

Daily Editorial Analysis 12 July 2025

July 12, 2025 • vajiramandravi.com

India and the Global AI Race - A Call for Strategic, Democratic Governance

Context:

- As the United States and China spearhead **a new age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) competition** and the European Union asserts regulatory leadership, **India has announced its ambition to become a major player in global AI governance.**
- However, without **a robust, politically anchored national AI strategy**, India's efforts risk fragmentation and global irrelevance, particularly as global governance norms around AI solidify.

India's Global AI Ambition vs Domestic Strategic Deficit:

- **India's strategic position:** India seeks to represent the Global South in AI forums by leveraging –
 - Democratic legitimacy
 - Digital capabilities
 - Leadership in the Global Partnership on AI (GPAI)
- **The governance gap:** IndiaAI Mission (with a budget outlay of Rs. 10,000 crore) is operational but –
 - It lacks a cabinet-endorsed national strategy.
 - It is housed as a division of a Section 8 company in the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), and is led by a bureaucrat.
 - Operates with limited political mandate or coordination authority.
- **Comparison with global peers:** US, China, UK, and EU have formal AI strategies with roadmaps, timelines, and institutional backing.

Structural Challenges in India's AI Ecosystem:

- **Research and talent deficit:**
 - Weak R&D base and limited AI-specialised PhDs.
 - Indian universities underperform in global AI rankings.
 - Poor academia-industry collaboration.
 - Brain drain of top-tier talent to global AI hubs.
- **Private sector limitations:**
 - The IT sector focused on services, not innovation.

- Low investment in foundational AI research.
- Absence of AI-first national champions.
- Venture capital flows focused on consumer tech, not deep-tech innovation.

Democratic and Institutional Shortcomings in AI Governance:

- **Parliamentary exclusion:**
 - No bipartisan consensus on AI.
 - **Less than 1% of parliamentary questions on AI.**
 - Absence of institutional oversight mechanisms.
 - Lack of parliamentary involvement undermines policy legitimacy, governance continuity, and public trust.
- **Technocratic policy discourse:** The mostly technocratic policy talks have given little attention to crucial questions like **strategic autonomy**, the use of public data, energy demands, and national security consequences.

Consequences for India's Global AI Credibility:

- **Disconnect** between global aspirations and domestic governance, as India's international ambition is undercut by **fragmented domestic policies**.
- Democracies worldwide watch for **alignment** between India's internal governance and external leadership claims.

Way Forward - A Democratic and Strategic AI Framework:

- **Cabinet-endorsed national AI strategy:** Actionable roadmap and vision aligned with economic, security, and industrial policies and presented to Parliament for legitimacy.
- **Empowered coordinating authority:** With a whole-of-government mandate and institutional mechanisms for democratic accountability.
- **Parliamentary oversight:**
 - Establishment of dedicated **standing committees** on AI.
 - Bipartisan deliberation to ensure long-term policy stability.
- **Public engagement:** Transparent debate on ethical, social, and strategic implications.

Conclusion - AI as a National Strategic Imperative:

- AI is not just a technology — it is a **general-purpose transformation** impacting national security, economic development, social equity and governance.
- India's young population, digital infrastructure, and democratic framework offer **unique advantages**.
- But without **strategic coherence and democratic anchoring**, India risks losing its window to shape global AI norms.

India and the Global AI Race - A Call for Strategic, Democratic Governance FAQs

Q1. Examine the structural and strategic challenges hindering India's ambition to become a global leader in AI.

Ans. India faces structural deficits like a shallow R&D base, weak academia-industry collaboration, talent drain, and absence of AI-first national champions, compounded by the lack of a Cabinet-endorsed national strategy.

Q2. Discuss the significance of democratic legitimacy and parliamentary oversight in shaping India's AI governance framework.

Ans. Democratic legitimacy through parliamentary engagement is crucial to ensuring policy stability, bipartisan support, and public trust in AI governance, which is currently missing in India's technocratic approach.

Q3. Critically analyse the limitations of the IndiaAI Mission in addressing India's long-term AI governance needs.

Ans. Despite its significant budget, the IndiaAI Mission lacks political authority, Cabinet approval, and whole-of-government coordination, making it insufficient to lead comprehensive and strategic AI transformation.

Q4. Evaluate the role of India in representing the Global South in the evolving landscape of global AI governance.

Ans. India is well-positioned to represent the Global South due to its digital capabilities and democratic credentials, but its credibility depends on aligning domestic governance with its international AI leadership ambitions.

Q5. Why is a Cabinet-endorsed National AI Strategy critical for India, and what should it ideally encompass?

Ans. A Cabinet-backed strategy is essential to provide long-term policy coherence, whole-of-government coordination, democratic accountability, and must align AI policy with R&D, industrial, and national security goals.

Source: IE

View India's Gender Gap Report Ranking as a Warning

Context

- **India stands at a crossroads in its development journey**, a global economic power, a digital innovator, and the world's youngest nation by population, yet, beneath these commendable achievements lies a troubling paradox.
- The World Economic Forum's Global **Gender Gap Report (2025)** places **India at 131 out of 148 countries**, revealing an unsettling truth: gender inequality remains a deep-seated and structural impediment to the nation's progress.
- Therefore, **it is important to analyse the multidimensional nature of India's gender gap**, particularly in economic participation and health.

Reasons Behind India's Gender Gap

• Structural Failures

- India's poor ranking is most alarming in the domains of **economic participation** and **health and survival**, two pillars that are foundational to gender equity.
- While **improvements have been noted in educational attainment**, they have not translated into broader wellbeing or workforce participation for women.
- The **nation's sex ratio at birth remains severely skewed**, underscoring a persistent and dangerous cultural preference for sons.
- Further, **a decline in healthy life expectancy for women indicates chronic neglect** in reproductive and preventive healthcare.

• Skewed Health Outcomes

- A particularly sobering statistic is that **57% of Indian women aged 15-49 are anaemic**, significantly limiting their capacity to learn, earn, and safely bear children.
- Despite the scale and solvability of such problems, **policy responses remain insufficient**.
- The **lack of investment in primary healthcare and reproductive services**, especially for rural and economically vulnerable women, **reflects a structural failure to prioritise women's health as a national development goal**.
- As the text emphasizes, without good health, **economic inclusion becomes impossible**.

• Economic Exclusion and Invisible Labour

- **India ranks 143rd on the Economic Participation and Opportunity** subindex, highlighting the extent of gendered economic exclusion.
- **Women earn less than a third of what men earn**, and their participation in the formal workforce is disproportionately low.
- These **gaps are not only socially unjust but also economically self-defeating**.
- A McKinsey Global Institute report (2015) estimated that **closing gender gaps could add \$770 billion to India's GDP by 2025**, a goal that now seems missed.
- Beyond workforce numbers, **Indian women remain grossly under-represented in leadership and decision-making spaces**.
- From corporate boardrooms to parliamentary committees, **their voices are systematically marginalised**.
- Most notably, women bear the burden of **unpaid domestic and care work**, performing nearly **seven times more** than men, according to the Time Use Survey.
- Yet, **this critical labour remains invisible in national accounting** and grossly underfunded in public policy.

The Demographic Turning Point

- India's demographic profile is evolving rapidly. While it currently enjoys the benefits of a young workforce, **the share of elderly citizens is set to double by 2050**, with a significant portion comprising older women, especially widows who face higher dependency.

- At the same time, **fertility rates are now below the replacement level**, signalling an eventual decline in the working-age population.
- This **demographic transition intensifies the urgency of gender inclusion**.
- As the dependency ratio rises, **the burden on a shrinking workforce will increase, potentially undermining India's fiscal and economic stability**.
- The only sustainable response is to ensure that **women, who make up half of the population, are healthy, empowered, and economically active**.
- Gender equality is no longer just a matter of human rights. It is a **demographic imperative** and an **economic necessity**.

From Slogans to Systems: The Need for Real Investment

- India does not lack policy frameworks or political ambition.
- What it lacks is **real investment** and **systemic reform**. Addressing gender inequality requires a multi-sectoral approach:
 - **Public health systems** must prioritise women's preventive and reproductive needs.
 - **Care infrastructure** must be expanded and integrated into social protection policies.
 - **Gender budgeting** and **time-use data** must inform policy design.
- Most importantly, women must be seen not as passive beneficiaries, but as **active builders of the economy**.
- The **Global Gender Gap Report (2025), then, is more than a ranking, it is a warning**.
- If India fails to address its gender disparities now, it risks undermining the very gains it has so admirably achieved in other arenas.

Conclusion

- **India's aspirations of becoming a global superpower will remain incomplete** if half its population is left behind.
- **Gender inequality in health, labour, and care work is not just a social issue**, it is a drag on the nation's potential.
- **To reverse this, the country must commit to transformative action that places women at the heart** of its economic and demographic planning. The time for slogans has passed; **the time for systemic investment and real reform is now**.

View India's Gender Gap Report Ranking as a Warning FAQs

Q1. What is India's rank in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025?

Ans. India ranks 131 out of 148 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, indicating significant gender inequality.

Q2. What percentage of Indian women aged 15–49 are anaemic?

Ans. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 57% of Indian women aged 15 to 49 are anaemic.

Q3. Why is unpaid care work a concern in India?

Ans. Unpaid care work is a concern because Indian women perform nearly seven times more of it than men, which limits their time, agency, and ability to participate in the formal economy.

Q4. How can care infrastructure help women in India?

Ans. Investing in care infrastructure such as childcare and eldercare services can reduce the burden of unpaid work on women and help them enter or re-enter the workforce.

Q5. Why is gender equality crucial for India's future?

Ans. Gender equality is crucial for India's future because it is essential for sustaining economic growth, addressing demographic shifts, and ensuring national development.

Source: **The Hindu**

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/daily-editorial-analysis-12-july-2025/>

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