its inherent complexity. A system as vast and diverse

as India's cannot be governed through rigid uniformity without sacrificing responsiveness, nor through unstructured variation without risking inequality. The strength of Indian federalism has lain precisely in its ability to navigate this balance, allowing space for adaptation while maintaining a shared constitutional and administrative core.

What emerges, then, is not a system in need of fundamental rethinking, but one that requires more deliberate calibration. The task ahead is to deepen the institutional capacity of weaker regions, to structure discretion without eliminating it, and to ensure that diversity operates as a source of innovation rather than divergence in outcomes. How can administrative systems be designed to support flexibility while maintaining accountability? What forms of coordination can enable learning across regions without imposing uniformity? And how might policy frameworks better reflect the realities of spatial variation rather than abstracting away from them?

In this sense, India's experience offers a distinct model of federalism, one that is not defined by symmetry, but by managed difference. Its durability has depended on the recognition that diversity is not an obstacle to governance, but one of its organising principles. The continued evolution of this model will rest on how effectively the state can align its administrative practices, infrastructural investments, and institutional cultures with this foundational reality.

The Indian state, therefore, is best understood not as a fixed structure, but as an adaptive system, continuously shaped by the interplay of diversity and discretion across space. Its coherence does not arise from sameness, but from the capacity to sustain difference within a common framework of purpose. This capacity, while often understated, has been one of the defining strengths of India's governance trajectory.

The challenge, and indeed the opportunity, lies in refining this balance further, so that the experience of governance, regardless of location, reflects not only the diversity of the country, but also the consistency of its commitment to equitable citizenship. Can India continue to deepen this balance in ways that preserve flexibility while strengthening fairness? Can it build institutions that recognise difference without reproducing disparity? And can it do so while

retaining the dynamism that has allowed its federal system to evolve over time?

If the evidence of the past is any indication, the answer lies not in imposing uniform solutions, but in strengthening the very capacities that allow diversity and discretion to coexist productively. It is in this calibrated interplay that the resilience of the Indian state has been forged, and it is here that its future potential continues to reside.

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Labour Force Participation and Sectoral Transitions

Opportunities for India's Progressive Growth

Introduction

Labour employment is a crucial aspect of economic development and social stability. It encompasses job creation, workforce participation, working conditions, and wages. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, "Decent Work and Economic Growth," focuses on promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. This article explores the link between labour employment and SDG 8, highlighting key statistics, trends, and challenges. SDG 8 aims to achieve the following:

- Sustain per capita economic growth, particularly in least developed countries.
- Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification and innovation.
- Promote policies supporting productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).
- Improve global resource efficiency in consumption and production.
- Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men.
- End forced labour, human trafficking, and child labour.
- Protect labour rights and promote safe working environments.
- Develop policies for sustainable tourism, financial inclusion, and improved global economic integration.

United Nations' Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, to which India is also a signatory, includes Goal number 8 "decent work and economic growth" highlighting its importance in economic growth and poverty reduction. In this context, globally, 0.36 percentage point increase in labour force participation rate (LFPR) over the period of five years from 2019 to 2023¹ also observed a corresponding increase of 0.4 percentage points in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate.² This change was more pronounced in India with 4.10 percentage points increase in LFPR and correspondingly, 3.9 percentage points increase in GDP during these years.

As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)2025, India's Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for persons aged 15 years and above is 54.2%, translating to approximately 640 million individuals in the labour force out of an estimated 1.18 billion working-age population. Rural LFPR stood at 56.1% (roughly 440 million), while urban LFPR was 50.4% (about 200 million).³ India's total population is estimated at 1.464 billion in mid-2025.⁴ At the global level, the population is around 8.1 billion, with global LFPR ranging from 60% to 70%, equating to nearly 5 billion people in the labour force. These figures underline India's strong demographic base and the growing opportunity to expand inclusive and productive employment across both rural and urban sectors.

Whereas, the labour force is a significant contributor to the global economy, labour rights with decent working conditions are also integral to the social and economic development of an individual. While SDG 8 emphasises the term 'decent work' for progressive

¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.ZS>

² https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEO_WORLD

³ <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2025/may/doc2025515555901.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/india-population/>

economic growth, International Labour Organization (ILO) describes ‘decent work’ as the one with fair income, workplace security, social protection, freedom of expression of concerns and gender equality.⁵

For realizing the concept of ‘decent work’ into practice, existence and implementation of labour laws are very important. The significant catalyst for creation of labour laws was the Industrial Revolution resulting in unfair working conditions, including long hours, low wages, child labour, and unsafe workplaces.⁶ This was also a significant reason for establishment of ILO in 1919 and subsequent framing of ‘The Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work of International Labour Organisation’ (1998, amended in year 2022) guided by five principles vital for social and economic lives of people namely, (i) freedom of association and right to collective bargaining, (ii) elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, (iii) abolition of child labour, (iv) elimination of discrimination at workplace and (v) safe and healthy working environment.⁷

Another important aspect of decent work is gender equality which is crucial for economic growth and sustainable development. United Nations has highlighted that by the year 2025, global annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) could increase by 26%, equivalent to US\$28 trillion, if women assumed roles in labour markets identical to men.⁸ However, presently, women’s share in global employment market is 39.7 percent and only 27.5 percent in management level positions (Year 2022).⁹ In India, the Periodic Labour Force Survey report (2022-23) shows that for every 100 males, there are only around 19 females working at senior level positions in an organization.¹⁰

⁵ <https://www.ilo.org/topics/decent-work>

⁶ <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/industrialization-labor-and-life/>

⁷ <https://www.ilo.org/ilo-declaration-fundamental-principles-and-rights-work>

⁸ <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/changingworldofwork/en/index.html>

⁹ <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/women/>

¹⁰ https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/press_release/Press_note_AR_PLFS_2021_22_24022023.pdf

According to the ILO, job quality encompasses the overall conditions of employment that affect a worker's well-being, security, and satisfaction. It goes beyond wages to include fair pay, safe conditions, job stability, skill growth, and access to rights and protections. Quality jobs promote not only productivity but also health, dignity, and future security, and are measured through both objective indicators and subjective perceptions, making them vital for inclusive and sustainable employment.¹¹

Beyond the LFPR and quality of jobs, another concerning aspect is gender pay disparity. As per United Nations (UN) Women data, globally, women only make around 77 cents for each dollar men earn.¹² This figure is more concerning in India where for every 100 rupees, women earn only 18 rupees (PLFS 2022-23). This is a critical issue because as per India Employment Report (2024) published by ILO, main reason for choice of employment for 50.7 percent women in India is good salary, which is mostly a universal aspect.

Also, the labour force is engaged in various economic sectors such as primary sector (e.g., agriculture, fishing, mining), secondary sector (e.g., manufacturing, construction), and tertiary sector (e.g., education, Information Technology [IT], banking). Analysis of its evolution over time is critically important to come out with practicable policy recommendations to increase LFPR in a realistic timeframe.

Using Kondratiev's long-wave framework, the paper places India at the threshold of a Sixth technological wave driven by artificial intelligence, clean energy, biotechnology, space systems and digital public infrastructure. While earlier waves moved labour from

¹¹ https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_emp/%40emp_ent/%40ifp_seed/documents/publication/wcms_905553.pdf

¹² <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/changingworldofwork/en/index.html>

artisans to factories and then into manufacturing and IT-enabled activities, the emerging transition requires a deliberate shift of India's workforce from low-productivity agriculture into technology-enabled and knowledge-intensive service employment. The article proposes digital transformation as the main conduit for this change and argues that digitalisation must become a labour-policy buzzword, embedded in public discourse and institutionalised in university curricula and skilling systems, so that India's demographic advantage converts into a future-ready, service-oriented and globally competitive workforce.

➤ **Labour Force Participation: Economic Significance and Global Perspective along with insights from India**

Labour Force Participation Rate has a direct and significant impact on a country's GDP by influencing the size of the workforce, productivity, income levels, and overall economic activity. A higher LFPR can lead to increased production of goods and services, directly boosting GDP. *So also, lower LFPR can have adverse effects. For example, Japan's declining and ageing population and reduced LFPR over the years have adversely impacted its economic performance. Also, many European countries are confronting this issue.* Table 1 and figure1 shows the probable symbiotic relationship between Labour Force Participation Rate and Gross Domestic Product growth rate.

Table 1: Relationship between Labour Force Participation Rate and Gross Domestic Product growth rate

Country Name	Gross Domestic Product growth rate*				Labour Force Participation Rate**		
	Year 2000 (USD trillion)	Year 2023 (USD trillion)	Percentage change	Interpretation	Year 2000	Year 2023	Percent-age change
China	1.22	18.27	1393.34%	Very High Growth: rapidly growing economies, driven by industrialization, services boom (India), manufacturing dominance (China, Bangladesh), and strategic development aid /utilization (Bhutan).	76.82	66.38	-13.61
							China has issue of aging population wherein share of population aged 65+ years of age people doubled from ~7.0 % in 2000 to 14.9 % by end-2022 ¹³ and working-age population (16–59) shrank from 61.3 % (2023) to 60.9 % (2024) ¹⁴

¹³ <https://repository.unescap.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/22b21944-d6ac-45cb-8353-39fc71d41222/content>

¹⁴ https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/?utm_source

Bangla- desh	0.05	0.44	719.61%	58.22	58.16	-0.10	High GDP growth with nearly stable LFPR – reflects inclusive growth where workforce participation was largely retained
India	0.47	3.64	676.90%	57.20	55.34	-3.25	Despite a 676.9% GDP growth, LFPR declined – implying growth without proportionate job creation (jobless growth). Female LFPR rose modestly from 27.8 % to 31.7 % in 2023–24 (PLFS), yet only 15.9 % hold salaried or contracted jobs—implying most are in low-quality roles with underemployment concerns.

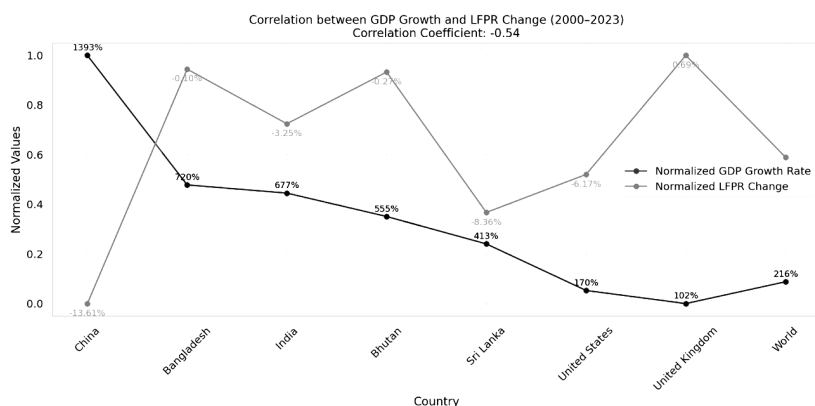
Bhutan	0.0005	0.003	555.28%		69.71	69.52	-0.27	Remarkably stable due to agrarian workforce, rural employment, modest urban transition, targeted development aid (India, UN, World Bank) in education, infrastructure, and healthcare.
Sri Lanka	0.02	0.08	412.66%	Lowest among growing economies: Though seemingly high, it is lowest among fast-growing economies, possibly due to economic instability, conflict, debt crises, and fiscal mismanagement.	55.57	50.93	-8.36	Youth inactivity rising: youth (under 25) labour force participation declined faster than any other cohort over past decade ¹⁵ Persistent informality, stagnant women's participation, fragile employment quality ¹⁶

¹⁵ https://iesc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/01.-YouLead-Market-Assessment-2017.pdf?utm_source

¹⁶ https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%2540asia/%2540ro-bangkok/%2540ilo-colombo/documents/publication/wcms_856157.pdf?utm_source

United States	10.25	27.72	170.40%	Moderate Growth: Mature economies have slower relative growth due to already high base GDP. Global GDP growth also reflects emerging markets' rise.	65.93	61.86	-6.17	In US, 65+ years of age group grew by 3.1 % from 2023 to 2024, while under-18 population fell by 0.2 % ¹⁷
United Kingdom	1.67	3.37	102.35%		61.91	62.34	+0.69	UK defies the trend, possibly due to high female participation and stability, later retirement ages, and policies encouraging part-time/flexible work.

¹⁷ https://www.investopedia.com/baby-boomers-are-leaving-a-gap-in-the-american-workforce-and-young-adults-are-unlikely-to-fill-it-11764919?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Figure:1

GDP: Bar Graph – LFPR: Line Graph

Source URLs: * <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD> - **<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.ZS>

The negative correlation coefficient of -0.54 suggests a moderate inverse relationship, meaning that higher economic growth is not translating into improved labour participation.

Key interpretations:

1. **Decoupling of GDP and LFPR:** High GDP growth no longer guarantees increased labour force engagement, especially with automation, AI, and higher labour productivity.
2. **Demographic Impact:** Aging populations (e.g., China, US) and youth in education (India) suppress LFPR despite economic growth.
3. **Policies for employment generation:** Nations with falling LFPR despite growth (e.g., India, Sri Lanka) need to focus on employment-intensive growth, skilling, and labour market reforms.
4. **Structural Shifts:** Countries are moving from agriculture/manual labour to services and digital economies, which require fewer but more skilled workers.

➤ **Employment and Labour in India**

India's labour market trends reflect a close interaction between labour force participation, unemployment, and structural shifts in employment. Insights from the India Employment Report 2024 and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2025) indicate stability, but with persistent underutilization of labour. The overall LFPR has fallen from 60 percent in 2000 to 55 percent in 2025. Male participation has held steady at around 77 percent, while female participation, after dropping to 24 percent in 2019, has shown some recovery to 33 percent, though it remains substantially lower. Employment generation has lagged, with the Worker Population Ratio stagnating at 52 percent. Unemployment has eased from its 2019 peak of 6 percent but remains high at 5 percent. Rural areas fare slightly better, with unemployment at 5 percent compared to 7 percent in urban centres, where job creation remains weak. The challenge is more pronounced among the young, with youth unemployment at 15 percent—nearly three times the national average—and among graduates, where 14 percent remain jobless due to skill mismatches. Structural shifts add to these pressures: agriculture continues to employ the largest share of the workforce at 46 percent, industry has stagnated at 24 percent, and services, after earlier gains, have moderated to 31 percent. Consequently, self-employment accounts for 55 percent of workers, regular wage jobs remain limited to 23 percent, and casual labour has declined, leaving the workforce more engaged but not significantly more securely employed.

These interlinked dynamics underscore the urgency of accelerating structural transformation towards industry and services to harness India's demographic potential. Data and decadal trend on key indicators of labour and employment in India is presented in table 2.

Table 2: Data and decadal trend on key indicators of labour and employment in India

Sl.No.	Indicator	2000	2012	2019	2022	PLFS (Apr–Jun 2025, CWS)	Interpretation
1	Overall LFPR (15+)	60%	55%	54%	55%	55%	Labour force participation has stabilised, though a significant share of the population remains outside the workforce.
2	Male LFPR (15+)	80%	77%	75%	76%	77%	Male participation remains steady, indicating limited withdrawal of men from the labour market.
3	Female LFPR (15+)	40%	32%	24%	25%	33%	Female participation shows signs of recovery after prolonged decline, yet remains substantially lower than male levels.
4	Rural LFPR (15+)	63%	59%	57%	58%	57%	Participation in rural areas continues to be higher than in urban regions.
5	Urban LFPR (15+)	54%	49%	46%	47%	51%	Urban participation has improved modestly but still lags behind rural areas.
6	Overall WPR (15+)	58%	53%	52%	53%	52%	Employment rates remain stable, though a large portion of work is of low quality or irregular nature.
7	Overall Unemployment Rate (15+)	2%	3%	6%	5%	5%	Unemployment has moderated compared to recent peaks but remains above earlier levels.
8	Rural Unemployment Rate (15+)	2%	2%	5%	5%	5%	Rural areas are better able to absorb labour, resulting in comparatively lower unemployment.
9	Urban Unemployment Rate (15+)	3%	4%	8%	6%	7%	Urban unemployment is consistently higher, reflecting slower job creation in cities.

10	Youth Unemployment (15–29 yrs)	NA	NA	17%	17%	15%	Youth continue to face high unemployment, though conditions have slightly improved.
11	Graduate Unemployment (15+)	NA	NA	15%	14%	NA	Educated individuals face persistent difficulty in securing suitable employment, highlighting skills–jobs mismatch.
12	Agriculture Employment Share	60%	49%	43%	46%	NA	A large workforce remains engaged in agriculture, underscoring the need for expansion of non-farm opportunities.
13	Industry Employment Share	16%	24%	26%	24%	NA	Industrial employment has stagnated, limiting diversification of job opportunities.
14	Services Employment Share	24%	26%	32%	31%	NA	Growth in services employment has slowed after earlier expansion.
15	Self-Employment (% of workforce)	52%	50%	52%	55%	NA	A majority of workers remain dependent on self-employment, often in the absence of formal jobs.
16	Regular Wage/ Salaried Workers (% of workforce)	18%	21%	24%	23%	NA	The share of salaried workers has risen gradually but then decreased possibly due to recovery from the Covid period. Informal sector needs to still recover more than the formal sector. Further, salary needs to correspond to rise in profit of an organization.
17	Casual Labour (% of workforce)	30%	29%	24%	22%	NA	Casual labour has declined, indicating a gradual reduction in insecure forms of work.

Source: Data for years 2000 to 2022 from India Employment Report 2024. Data for year 2025 from Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Quarterly Bulletin for April – June 2025

Now, quantity of LFPR in itself is not a good metric of economic performance, the quality of employment also needs investigation. Key statistics on Labour Force Participation as observed through PLFS report 2023-24 have been categorized in table 3.

Table 3: Key statistics as observed through PLFS report 2023-24

Sl.No.	Indicator		Sub-indicator	Year 2022-23	Year 2023-24	Change
1	Types of job	(i)	Increased self-employment	57.3%	58.4%	+1.1 % points
		(ii)	Increased salaried/regular wage jobs	20.9%	21.7% ● No job contract: 58% ● No paid leave: 47.3% ● No social security benefit: 53.4 %	+0.8 % points
		(iii)	Decreased casual labour	21.8%	19.8%	-2 % points
2	Monthly Earnings (April- June 2024)	(i)	Earnings from self-employment (average gross earnings over the last 30 days, not adjusted for inflation)	Rs. 13,347	Rs. 13,900	+ Rs.553
		(ii)	Regular monthly of wage/ salaried employee	Rs. 20,039	21,103 (around 35% more than self-employed)	+Rs.1064

		(iii)	Per day earning by casual labour	Rs. 403	Rs. 433	+Rs.30
3	Unemployment rate	(i)	Age > 15 years	3.2%	3.2%	0 % points
		(ii)	Age 15-29 years (Youth)	10%	10.2%	+0.2% points
4	Sectors of jobs	(i)	Agriculture	45.8%	46.1% (Major sector of earning out of all)	+0.3% points
		(ii)	Mining & quarrying	0.3%	0.2%	-0.1% points
		(iii)	Manufacturing	11.4%	11.4%	No change
		(iv)	Electricity, water, etc.	0.5%	0.5%	No change
		(v)	Construction	13.0%	12.0%	-1% points
		(vi)	Trade, hotel & restaurant	12.1%	12.2%	+0.1% points
		(vii)	Transport, storage & Communications	5.4%	5.6%	+0.2% points
		(viii)	Other services	11.4%	11.9%	+0.5% points

Source: PLFS report 2023-24 (pg.42,46)

Female Labour Force Participation and Youth Employment: Global vs India

Women make up almost half of any country’s population, yet their participation in the labour market is unequal. Globally, the female-to-male LFPR ratio reached 69.1% in 2023 (up 17.9 points since 1990). India lags behind with 42.6%, improving by only 12.2 points in the same period. Most Indian women are in self-employment (73.5%) or casual work (18.7%), with only 7.8% in salaried jobs, showing weak job quality.

Table 4: Female Labour Force Participation (1990–2023)

Country	LFPR Female 1990 (%)	Female-to-Male LFPR Ratio 2023 (%)	Change (Points)
Bhutan	58.7	87.4	+28.7
China	73.0	84.0	+11.0
United States	56.5	83.9	+27.4
Bangladesh	26.6	46.2	+19.6
Sri Lanka	45.1	44.6	−0.5
India	30.4	42.6	+12.2
World Avg.	51.2	69.1	+17.9

Youth unemployment is another major concern. Globally, 73 million young people (13.6%) were unemployed in 2024. India’s rate is much higher at 23%, nearly triple that of Germany (6.5%) or Japan (4.5%). This reflects both a shortage of decent jobs and skill mismatches.

Table 5: Youth Unemployment (2023)

Country	Youth Unemployment (%)
India	23.0
United States	9.1
China	11.0
Germany	6.5
Brazil	21.2
South Africa	55.0
Bangladesh	14.8
Japan	4.5

Gender disparities also persist in wages and unpaid household

work. On average, Indian women earn 23–25% less than men in salaried jobs, and their unpaid household work equals 21–26% of GDP, much higher than men’s share. This “shadow economy” underscores women’s hidden contribution to national growth.

Table 6: Gender Pay Gap & Unpaid Work (India)

Indicator (2022–23)	Women	Men
Avg. monthly salary (₹)	15,398	20,033
Labour income share (₹ per 100)	18	82
Agriculture daily wage (₹)	294	383
Managerial salary (₹ per 100)	52	100
Unpaid household work (% of GDP, OCM)	14.5%	11.9%
Unpaid household work (% of GDP, RCM)	21.5%	15.1%

In brief, India has seen modest gains in female LFPR, but most women remain in low-quality jobs with a persistent pay gap. Coupled with high youth unemployment, this points to an urgent need for better skilling, fair wages, and greater inclusion of women and youth in formal, secure jobs.

Given the evolving trends in labour force participation globally and in India, it becomes essential to examine where this labour is predominantly engaged, particularly in the context of developing economies. A significant proportion of the workforce, especially in rural and low-income regions, remains concentrated in the primary sector, with agriculture being the most dominant component. Understanding the structure, challenges, and economic contribution of the primary sector is thus crucial to interpreting employment patterns, productivity levels, and developmental trajectories. This contextual shift allows for a deeper exploration of the sectoral foundations of labour engagement, and why structural transformation—from agriculture to industry and services—remains a policy imperative.

➤ **Primary Sector of the Economy**

The primary sector of the economy refers to activities that involve the direct extraction or use of natural resources, and it forms the foundation of economic development in most countries. This sector

includes agriculture, fishing, forestry, and mining, with agriculture being the most prominent component, especially in developing nations like India. Agriculture encompasses crop cultivation, livestock rearing, horticulture, and fisheries, and plays a crucial role in ensuring food security, providing raw materials, and employing a significant portion of the population. Despite its declining share in GDP in many economies, it remains vital for livelihoods and rural development.

Global Perspective on Primary Sector (Mainly Agriculture) along with insights from India

Agriculture has historically served as the backbone of economies, especially in developing nations, by providing livelihood, food security, and employment. However, as countries develop economically, the proportion of people employed in agriculture typically declines due to structural transformation, mechanization, and growth in manufacturing and services sectors. Agriculture, historically the backbone of most economies, has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past two decades. While the share of population engaged in agriculture has declined across the world, its contribution to GDP has declined at a slower pace—leading to persistent structural imbalances in developing countries.

According to the ILO:

- Approximately 1 billion people work in agriculture, plantations, and other rural sectors globally, representing about 28% of the world's employed population.¹⁸
- In many low-income and developing countries, agriculture accounts for nearly 25–30% of all employment, while in sub-Saharan Africa it can exceed 50% or more.

A comparative data on trend in agricultural employment and share of agriculture in GDP for few countries and globally from the years 2000 to 2023, focusing on the disparity between employment in agriculture and its share in GDP, is presented in the table 7.

¹⁸ <https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/industries-and-sectors/agriculture-plantations-other-rural-sectors>

Table 7: Trend in agricultural employment and share of agriculture in country's GDP

Table 7(a): Employment in Agriculture (% of Total Employment)

Country	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2022	2023
China	49.94	44.80	36.70	28.30	23.60	23.39	22.76	22.33
Bhutan	69.53	65.05	57.19	57.99	49.92	49.86	43.96	43.81
Bangladesh	60.86	48.08	47.31	43.54	37.97	37.31	35.66	35.27
India	59.64	55.02	51.06	44.21	44.68	44.08	42.86	43.51
World	39.67	36.46	32.66	28.42	26.87	26.61	26.18	26.08
Sri Lanka	38.02	32.94	30.94	28.66	27.12	27.28	26.49	26.26
United States	2.26	1.69	1.74	1.78	1.75	1.66	1.62	1.57
United Kingdom	1.53	1.38	1.22	1.14	1.04	1.02	1.00	0.99

Table 7(b): Share of GDP from Agriculture (%)

Country	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2022	2023
China	14.68	11.64	9.33	8.39	7.70	7.24	7.32	7.12
Bhutan	21.62	18.03	12.41	12.00	15.70	15.79	14.67	17.32*
Bangladesh	22.72	18.57	17.00	14.78	12.00	11.63	11.22	11.00
India	21.61	17.62	17.03	16.17	18.67	17.37	16.64	16.00
World	3.35	3.19	3.82	4.20	4.33	4.26	4.25	4.10
Sri Lanka	19.93	11.82	9.05	8.25	8.25	8.79	8.50	8.28
United States	1.15	1.15	1.03	1.03	0.94	0.94	0.8**	0.8**
United Kingdom	0.82	0.54	0.59	0.63	0.67	0.71	0.66	0.58

Sources for tables 7(a) and (b):

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS>

<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/agriculture-share-gdp>

(*) <https://www.reportlinker.com/dataset/d973c649c316c080727961129b05765eac0ba2d3>

(**) <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/chart-detail?chartId=58270>

From the data in table 7, it is seen that historically, India's share has been high in agricultural employment, however, the trend of this share still continues to be on higher side with around 44 percent labour force engaged in agricultural employment contributing only 16 to the national GDP. Comparably, China, which is the second largest economy in the world, reduced its employment share in agriculture sector by more than half over the past 20-25 years and the figure stands at around 22 percent.

Distribution of Employment Structure across three sectors in India over past decade

Over two decades (2000 to 2022), the share of agriculture in employment has steadily declined (from 60% in 2000 to ~45% in 2022), while industry and services have gained importance. However, the recent period (2019–2022) shows a reverse trend, with agriculture's share rising again due to distress-driven return to farms, while industry and services saw a fall in their employment shares. While agriculture still employs nearly 46% of the workforce in 2022, its contribution to GDP is far smaller compared to industry and services. This imbalance persists because low-educated workers remain trapped in agriculture, where productivity and wages are low. The Economic Survey (2024) cautions that India's dependence on agriculture for employment remains disproportionately high for its level of economic development. For meaningful structural transformation, the economy needs to generate at least 7.85 million non-farm jobs annually by 2030 to absorb the expanding labour force and simultaneously reduce over-dependence on agriculture. To meet this goal, approximately 3.5 million people per year must shift out of agriculture into other sectors. However, the current trends indicate a reverse movement, signalling either stagnation or informal reabsorption due to lack of viable alternatives. A relationship between Employment, GDP, Productivity for the past 24 years is presented in table 8.

Table 8: India's Employment, GDP, Productivity (2000–2024)

Sector	Em- p- loy- ment Share (2000)	Em- p- loy- ment Share (2012)	Em- p- loy- ment Share (2019)	Em- p- loy- ment Share (2022)	Em- p- loy- ment Share (2024)	GDP Share (2024)	Labour Productiv- ity (₹ '000/ worker, 2015–19)	Estimated GDP per Worker (₹)	Em- p- loy- ment Growth Trend	Key Insight
Agricul- ture	60.0%	49.0%	42.5%	45.5%	46%	15%	₹89	₹89,000	Declined (2005– 15), rising again	Absorbs nearly half the work- force but adds little to GDP; low skills → disguised un- employment.
Industry	16.0%	24.0%	25.6%	24.0%	24%	30%	₹398	₹398,000	Flat since 2010	High produc- tivity growth, but capital- intensive → stagnant job creation.
Services	24.0%	26.0%	31.9%	30.5%	30%	55%	₹397	₹397,000	Steady rise since 1980s	Drives GDP with fewer jobs; attracts educated labour, but slowing ab- sorption limits impact.

Source: India Employment Report 2024, India KLEMS Database 2024, [Economic & Political Weekly, December 14, 2024], Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) Gross Value Added (GVA) Data, PLFS 2023–24 Highlights

Key Interpretations from the data in table 8 is as follows:

- Mismatch between employment and output: Agriculture still employs nearly half the workforce but contributes only 15% to GDP, indicating a need to transition surplus labour to more productive sectors.
- *Structural transformation of Indian economy over the decades has happened but the pace is quite gradual in comparison to many East Asian countries – many of them have graduated from a lower income country to middle- or higher-income country.*
- Stagnant manufacturing employment: Despite rapid growth in productivity, the industry sector is not creating jobs proportionately, suggesting automation and underinvestment in labour-intensive manufacturing.
- Services sector leads transformation: It is absorbing an increasing share of the workforce while sustaining high productivity, making it the backbone of modern economic growth.

Sectoral Employment Patterns: A Closer Examination

India's employment challenge goes beyond the obvious fact that agriculture is dominated by self-employed farmers. **Table 9 shows that agriculture employs 292 million workers, of whom nearly 82% are self-employed and 46% are own-account workers**, which is natural for a sector built around family-based farming. What becomes striking only after drilling deeper is that the same pattern of disproportionate self-employment repeats outside agriculture, where it should not be the natural norm. Around 30% of workers in industry and 45% in services are also self-employed, a clear sign of missing formal jobs rather than entrepreneurial choice.

Added to this is the large share of casual labour in industry (about 45%), revealing widespread job instability even in sectors expected to generate steady employment. Regular wage jobs, the backbone of a productive modern workforce, remain limited — only about 26% in industry and 52% in services, and negligible in agriculture.

Thus, the real issue is not that farmers are self-employed, but that self-employment and casual work have spread far beyond agriculture, signalling a deeper structural shortage of secure, productive jobs across the entire economy.

Table 9: Estimated Workers in India by Sector and Type of Employment (with Approx. % Share)
(Figure in millions)

Sector	Total Workers	Own Account	Self-Employed	Casual Labour	Regular Wage	Household Helper
Agriculture	292	135 (≈46%)	240 (≈82%)	50 (≈17%)	3 (≈1%)	105 (≈36%)
Industry	153	40 (≈26%)	46 (≈30%)	69 (≈45%)	39 (≈26%)	6 (≈4%)
Services	188	73 (≈39%)	85 (≈45%)	18 (≈10%)	97 (≈52%)	12 (≈6%)

Source: *India's Services Sector, NITI Aayog (2025)

Table 10.1: Annual Growth rate in LFPR

Indicator	AY18	AY19	AY20	AY21	AY22	AY23	*CAGR (% p.a.) AY23/AY18	CAGR (% p.a.) AY23/AY20
LFPR – Persons (%)	49.8	50.2	53.5	54.9	55.2	57.9	3.1	2.7
LFPR – Female (%)	23.3	24.5	30.0	32.5	32.8	37.0	9.7	7.2
LFPR – Male (%)	75.8	75.5	53.9	77.0	77.2	78.5	0.7	13.4

* Compound Annual Growth Rate

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2017–18 to 2022–23 as referred in NITI Working Paper on Vikasit Bharat by Arvind Virmani (July 2024)

Table 10.2: Annual Growth rate in Wages (₹ per month, constant 2017–18 prices)

Type of Worker	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Avg. Growth Rate (% p.a.) AY23/AY18
Casual workers	5,964	6,192	6,286	6,375	6,745	6,862	2.8
Salaried workers	15,589	15,761	15,763	15,331	15,586	15,314	-0.4
Self-employed	10,033	10,571	9,698	9,352	9,833	10,320	0.6
Weighted average wage	10,288	10,666	10,312	10,006	10,367	10,611	0.6

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2017–18 to 2022–23 as referred in NITI Working Paper on Vikasit Bharat by Arvind Virmani (July 2024)

Table 10 shows that Labour force participation has increased steadily during AY18–AY23, driven mainly by a sharp rise in female LFPR, while male participation has remained broadly stable at a high level. This indicates widening engagement with the labour market, particularly among women. Real wage growth, however, has been modest overall, with faster gains for casual workers and stagnation in salaried wages. Overall, the trends suggest expanding employment participation with gradual and uneven improvements in real incomes.

Key Findings of India's Economic Survey 2024–25

The Survey highlights deep concerns about India's employment structure. Despite overall economic growth, **job creation is concentrated in low-wage agricultural work**, while manufacturing and services—traditional growth sectors—are failing to absorb enough workers. Agriculture's employment share has **risen from 44.1% in 2017–18 to 46.1% in 2023–24**, signalling a reverse shift away from non-farm jobs. Women are disproportionately affected: their share in the agricultural workforce increased sharply from **57% in 2017–18 to 64.4% in 2023–24**, compared to men's declining share. The Survey also points to **persisting low wages**, with **40.8% of regular workers** and **51.9% of casual workers** still earning below the minimum wage, underscoring high informality and vulnerability.

For sustainable transformation, India must create at least **7.85 million non-farm jobs annually by 2030**. This requires shifting **3.5 million people each year out of agriculture**, yet current trends show the opposite, a worrying sign of stagnation and limited alternatives.

Table 11: Highlights from Economic Survey 2024–25

Key Finding	Data / Description
Agriculture's rising share	44.1% (2017–18) → 46.1% (2023–24)
Manufacturing employment	Declined to 11.4% (2023–24)
Services employment	Declined to 29.7% (2023–24)
Women in agriculture	57% (2017–18) → 64.4% (2023–24)
Men in agriculture	40.2% (2017–18) → 36.3% (2023–24)
Workers below minimum wage	Regular: 40.8%; Casual: 51.9% (2023–24)
Non-farm jobs needed by 2030	7.85 million annually
Labour shift needed out of agriculture	~3.5 million people per year

➤ **Moving workers out of Agriculture: India's Growth Opportunity**

India's economy today is shaped not just by how much it produces, but also by where its workers are employed. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24 shows that out of estimated 572 million workers, nearly 46% of Indian workers are still in agriculture, even though farming contributes only about 7% of national output, as presented in table 12.

Table 12: India's Growth Opportunity

Sector	India — Employment Share (2024)	China — Employment Share (2023)
Agriculture	46%	22.33%
Industry	24%	29.42%
Services	30% <i>(Globally, services account for nearly 50% of employment- India's Services Sector-NITI Aayog-2025)</i>	48.25%

Source:

- India Employment Report 2024, India KLEMS Database 2024, [Economic & Political Weekly, December 14, 2024], MoSPI GVA Data, PLFS 2023–24 Highlights
- National Bureau of Statistics (China)- https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202502/t20250228_1958822.html

This imbalance in employment and productivity is one of the biggest reasons India's GDP lags behind countries like China. China's employment structure shifted dramatically in the past two decades, reducing agricultural employment from about 50% in 2000 to 22% in 2023 and increasing maximum employment in services sector. During the same period, its GDP rose from **\$1.2 trillion to \$18.3 trillion**. India also grew, from **\$0.47 trillion to \$3.64 trillion**, but the slower pace of sectoral reallocation limited the scale of transformation. The contrast highlights how **labour mobility, coupled with capital deepening and urbanisation, can amplify growth**. The optimistic aspect here it that if China has achieved such progress, so can India.

Productivity Gap Across Sectors

India's core challenge is the sharp difference in per-worker productivity across sectors. An average worker in agriculture adds only **about \$89,000 a year**, while those in industry and services

add **about \$4 lakh annually**—meaning a worker outside farming produces **over four times more** than one in agriculture.

Table 13: Productivity Gap Across Sectors (Updated)

Sector	Workers (millions)*	GDP per worker (₹ lakh)
Agriculture	292	0.89
Industry	153	3.98
Services	188	3.97

Source: *India's Services Sector, NITI Aayog (2025); India Employment Report 2024; India KLEMS Database 2024; Economic & Political Weekly (Dec 14, 2024); MoSPI GVA Data; PLFS 2023–24 Highlights.

Impact of Shifting Workers Out of Agriculture

Every movement of labour away from agriculture raises GDP substantially. If India reduces the agricultural employment share from **46% to 30%**, the economy would gain **about ₹30 lakh crore**, roughly **9% of GDP**. A transition towards China's level of **22% agricultural employment** could raise GDP by **₹41 lakh crore**, adding **over 12%** to the economy. These gains require complementary policy, investment, and institutional support.

Table 14: GDP gains from transition of labour force from agriculture sector

Scenario	Workers shifted (million)	GDP Gain per worker (₹ lakh)	Total Gain (₹ lakh crore)	% of India's GDP (₹330 lakh crore)
10 million shift to Industry/Services	10	~3.1	3.1	~1%
Agri share cut from 46% → 30%	98	~3.1	30.4	~9.2%
Agri share cut from 46% → 22% (China-like)	132	~3.1	41.0	~12.4%

India's Employment Shift: Matching China by 2047 Without Productivity Gains

India's economy can achieve China's productivity targets by 2047 through labour reallocation alone, keeping worker productivity constant at current levels across agriculture (₹89,000), industry

(₹398,000), and services (₹397,000). This projection shows agriculture's employment share dropping from 46% in 2024 to 36% by 2034 and 22.3% by 2047, boosting total GDP per worker from ₹255,600 to ₹328,600—a 28.6% gain. Industry absorbs more workers (rising to 30% by 2034 and 38.2% by 2047), while services grow modestly to 34% and 39.5%. A projection in the table 15 below shows the growth opportunities through employment shifts from agriculture.

Table 15: Projection on growth opportunities through employment shifts from agriculture to other sectors

Year	Agriculture sector			Industry Sector			Services Sector			Total GDP/ Worker (₹'000)	Productivity Gain (%)
	Employment share (%)	GDP/ Worker (₹'000)	Change in employment share (%)	Employment share (%)	GDP/ Worker (₹'000)	Change in employment share (%)	Employment share (%)	GDP/ Worker (₹'000)	Change in employment share (%)		
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	$K = \frac{[(B/100) * C] + [(E/100) F] + [(H/100) * J]}{255.6}$	L
2024 (Base Year)	46	89	0	24	398	0	30	397	0	255.6	0
2034 (after 10 years)	36	89	-10	30	398	+6	34	397	+4	287.3	12.4
2047*	22.3	89	-23.7	38.2	398	+14.2	39.5	397	+9.5	328.6	28.6

Assumption: Worker productivity in each sector remains constant at current levels of year 2024 as in table 1.

*(Target comparable with China's present status)

Lower Services Absorption Due to Skill and AI Barriers

NITI Aayog's October 2025 report, "India's Services Sector: Insights from Employment Trends and State-level Dynamics" highlights divisions between high-value services (IT, finance) that drive growth but offer limited jobs due to skill gaps, and traditional sub-sectors (trade, transport) that dominate low-skill, low-productivity employment. AI automation further displaces routine services jobs, prioritizing high-value segments over mass employment. Further, NITI Aayog also reports that services employ ~30% of workforce but absorb labour unevenly: high-value segments are skill-constrained, while informal traditional roles prevail, with urban-rural gaps (e.g., higher urban services participation) and gender disparities limiting women to low-value work without upskilling ¹⁹.

Now, when the opportunity is visible and possible, then it needs policy on sectoral transition of employment share in the three predominant sectors of Agriculture, Industry and Services.

➤ **Evidence Based Policy for Sectoral Transition**

(Agriculture → Industry → Services → High-Value Services)

India's transition from a predominantly agricultural economy to an industrial and eventually high-value service economy requires a structured, evidence-based approach that mirrors the successful trajectories of China, Vietnam and South Korea. Global studies show that no country has achieved high productivity without simultaneously strengthening three pillars: physical infrastructure, digital infrastructure, and human capital. Therefore, each stage of India's labour reallocation from Agriculture to Industry and Services sectors must be supported by:

1. **Human-Capital Enablers** including basic education and industrial skill training, service-sector competencies, and digital/AI readiness. This integrated approach ensures that productivity rises steadily while labour is absorbed safely into sectors capable of generating higher incomes and economic resilience by 2047.

¹⁹ https://niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-10/Indias_Services_Sector_Insights_from_Employment_Trends_State_level_Dynamics.pdf

2. **Physical Enablers** such as roads, logistics hubs, industrial clusters and digital workspaces.
3. **Digital Enablers** such as broadband connectivity, digital marketplaces, fintech rails and AI/cloud platforms.

Education and Skills as the key Human Enablers for Labour Shift from Agriculture to Industry and Services

Education plays a pivotal role in enabling the shift of labour from low-productivity agriculture to higher-productivity industry and services. As economies develop, the ability of workers to move into modern sectors depends fundamentally on the level of schooling, skill acquisition, and human capital formation. Countries with higher average years of education consistently achieve far greater productivity, faster structural transformation, and better employment quality. In India's case, analysing trends in workforce education levels, school transition rates, and global productivity comparisons reveals how improvements in education directly influence the pace and scale of labour movement away from agriculture.

Data in tables 16 to 19, below presents the global key indicators/ data relating to education.

Table 16: Productivity vs. educational attainment (Global)

Country	Year	Avg. Years of Education (15–64 yrs)	Productivity: Output per Hour Worked (\$ in 2021 prices per hour)
Germany	2020	13.1	82.04
United States	2020	13.32	81.08
United Kingdom	2020	12.9	70.25
Sri Lanka	2020	10.33	19.69
China	2020	8.99	15.13
India	2020	7.8	7.24
Bangladesh	2020	7.23	7.11

Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/productivity-vs-educational-attainment>

Table 17: Labour Force: By Education Level: All India

Year	All education groups	No education	%	Primary (up to 5th standard)	%	Secondary (6th-9th standard)	%	Higher secondary (10th-12th standard)	%	>= Graduate	%
2016-17	43,87,87,487	7,66,92,238	17.48%	9,43,01,350	21%	8,00,48,004	18%	11,95,29,888	27%	6,82,16,006	16%
2017-18	42,32,51,557	3,67,77,765	8.69%	11,21,02,989	26%	8,57,22,597	20%	12,41,49,160	29%	6,44,95,047	15%
2018-19	42,32,14,677	1,36,21,969	3.22%	12,32,96,023	29%	8,93,53,881	21%	13,49,49,109	32%	6,19,93,696	15%
2019-20	42,97,71,546	62,40,275	1.45%	12,74,00,593	30%	9,09,37,102	21%	14,28,64,482	33%	6,23,29,094	15%
2020-21	41,08,16,318	1,24,02,133	3.02%	6,59,80,734	16%	11,65,48,176	28%	15,90,01,233	39%	5,68,84,042	14%
2021-22	41,94,23,813	16,58,362	0.40%	7,74,27,464	18%	11,53,90,619	28%	16,53,43,003	39%	5,96,04,364	14%
2022-23	42,10,26,173	3,93,243	0.09%	7,62,63,572	18%	11,33,64,346	27%	17,08,82,947	41%	6,01,22,064	14%
2023-24	43,97,71,954	17,80,609	0.40%	7,99,76,276	18%	11,48,31,094	26%	18,01,92,828	41%	6,29,91,148	14%
2024-25	45,66,54,270	18,45,060	0.40%	8,20,42,608	18%	11,56,36,011	25%	18,50,72,238	41%	7,20,58,352	16%

Source: PLFS

Table 18: Annual School Transition Rates in India, 2018-19 to 2023-24

Academic Year	Primary → Upper Primary	Upper Primary → Secondary	Secondary → Higher Secondary
2018-19	91.0%	91.4%	71.6%
2019-20	92.1%	91.3%	73.3%
2020-21	92.1%	91.3%	73.3%
2021-22	93.2%	88.8%	78.4%
2022-23	87.9%	86.7%	71.3%
2023-24	88.8%	83.3%	71.5%
Average	91%	89%	73%

Source: Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE)+ references ^{20,21}

²⁰ https://educationforallinindia.com/national-highlights-of-the-udisepus-data-2021-22-2022-23-to-2023-24/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²¹ https://educationforallinindia.com/udise-plus-2019-20-data-observations/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Table 19: India's Education level snapshot

Indicator	India*		China
Mean Years of Schooling*	7.33 years	8 years	https://www.worlddeconomics.com/Indicator-Data/ESG/Social/Mean-Years-of-Schooling/
Net Enrolment Ratio (Secondary Level) *	50.9 %	96%	https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR%3Flocations%3DCN&ved=2ahUKEwik3u7Grp6RAxWkxjgGHX8BKTgQFnoECBkQAQ&usg=AOvVaw2uWPhvR_EHjaBRrEVW25Yh

*<https://m.economicstimes.com/industry/services/education/education-ministry-flags-learning-gaps-dropouts-as-hurdles/articleshow/123885363.cms>

**<https://government.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/education/government-identifies-key-education-challenges-ahead-of-national-conference/123890974>

Observations from the data in tables 16 to 19 above:

	Observation	What the Data Shows	Meaning for Labour Shift
1	Education Level vs Productivity (Global)	India's average schooling is much lower than high-productivity countries. Productivity is also significantly lower.	Lower education results in lower productivity and slows the movement of workers out of agriculture.
2	Basic Education in Labour Force	The share of workers with no education fell from 17.5% to 0.4% within eight years.	A largely literate workforce improves readiness for non-farm jobs.
3	Primary and Secondary Education	Primary levels remain stable. Secondary education shows modest improvement.	Mid-level education is improving but still not sufficient for manufacturing jobs.
4	Higher Secondary Education	Workforce with higher secondary education increased from 27% to 41%.	A stronger base of semi-skilled workers is emerging for industry and services.
5	Graduate-Level Education	Graduate share remains stagnant around 14–16%.	Limited growth in skilled labour restricts expansion of modern sectors.
6	School Transition Rates	Transition to secondary school has declined. Secondary to higher secondary remains low.	Dropouts reduce the future pool of skilled and educated workers.

7	Skill Depth and Employability	Schooling has improved, but vocational and technical skills remain limited.	Workers have basic education but often lack job-ready skills needed in modern sectors.
8	Overall Outcome	Education levels are rising at the foundational level. Progress in higher and technical education is slower.	India's shift from agriculture to industry and services is improving but remains gradual.

Government spending, though increasing, needs further enhancement in budget allocation. The **Union Budget 2024–25 allocated ₹1.29 lakh crore (2.54% of total expenditure) for education**, far below the **6% of GDP target under NEP 2020**. Weak learning outcomes also persist as Annual Status of Education Report 2023 reported that **only 43% of rural Class V children can read a Class II-level text** while low rural female participation in higher education further limits transition.

Policy measures, therefore, must focus on improving **rural schooling quality, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics or STEM education, Industrial Training Institute (ITI) modernization, vocational skilling under Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and early integration of industry-relevant curricula**. Expanding digital platforms like **PM e-Vidya and Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing or DIKSHA** can widen reach. Without these interventions, India's labour force will remain trapped in low-productivity agriculture instead of moving to industry and services, where growth potential is far greater.

Framework for Enabling India's Labour Transition Across Sectors

Russian economist **Nikolai Kondratiev** showed that capitalist economies move in long technological waves of about 40–60 years, in which clusters of innovation restructure production, institutions and labour markets. The first wave shifted artisans into factories through steam and textiles; the second created infrastructure employment via railways and coal; the third expanded scientific and technical work with electricity and chemicals; the fourth built organised industrial labour around automobiles and petrochemicals; and the fifth pushed workers into IT-enabled and service-sector jobs through computing

and automation. India now approaches a **Sixth Kondratiev Wave**, driven by artificial intelligence, clean energy, biotechnology, space systems and digital public infrastructure. This transition is fundamentally about **digital transformation of labour**, moving workers from low-productivity informal activity into **technology-enabled services, green jobs, data-driven operations and precision manufacturing**. For India to harness this shift, **digitalisation** must become a **national labour-market buzzword**, actively shaping public discourse and being formally embedded in **university curricula, research programmes and skilling institutions**, so that higher education produces a workforce prepared for a **service-oriented, knowledge-intensive and globally competitive economy**, not merely for traditional employment.

A successful shift of workers from agriculture to industry, and further into services and high-value services, depends on strengthening three pillars of development: human capital, physical connectivity, and digital infrastructure. Each stage of structural transformation requires workers to acquire new skills, access new markets, and participate in expanding economic activities. By aligning education, skilling, infrastructure, and digital inclusion, India can support a smooth and upward movement of its labour force into more productive and better-paid sectors.

A. AGRICULTURE → INDUSTRY TRANSITION

1. Human-Capital Enabler: Industrial Skill Training

Policy Measure	Constraint	Way Out
Focus on basic education and industrial skill training (machine operations, repair) as agricultural labour often lacks foundational education and industrial skills	Agricultural labour lacks basic education and industrial skills; generic skilling ineffective.	World Bank Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States Program (STARS) shows industry-aligned skilling improves employment outcomes significantly. https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P168568

2. Physical Enabler: Rural Roads, Logistics & Industrial Clusters

Policy Measure	Constraint	Way Out
Expand rural roads, last-mile logistics & agro-industrial clusters	Workers cannot access industrial jobs due to poor mobility. Firms avoid rural areas due to high logistics cost.	Rural roads increase non-farm employment by 22% (Asher & Novosad, NBER) → enables shift to industry. https://samuelasher.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/an-rural-roads.pdf

3. Digital Enabler: Digital Marketplaces for Agro-Industry (e-NAM, cold-chain IoT)

Policy Measure	Constraint	Way Out
Expand digital supply-chain systems for agro-processing (e-NAM, IoT cold chains)	Farmers/primary workers lack access to reliable digital markets → lower incomes → cannot transition to industry.	e-NAM reduced intermediation and increased prices for farmers by up to 15% (World Bank). https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports

B. INDUSTRY → SERVICES TRANSITION

1. Human-Capital Enabler: Service-Sector Skilling

Policy Measure	Constraint	Way Out
Provide technical education and soft-skills training (communication, digital literacy, retail, logistics); skill mismatch persists as industrial workers lack these competencies; service skills demand is three times that of manufacturing	Skill mismatch: industrial workforce lacks soft + digital skills needed in services.	Service-skill demand is 3× higher than manufacturing (ILO Skills Forecast 2022). https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/WCMS_813696

2. Physical Enabler: Urban–Rural Service Hubs & Logistics

Policy Measure	Constraint	Way Out
Build service hubs: logistics centres, retail parks, small business zones	Industrial workers in Tier-2/3 locations have no local service-sector opportunities.	Service-sector job multipliers are 2.5× manufacturing (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA]). https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/

3. Digital Enabler: Broadband Expansion (BharatNet)

Policy Measure	Constraint	Way Out
Accelerate BharatNet, 4G/5G in semi-urban & rural areas	Digital divide blocks entry into Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES), logistics, digital retail.	2.18 lakh GPs broadband-ready → enables service-sector expansion. https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/smart-infra/bridging-urban-rural-digital-divide-bharatnet-makes-2-18-lakh-gram-panchayats-broadband-ready/120502030

C. SERVICES → HIGH-VALUE SERVICES TRANSITION

1. Human-Capital Enabler: Digital & AI Skill Training

Policy Measure	Constraint	Way Out
Provide rural AI/digital literacy programmes, gig-work readiness, telemedicine assistants	High-value service jobs require digital readiness; rural workforce lacks exposure.	Digital skilling under Digital India significantly improves employability (Observer Research Foundation [ORF]) Report 2024). https://www.orfonline.org/research/a-decade-of-digital-india-mission-achievements-gaps-and-the-way-forward

2. Physical Enabler: Rural Digital Workspaces & Telemedicine Centres

Policy Measure	Constraint	Way Out
Build digital work hubs/BPOs, telemedicine clinics, digital classrooms	Lack of physical access points to high-value digital jobs.	eSanjeevani delivered 3 crore+ teleconsultations, proving viability of digital service delivery in rural India. https://ibef.org/news/health-ministry-s-flagship-telemedicine-service-esanjeevani-records-3-crore-tele-consultations

3. Digital Enabler: AI + Cloud + Fintech Platforms

Policy Measure	Constraint	Way Out
Accelerate fintech, UPI, cloud platforms, digital KYC for rural entrepreneurs	Lack of credit and digital infrastructure limits rural service entrepreneurship.	UPI crossed ₹17.4 lakh crore monthly transactions (2024) → supporting rural digital entrepreneurship. https://www.npci.org.in/statistics

The framework above attempts to convey that India can reach China-level productivity only by synchronising **human capital**, **physical infrastructure** and **digital systems** at every stage of labour transition. When roads, broadband and targeted skilling move together, workers can shift from low-productivity agriculture to industry and then into high-value digital services without displacement. Evidence from World Bank, ILO, National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) and Digital India conveys that this integrated approach, not isolated schemes, is what unlocks rapid productivity gains. With this coordinated push, India can realistically achieve the structural transformation required for **Viksit Bharat 2047**.

While the path for achieving employment shift transitions has been projected above, Government of India has already brought out the Labour reforms through its new four labour codes as a catalyst towards Labour Welfare.

India's Four New Labour Codes (2025)

India's labour regulation framework historically evolved through **fragmented laws enacted between the 1920s and 1970s**, designed for an industrial economy far smaller, less diverse, and more formal than today. Over time, this patchwork created **overlapping definitions, complex compliance burdens, and uneven worker protections**, prompting long-pending calls for consolidation and modernization.

In response, the Government merged 29 central labour laws into four Labour Codes—the Code on Wages (2019), Industrial Relations Code (2020), Code on Social Security (2020), and Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (2020)—which came into force on 21 November 2025. The reform simplifies labour regulation, creates uniform wage, safety, and social-security standards, and brings gig, platform, and informal workers under a unified national framework. It expands access to provident fund, insurance, gratuity, and clear wage rules, while strengthening dispute resolution. For employers, the Codes streamline compliance through standardised procedures, reduced licensing, and a single digital registration system. Overall, the consolidation aims to balance worker protection with regulatory efficiency, formalise employment, and support India's shift toward a more productive and inclusive labour market.

Table 20: India's Four New Labour Codes explained

Code	Key Provisions	Earlier Laws Replaced	What Changed (Reform Element)	Positive Effects	Constraints	Risks	Source URLs
Code on Wages, 2019	National floor wage; single wage definition; timely payment; wage slips; universal coverage.	Minimum Wages Act 1948; Payment of Wages Act 1936; Payment of Bonus Act 1965; Equal Remuneration Act 1976.	Single national framework; uniform wage definition; expanded coverage across all workers.	Transparency in wages; fair pay; reduced underpayment; supports formalisation.	Higher compliance burden for MSMEs; state alignment to floor wage.	Firms may shift to contract labour; risk of reduced hiring due to higher wage costs.	- labour.gov.in/pib2192463.pdf - indianexpress.com/.../labour-codes-what-changes - magzter.com/.../LABOUR-CODES-TO-SIMPLIFY-LAWS
Industrial Relations Code, 2020	Fixed-term employment; layoff/closure threshold 100→300; union recognition; dispute mechanisms.	Industrial Disputes Act, 1947; Trade Unions Act 1926; Standing Orders Act 1946.	Greater employer flexibility; formalised fixed-term jobs; simplified standing orders.	May increase hiring; clearer employment categories; faster dispute handling.	State rule notification needed; union concerns on bargaining power.	More precarious jobs; weaker job security; reduced collective bargaining.	- labour.gov.in/pib2192463.pdf - indianexpress.com/.../labour-codes-what-changes - magzter.com/.../LABOUR-CODES-TO-SIMPLIFY-LAWS

Code on Social Security, 2020	Provident Fund (PF), Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC), maternity, gratuity; gig & platform worker coverage; ESIC even for 1 hazardous worker.	9 social security laws incl. EPF 1952, ESIC 1948, Maternity 1961, UWSSA 2008.	Legal inclusion of gig/unorganised workers; unified registration; simplified compliance.	Wider safety net; boosts formalisation & LFPR; better protection for women & gig workers.	Registration of gig/unorganised workers; platform compliance burden.	Firms may shift workforce to avoid contributions; uneven coverage if states delay.	•labour.gov.in/pib2192463.pdf •indianexpress.com/.../labour-codes-what-changes •magzter.com/.../LABOUR-CODES-TO-SIMPLIFY-LAWS
OSH & Working Conditions Code, 2020	48-hour week; safety committees; annual health check-up; appointment letters; migrant-worker database; women allowed night shifts with safeguards.	13 laws incl. Factories Act 1948, Mines Act 1952, Contract Labour 1970, ISMW Act 1979.	Standardised safety norms; digitised licensing; expanded worker protections.	Safer, more regulated workplaces; gender inclusion; improved documentation.	Enforcement capacity gaps; compliance cost for small units.	Non-compliance in informal sector; paperwork burden discouraging formalisation.	•labour.gov.in/pib2192463.pdf •indianexpress.com/.../labour-codes-what-changes •magzter.com/.../LABOUR-CODES-TO-SIMPLIFY-LAWS

Source: Various

Table 21: Benefits of the Labour Codes

Category	Details
Why Workers Need Labour Codes	● Limited social protection, especially for contractual and unorganised workers.
	● Lack of formal recognition for new-age workers (gig, platform, migrant), leading to unfair treatment and no social security.
	● Absence of uniform wage standards causing unequal pay for similar work.
Why Employers Need Labour Codes	● Multiple outdated labour laws hamper business efficiency and increase administrative work.
	● Heavy compliance burden discourages investment and FDI inflows.
	● Excessive regulatory requirements impede business expansion, scale, and formalisation.
Benefits of Labour Codes (For All Stakeholders)	● Appointment Letters: Mandatory written contracts ensuring transparency and job security.
	● Social Security Coverage: PF, ESIC, insurance, maternity, and benefits extended to all workers including gig/platform.
	● Minimum Wages: Statutory right to uniform minimum wages nationwide.
	● Preventive Healthcare: Mandatory free annual health check-ups for workers above 45.
	● Timely Wages: Ensures financial stability, reduces stress, improves morale.
	● Women Workforce Participation: Women allowed in all sectors and night shifts with safeguards.
	● ESIC Coverage: Mandatory for ≥10 employees and even <10 if hazardous; migrant workers included.
	● Reduced Compliance Burden: Single licence, single registration, single return; digitised processes.

Overall Impact (Combined View)	Workers: Better protection, clearer rights, improved income security, safer workplaces, expanded social security, more inclusion.
	Employers: Lower compliance load, greater operational flexibility, unified regulations, higher ease of doing business.
	Economy: Improved formalisation, more jobs, higher labour force participation (especially women), enhanced investment climate.

The Four Labour Codes unify fragmented laws for wage fairness, social security, formalisation, and inclusion across gig/informal workers, women, and MSMEs—but success depends on state implementation, enforcement, and avoiding compliance-driven casualisation that boosts jobs yet erodes security.

➤ Conclusion

India’s journey toward the **Viksit Bharat@2047 vision** hinges on replicating, at scale, the labour reallocation miracle that fuelled China’s economic rise—where agricultural employment fell from **55% in the 1990s to around 22% today**, unlocking massive productivity gains. India, with **46% of its workforce still in low-productivity farming**, stands before a similar opportunity: shifting workers out of agriculture can add **8–13% to GDP**, as each worker transitioning contributes nearly **₹3.1 lakh** in additional output. However, unlike China’s era of labour-absorbing industrial expansion, India faces a more complex landscape where **AI is rapidly automating 25–50% of routine service-sector tasks**, shrinking the traditional absorption capacity of IT, BPO, and clerical jobs. Coupled with manufacturing’s modest **17% GDP** share and the fact that only **4.1%** of India’s workforce has formal technical training—compared to **70%+** in Germany and South Korea—the transition is structurally constrained. Therefore, unlocking India’s productivity dividend will require **AI-resilient skilling**, deep reforms in education, Research and Development (R&D) investment beyond the current **<1% of GDP**, and a stronger manufacturing ecosystem supported by

infrastructure, innovation, and industry-linked training. Only then can India convert its demographic strength into economic power and achieve the transformational leap necessary for **Viksit Bharat**.

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