

Beyond data: India must aim for AI sovereignty

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The government, industry leaders, and policymakers must act swiftly to create an AI ecosystem that fosters indigenous innovation. This will require investments, regulatory clarity, and a cultural shift prioritising AI research and development as a national goal



It is time for India to recognise that in the 21st century, true sovereignty is not just about protecting borders or data—it is about controlling the algorithms that will shape the future. File image

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping global power, with nations investing heavily to dominate the AI-driven future. The United States (US), China, and the European Union (EU) have secured strategic control over AI, yet India is playing catch-up despite its digital strength. While data sovereignty has been debated, India must now prioritise AI sovereignty—ensuring complete control over AI development, deployment, and benefits.

AI is not just a technological breakthrough; it is a geopolitical tool, an economic force multiplier, and a driver of societal change. The nations that dictate AI narratives today will control the digital future. While Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has spoken of the launch of an Indigenous AI model soon, India remains a passive participant for now, risking digital dependence and economic subjugation.

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India's Position in the Global AI Race

The AI revolution has been led by nations that recognise its strategic importance. The US and China dominate with substantial government-backed investments, while the EU prioritises responsible AI frameworks. India, despite initiatives like the Production-Linked Incentive scheme, still lags in foundational AI research, semiconductor manufacturing, and computing infrastructure—key drivers of AI sovereignty.

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Complicating matters is the delayed enforcement of India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA), 2023, as crucial implementation 'Rules' remain undecided. Moreover, India's AI landscape requires additional legislation(s) [or soft-law frameworks] beyond the DPDPA, which primarily addresses data protection but not broader AI governance. Critical issues like algorithmic accountability, liability frameworks, and ethical AI development remain unregulated. Without strong policies, AI models trained on Indian datasets may still be controlled by foreign entities, jeopardising digital autonomy.

Beyond Data Sovereignty

India is vocal about data sovereignty—the principle that Indian laws should govern data generated within its borders. However, in an AI-driven world, data control alone is insufficient. AI sovereignty requires not just data protection but also indigenous development of AI models, algorithms, and computational infrastructure.

Today, AI breakthroughs are primarily dominated by the U.S. and China, which build models using vast datasets, including data from developing countries like India. Ironically, while Indian users contribute significantly to training these AI models, the economic gains, control, and intellectual property remain with foreign corporations. This raises a critical question: Despite its tech prowess, why hasn't India produced giants like OpenAI, Meta, or Perplexity?

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For instance, OpenAI's GPT models likely rely on Indian content, yet India has no influence over their development or deployment. This exemplifies digital colonialism, where data from developing nations fuels the AI supremacy of a few global players, offering little return to the source nations. True AI sovereignty would ensure that India not only safeguards its data but also builds its own AI infrastructure—developing semiconductor capabilities, computational power, and indigenous large language models (LLMs) to secure its place in the AI revolution.

What India Must Do to Secure AI Sovereignty

India must establish national AI research institutes to fund fundamental AI research, set up AI supercomputing facilities, and invest in semiconductor manufacturing. Indian tech companies and academic institutions must focus on building homegrown AI models that cater to the country's linguistic and socio-economic diversity.

The government should collaborate with Indian tech firms, startups, and universities to create an AI ecosystem that fosters innovation. The success of ISRO in the space sector provides a strong precedent for how public-private cooperation can drive technological advancement. AI sovereignty must also include ethical and governance considerations. India currently relies on cloud computing services from American and Chinese firms. To achieve AI sovereignty, India needs its cloud infrastructure and AI-driven data centers to reduce reliance on foreign tech giants.

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With one of the world's largest youth populations, India can train its workforce in AI and related technologies, ensuring that AI development is not limited to a few elite institutions but democratised across the country. While India must develop indigenous AI capabilities, collaboration with global players is equally essential. Strategic alliances with countries that share India's vision for ethical AI development—such as the United Kingdom, EU, Japan and Australia—can help India access cutting-edge AI research and best practices.

A Call for Urgent Action

AI sovereignty is not just a technological necessity but a strategic imperative. As AI continues to redefine economies, security, and governance, India cannot afford to be a passive participant in this global revolution. The current trajectory, which focuses narrowly on data sovereignty, is inadequate. Instead, India must take bold steps to ensure that AI development, control, and benefits remain within its jurisdiction.

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Failing to do so will leave India vulnerable to digital dependence, economic exploitation, and geopolitical subjugation in the AI-driven world order. It is time for India to recognise that in the 21st century, true sovereignty is not just about protecting borders or data—it is about controlling the algorithms that will shape the future.

The author is a Chevening Scholar; an Assistant Professor at Jindal Global Law School; Of Counsel at Scriboard; and the co-author of the book- Artificial Intelligence and Law: Challenges Demystified. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.

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