



The dream of being an AI powerhouse

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Highlights

- AI is the use of computers to make decisions that are normally made by humans. Many forms of AI surround Indians already, including chatbots on retail websites and programs that flag fraudulent bank activity.
- In a recent discussion paper, NITI Aayog has chalked out an ambitious strategy for India to become an artificial intelligence (AI) powerhouse.
- NITI Aayog envisions AI solutions for India on a scale not seen anywhere in the world today, especially in five key sectors — agriculture, healthcare, education, smart cities and infrastructure, and transport.
- In agriculture, for example, machines will provide information to farmers on the quality of soil, when to sow, where to spray herbicide, and when to expect pest infestations. It's an idea with great potential: India has 30 million farmers with Smartphone's, but poor extension services.
- If computers help agricultural universities advise farmers on best practices, India could see a farming revolution.

Issues

However, there are formidable obstacles. AI start-ups already offer some solutions, but the challenge lies in scaling these to cover the entire value chain, as NITI Aayog envisions.

- The first problem is data. Machine learning, the set of technologies used to create AI, is a data-guzzling monster. It takes reams of historical data as input, identifies the relationships among data elements, and makes predictions.
- Another problem for AI firms today is finding the right people. NITI Aayog's report has bleak news: only about 50 Indian scientists carry out "serious research" and they are concentrated in elite institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Science.

what needs to be done?

- Better collection and digitisation of data under existing programs.
- Second, to close the skill gap, NITI Aayog suggests setting up a network of basic and applied AI research institutes. These institutes must collaborate closely with agricultural universities, medical colleges and infrastructure planners for better results.
- Third, NITI Aayog's ambitious road map does not mention deadlines or funding. Without these, it lacks accountability. The government must make haste and specify its commitments on these fronts.

Source: The Hindu