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Abstract

This paper examines the tension between India's rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and its foundational innovation capabilities. Although India's AI ecosystem is supported by ambitious programs and policy initiatives, it continues to face structural bottlenecks rooted in the country's historical IT outsourcing paradigm. Using the Five Battlegrounds of AI framework, with particular focus on the fifth battleground, India and AI, the study analyzes twenty (N=20) media discourse and empirical survey data from 2024 to 2026. We conduct a thematic analysis to identify key themes in India's AI innovation landscape. The findings suggest that despite India's strength as a global talent hub, it continues to lag the United States and China in the AI race, and especially in terms of intellectual property (IP) development. Our analysis also shows that reliance on foreign technologies can create socio-economic and strategic risks for India. We argue that India must treat AI as a national priority and move away from AI consumption to AI creation. India urgently needs to fast-track public compute infrastructure, incentivize IP generation, strengthen domestic R&D, and cultivate long-term risk capital.

Keywords: AI policy, AI innovation, digital colonization, sovereign AI

Introduction

India is witnessing a significant shift in its AI landscape. The government is playing a major role in building an AI ecosystem and expanding access to models, compute resources, GPUs, and research opportunities. To support the country's growing digital economy, India is also strengthening AI computing capacity and semiconductor infrastructure. A major step was the India AI Mission, approved in 2024 with an allocation of over ₹10, 300 crore, or roughly \$1.2 billion, over five years ^[1]. India's approved semiconductor projects reached ₹1.60 lakh crore or US \$19 billion by December 2025 ^[2]. But this allocation is multi-year and not exclusively AI. Indian AI companies, meanwhile, attracted about \$1.34 billion in 2025 private funding ^[3]. India's total AI investment in 2025, including software and hardware, is thus estimated to have been between \$5-6 billion.

India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) has emerged as a global model for digital transformation. India's foundational DPI, called India Stack, is considered a world-class "design approach that focuses on shared building blocks and supporting innovation across the ecosystem" ^[4]. Core systems such as Aadhaar, UPI, DigiLocker, eKYC, and eSign have created foundational layers for various functions like identity, payments, authentication, document access, and data exchange. This has allowed government agencies, businesses, and startups to build interoperable, user-focused services at scale. The DPI ecosystem is now entering a second phase through the integration of AI into financial services, public administration, welfare delivery, and digital governance ^[5, 6]. DPI will provide the scale, trusted access layer, and service-delivery backbone, while AI can add predictive analytics, automation, multilingual interfaces, fraud detection, personalization, and decision-support capabilities.

When compared to the US and China, India's \$5-6 billion number is quite low. In 2025, the US investment in AI was conservatively estimated to be in excess of \$670 billion. This includes domestic private investment upward of \$650 billion dollars and the rest federal government investment ^[7-10]. This is more than 100x India's 2025 domestic private and government spend in AI. Even China is far ahead of India in the AI race. In 2025, it launched a \$8.2 billion national AI industry fund, while China's broader state-backed hard-tech fund

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reached about \$138 billion. Chinese private AI investment in 2025 was \$12.4 billion, and data-center spending is estimated to be around \$70 billion in 2026^[9, 11, 12].

While India positions itself as a rising global AI power, a major disconnect exists between adoption and innovation^[13]. Historically, India's technology sector has been shaped by back-office outsourcing/software maintenance rather than high-value R&D or original intellectual property (IP) creation. India has been known as a supplier of technical labor to developed economies rather than as a producer of frontier technologies and sovereign IP^[14]. We argue that a similar pattern is now visible in India's AI ecosystem. Rapid AI adoption and talent availability is not necessarily translating into ownership of core AI technologies.

To examine this issue, the paper uses the five battlegrounds of AI framework, primarily focusing on the fifth battleground, India and AI. The five battleground framework identifies major arenas in which AI reshapes power: AI's impact on the economy and jobs; AI and global geopolitical power; AI's influence on human agency and psychological autonomy; AI and metaphysical questions about consciousness and human identity; and AI's implications for India's future^[14]. Within battleground #5, four concerns are especially relevant:

1. India as an exporter of raw AI talent^[14(p. 266)]
2. India as a consumer of foreign AI^[14(pp. 278-279)]
3. Dependence on foreign AI platforms^[14(pp. 273-274)]
4. Need for indigenous R&D and domestic AI infrastructure^[14(p. 359)].

We analyze twenty (N = 20) media and survey reports published between 2024 and 2026. We examine whether and to what extent India is lagging in the global AI innovation race. The study uses thematic analysis guided by the theoretical framework outlined above. We argue that continued dependence on foundational AI models developed by foreign technology companies could expose India to deeper economic and strategic dependence. Such reliance may limit India's ability to capture value within its own AI ecosystem. This will in turn weaken domestic innovation capacity, and reduce national control over critical data and digital platforms.

Methodology

The present study is grounded in Malhotra's^[14] five battlegrounds of AI framework, especially the India aspect. The study adopts a qualitative approach and analyzes twenty (N=20) media and corporate reports published between 2024 and 2026. The selected reports provide insights into the key discussions and trends shaping AI innovation in India and abroad. This analysis investigates the representation of India's AI goals while highlighting existing challenges and gaps in its innovation capabilities.

Results

Below we present the results of media and survey analysis based on the four themes mentioned previously.

India as an exporter of raw talent

India has one of the world's largest and fastest-growing AI talent pools: the NASSCOM-Deloitte report projects India's AI talent demand to rise from about 600, 000-650, 000 professionals to more than 1.25 million by 2027^[15]. NITI Aayog's 2025 report notes that India's AI talent demand is

expected to grow from 800, 000-850, 000 to over 1.25 million during 2024-26, while existing talent is growing at only 15%; more importantly, it observes that India is not among the top destinations for global AI talent and has a net negative AI talent migration rate of -1.55 per 10, 000^[16]. Yet the strategic value generated by this talent is often captured either outside India, or for foreign multinationals based in India. These centers employ Indian AI engineers, data scientists, and machine-learning specialists, but the ownership of platforms, products, patents, and strategic direction often remains with foreign parent companies. ANSR's 2025 report notes that more than 126, 000 AI professionals are embedded within Fortune 500 GCCs in India, with AI workforce growth at 16.4% CAGR and AI skill penetration 2.51 times the global average^[17].

India as a consumer of foreign AI

India functions primarily as a data-generation mine for foreign companies, which process this data to sell premium AI services back to Indian enterprises. Encouraged by the Government's initiatives, the private sector is increasingly investing in AI in India. Google has announced a \$15 billion AI Hub in Visakhapatnam and Tata Group has announced an \$11 billion AI innovation city in Maharashtra^[18]. While this is welcome, India is still primarily a large AI consumer and application market. A recurring pattern in multinational commentary is that India is called: "a huge market," "a growth opportunity," "a deployment base," "a talent hub." For example, Brian Chesky described India as one of Airbnb's largest future markets driven by AI adoption and digital consumers^[19]. Similarly, companies like HP increasingly discuss India as a destination for AI hardware consumption and enterprise deployment^[20]. OpenAI increasingly sees India as one of the world's largest AI user markets^[21].

Dependence on foreign AI platforms

India remains heavily dependent on foreign AI platforms and infrastructure. Even today, it has no major foundational large language models (LLMs) of its own and depends entirely on Western models like GPT-4, Claude, and Gemini^[22, 23]. This is problematic for a number of reasons including development and national security implications. Even the Economic Survey report of 2025-26 has warned that "reliance on foreign multinationals for AI-based solutions will leave India vulnerable to shifts in geopolitics, potentially constraining the country's future diplomatic choices"^[24(p. 560)]. For example, recently an IIT Panel found that hackers/inimical forces were using foreign platforms like Claude to detect vulnerabilities and gain access to the national school (CBSE) portal^[25]. Earlier, Microsoft had blocked Russia-backed Indian refiner Nayara Energy from accessing data stored on its own cloud servers, citing sanctions^[26]. These are serious issues which highlight the debilitating consequences of foreign tech dependence.

Need for indigenous R&D and domestic AI infrastructure

India is strong in talent and adoption, but relatively weaker in frontier compute and capital deployment; one recent industry assessment says India ranked 12th globally in AI funding as of 2024^[27]. Another ranking cited in early 2026 placed India 8th among 11 countries for accumulated AI investment as a share of GDP^[28]. India is still far from

being a frontier chip manufacturing power. Its historical strength has been chip design and downstream electronics, while commercial semiconductor fabrication has been limited^[29]. India's hyperscale GPU base is still small relative to the leaders. Announcements at the India AI Impact Summit 2026 indicate plans to deploy over 50, 000 additional GPUs within six months, potentially taking India's total GPU capacity beyond 100, 000 units nationwide^[30]. India's deep-tech capital base is improving, but it is still shallow compared with the U.S. and China. A recent alliance of Indian investors pledged over \$1 billion for deep tech over a decade, which is encouraging but also shows how recent and nascent the large capital pool remains^[31]. While India has excellent universities and engineering capability, it does not yet have the same concentration of top-tier frontier AI labs like China or the U.S.^[32-34].

Analysis and Discussion

AI infrastructure is becoming a national-industrial asset with global investments led by United States and China. A report by McKinsey shows by 2030, companies will invest almost \$7 trillion in capital expenditures on data center infrastructure globally. More than 40 percent of this spending will be invested in the United States alone^[35]. China is pursuing a more state-directed infrastructure model. Their national policies support domestic chips, sovereign cloud strategies, and very large data-center buildouts, and this has attracted over \$100 billion in state investment since 2021^[36].

In 2025, China also announced a national venture capital guidance fund expected to mobilize around US\$138 billion for hard technologies, including AI, semiconductors, and quantum technology^[37]. Similarly, the US has committed about US\$50 billion through CHIPS for America to strengthen semiconductor research, development, and manufacturing, a sector directly tied to AI infrastructure^[38]. India's advantage is its scale: massive digital public infrastructure, wide developer participation, and a large domestic market for AI applications^[27]. That makes India very attractive as a deployment market and consumer.

Unfortunately, as our results show, India is not a builder of frontier AI and fails the stress-test of the fifth AI battleground. India exports raw talent, consumes foreign AI tech, depends on foreign AI for critical infra needs, and lags behind in AI R&D. Consequently, India continues to trail several major economies in the global AI race. This of course has nothing to do with India's AI talent: India is still a major source of technical talent. However, its skilled workforce contributes primarily to the growth of global technology firms, and very little of the IP and economic value generated is retained in India.

At the same time, AI products and services developed by Indians, are later marketed back to Indian consumers. This is what Malhotra refers to as digital colonization^[14]. Just as during the British era, colonial rulers took away India's raw material for cheap and made Indians buy expensive finished goods, so also the same scenario is playing out in the AI world. This also has a different kind of psychological impact on Indian AI users - perpetuation of western world view. A major problem with many foreign AI systems is the issue of western worldviews and embedded biases. Often the underlying assumptions behind such systems are heavily biased against Indian culture and tradition^[39].

The pursuit of Sovereign AI for India is therefore not

merely a technological upgrade but a strategic national necessity. This is especially true for mission-critical national organizations like the Indian Space Research Organ (ISRO), where sovereign AI is a "strategic necessity and a critical infrastructure for space observation and national autonomy"^[40]. Moreover, AI is also transforming the state of warfare. The military modernization efforts of both China and the US are increasingly centered on intelligent autonomous systems. Future warfare will rely heavily on AI-driven platforms that can interpret complex battlefield conditions and also work with minimal human supervision. Relying entirely on foreign infrastructure and proprietary APIs means Indian industries have limited leeway to take any major steps. Any strategic decision will be highly vulnerable to foreign influence.

India has strong talent and fast adoption, but it still lacks the deepest layers of AI power: leading-edge chips and abundant GPU clusters. There is a dearth of world-class frontier labs, and the kind of sustained deep-tech capital that turns research into platforms. Despite massive investment announcements by global tech giants, those on the ground are not convinced on whether such investments will help in IP development or in lining the pockets of international tech giants. A survey of India-based tech professionals published in April 2026 found that more than half the participants saw India as lagging behind its global peers in AI. 62% of the participants, were in fact, gravely concerned by the lack of homegrown R&D and IP development - they felt this was holding India's progress back^[41].

To align India's AI trajectory towards innovation and sovereign upgrade, the state and private sector must come together and work in a critical-mission mode. They must move away from an application-centric consumption model to a foundational innovation framework. India possesses an experienced AI workforce, and it is high time they are leveraged for the betterment of the country. India is among the few countries to have a unique combination of a large population, a rapidly expanding economy, a digital-first mindset, and robust Digital Public Infrastructure. This creates a vast market for AI-driven products and services, and provides India with a lot of opportunities for AI innovation. However, long-term competitiveness will depend on India's ability to develop indigenous IP in cutting-edge AI research. Without original innovation, India will remain primarily a user of technologies created elsewhere.

Conclusion

In this study we demonstrated a major disconnect between India's rapid AI adoption and its ability to innovate in the AI space. The State has ambitious AI policy initiatives. Unfortunately, the national AI ecosystem has not budged from the inherited outsourcing mindset of the previous generation of IT services. As the data from 2024 to 2026 reveal, despite India's undeniable strength as a global talent hub, it continues to lag behind the US and China in both model and hardware. When combined with India's lack of IP development/sovereign AI, we see a heavy dependence of India on foreign technologies. This is especially worrisome when it comes to space sciences and warfare. To mitigate these vulnerabilities, India must treat AI as a national strategic priority, and not as an outsourcing opportunity. India needs an urgent, systemic shift from consumption to creation. This can be achieved by fast-

tracking infrastructure and semiconductor and incentivizing IP generation. Long-term risk capital is essential for sustaining deep-tech innovation in AI.

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