

## Defending Minds From Algorithms

As AI companions grow emotionally persuasive, India must recognise mental integrity as a constitutional safeguard against subtle algorithmic influence shaping beliefs, choices and autonomy

BY Krishna Deo Singh Chauhan & Sidharth Chauhan 18 Feb 2026 11:13 PM



Large Language Model (LLM)- based chatbots are no longer mere tools meant to be used intermittently. With pervasiveness, conversational sophistication, and deliberate 'human-like' features, they increasingly operate as 'partners' that are emotionally salient and active across personal, intimate, and professional life.

They have many beneficial impacts, such as enhancing productivity and creativity, expanding access to knowledge, supporting learning and decision-making, offering companionship, and lowering barriers to professional and personal assistance. However, with their growing use, their impact on user agency and psyche must also be carefully evaluated.

In recent months, multiple documented incidents globally have shown the ability of these systems to impact this agency. In some instances, these systems have reinforced distorted beliefs and contributed to serious psychological distress, raising concerns that such harms are no longer isolated. More broadly, worries have grown about design choices that encourage emotional reliance and habitual use, even when they may not support user well-being. This creates a 'steering effect' where the AI does not just predict user behaviour, but actively shapes it through repetitive, emotive reinforcement.

In such contexts, where AI systems increasingly function as 'partners', the appropriate frame extends beyond accuracy and privacy to include mental integrity, the idea that a person's cognitive and psychological self-governance should remain protected as these technologies evolve. Recognising this interest is not about constraining progress, but about fostering responsible innovation that builds durable trust and supports the long-term legitimacy of this rapidly advancing field.

### The right to mental integrity

While the right to mental integrity is not new, it may need repurposing for the age of AI 'partners'. In European instruments, mental integrity is most explicitly protected in Article 3 of the EU Charter, and in the ECHR system, it is typically addressed through Article 8's protection of private life, including psychological integrity. In practice, many leading cases arise in medical or coercive settings (including forced treatment), and Article 8 claims generally require a sufficiently serious adverse impact on a person's physical or psychological integrity. Additionally, while this right is acknowledged in some other jurisdictions, there is ongoing debate about the extent to which it protects individuals from non-physical forms of interference, such as psychological manipulation.

In recent years, extensive literature has emerged arguing that the right needs to be reimagined to address a new class of 'soft' interferences that alter the mind. This reimagined right would prohibit interventions that bypass a user's conscious control or reasoning capacities, using techniques that manipulate the mind not by force, but by surreptitiously altering mental states in ways the subject cannot detect or resist.

AI 'partners' call for a limited update to existing legal frameworks, which were not built to address quieter forms of algorithmic influence. Systems that simulate companionship may not involve physical coercion or cause immediate clinical harm, and so can fall outside traditional ideas of mental integrity. Given their emotional connection and human-like interaction, if such systems gradually shape a user's beliefs or reinforce harmful views, cognitive autonomy may still be affected even without bodily interference.

### The Right in India

*Justice Puttaswamy v. Union of India* is well known for having established the fundamental right to privacy in India. Puttaswamy opens an important constitutional path towards 'mental integrity' by tying privacy to dignity, autonomy, and decisional freedom. But its vocabulary has largely developed through concerns about intrusion, collection, disclosure, and surveillance, in short, protection from access and exposure. That framework does not yet fully grapple with a newer category of harm – technologies that do not merely know our choices, but systematically shape them. Persuasive AI 'partners', and in the near future, neurotechnologies can personalise influence and bypass reflective deliberation, even without any classic 'privacy breach'. The current focus on 'informational privacy' fails to address this 'decisional interference' where the harm is not that data was taken, but that the user's very will was subtly bypassed.

Puttaswamy is most fully developed in contexts where mental harms arise from coercion, bodily restraint, compelled disclosure, or the chilling effect of surveillance. While the judgment is philosophically expansive and deliberately future-facing, its application has thus far been clearer in cases involving intrusion or constraint than in those involving more diffuse forms of influence on mental agency. The harder technological case is direct interference with the conditions of mental agency itself, continuous micro-targeting, and closed-loop feedback that modulates attention, emotion, and impulse over time. These practices can erode mental integrity even when formal consent exists, and deception is hard to prove.

Finally, the principal threat today comes from privately owned systems. A right that is enforceable primarily against the State risks being underinclusive. Data protection, consumer protection, tort, and contract laws help, but they are piecemeal and often misaimed, focused on data processing, consent formality, deception, or ex post loss. They do not always reach more subtle forms of behavioural influence and cumulative erosion of agency. A separate right to mental integrity should not only supply the missing normative anchor and justify design-stage duties and remedies, but also meaningfully bind private actors, not just the State. Recognising this right as having 'horizontal' application would empower citizens to hold tech conglomerates accountable for predatory design choices that compromise cognitive sovereignty.

### A 'Summit' moment for safeguarding the individual agency

As India convenes the India AI Impact Summit 2026, a rare agenda-setting moment to shape global expectations for safe, trustworthy AI in the world's largest democracy, it should use that platform to recognise the right to mental integrity explicitly. Doing so need not be framed as a constraint on innovation, but as a clarity-giving constitutional anchor that guides design choices, safeguards user agency, and strengthens public trust as AI 'partners' become part of everyday life.

*Views expressed are personal. Krishna Deo Singh Chauhan is an Associate Professor and Assistant Dean, Sidharth Chauhan is an Associate Professor & Associate Dean, both at Jindal Global Law School*

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BY Shikhar Malhotra 11 June 2026 11:53 PM

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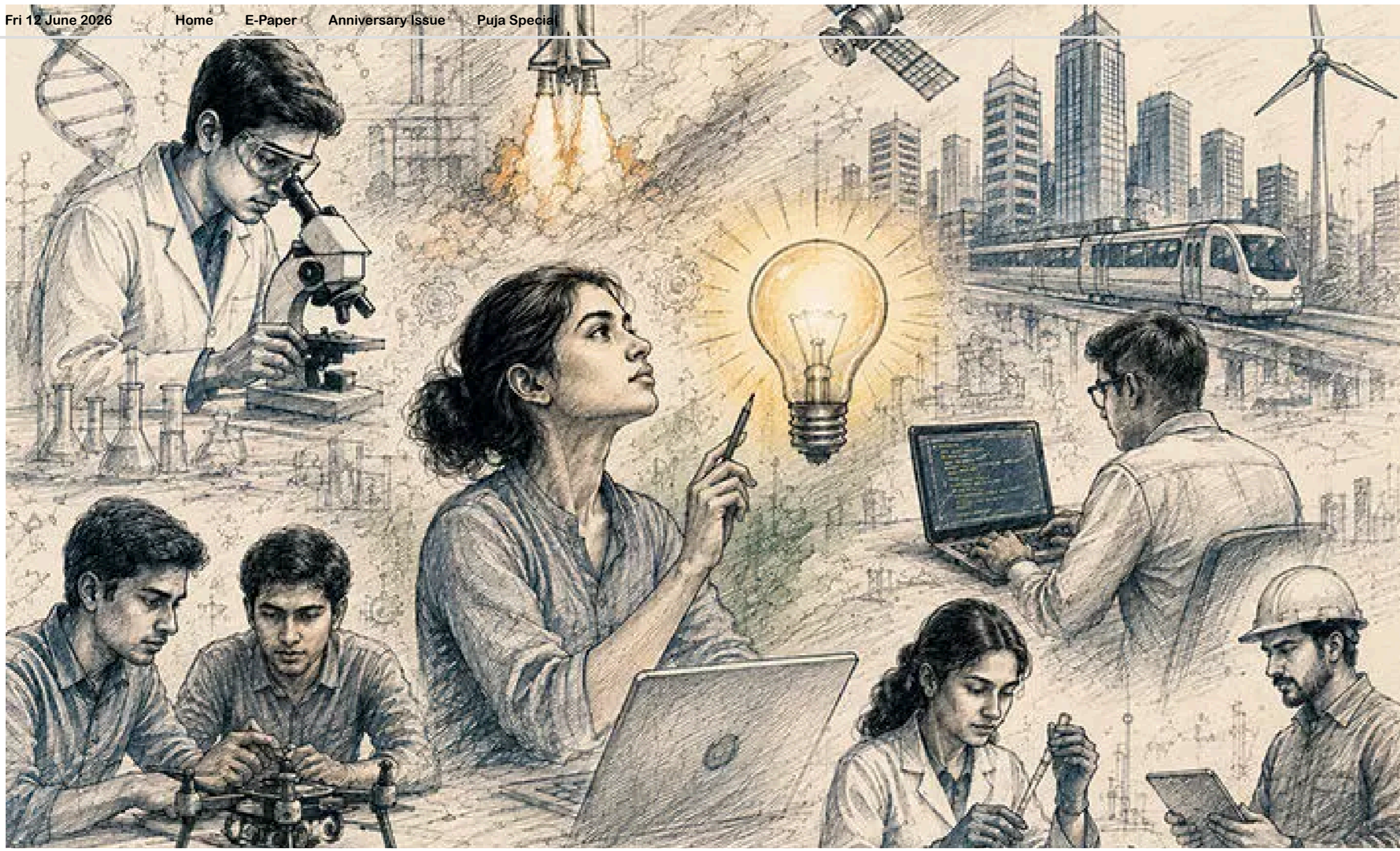
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Over the last decade, India has built many of the foundations required for an innovation-led economy. The number of Government of India recognised start-ups has grown from around 500 in 2016 to more than 2 lakh by December 2025. Recognised start-ups have also created more than 21 lakh jobs, showing how policy support has translated into enterprise creation and employment.

This momentum has been supported by investments in digital infrastructure, entrepreneurship, research, higher education and innovation-led policy. India's innovation capacity is also gaining global recognition. In the Global Innovation Index 2025, India ranked 38th among 139 economies and first among lower middle-income economies.

Initiatives such as Startup India, Atal Innovation Mission, IDEX, BIRAC and the IndiaAI Mission have helped create stronger pathways for entrepreneurship and research-backed innovation. The Atal Innovation Mission has supported 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs of the Ministry of Education and run by NITI Aayog, engaging more than 1.1 crore students, while the IndiaAI Mission has been approved with an outlay of ₹10,371.92 crore over five years.

The next challenge is execution

Policy has created the base. The next phase will depend on how effectively ideas move from frameworks to real-world solutions.

Across the country, a new generation of founders, researchers and students is building with a confidence that feels distinctly Indian. Ambitious, globally aware and practical, this generation is solving for scale from day one because India itself demands scale. Their work spans healthcare, clean energy, manufacturing, mobility, AI, semiconductors, agriculture, biotechnology and deep-tech, each area critical to the country's future.

Innovation cannot thrive in silos

There is growing recognition that innovation cannot be built by one part of the system alone. Governments can create enabling frameworks. Industry can provide scale, market access and operational understanding. Universities and research institutions can nurture talent, experimentation and discovery. Real progress happens when these parts work together.

Public institutions are showing the way

India's public Higher Education Institutions, like IITs and IISc, have played an important role in building this innovation base. IIT Madras and IIT Bombay have emerged as strong deep-tech incubation hubs, have over 1000 startups, with a combined valuation exceeding over 9 billion dollars creating tens of thousands of direct jobs. In FY 2024-25 alone, IIT Madras incubated over 100 deep-tech start-ups. This matters because it shows how universities can move beyond teaching and become centres for research, product development, enterprise creation and industry collaboration.

Private universities must deepen the innovation culture

Private institutions also have an important role to play in expanding India's innovation ecosystem. Universities such as Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR and KREA University can help build environments where interdisciplinary learning, research, entrepreneurship and real-world problem-solving come together. At Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR, this means encouraging students to question assumptions, work across disciplines and engage with complex challenges. Innovation cannot be treated only as an output. It has to become a mindset shaped through curiosity, rigour and execution discipline.

Taking Indian innovation to the world

Bharat Innovates 2026, an initiative by the Ministry of Education, captures this moment well. Announced during the India-France Year of Innovation, the initiative reflects a larger national effort to take ideas born in India's education and research ecosystem to global markets, investors, institutions and industry partners.

This aligns closely with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, the national aspiration to build a developed India by the centenary of independence. Its focus on pilots, co-development, research partnerships, investment and market access is important because this is where innovation becomes real. Ideas have to leave the lab, find users, meet industry needs and prove that they can go beyond India.

This matters because it creates resilience, adaptability, and execution discipline, qualities evident in the ventures showcased at Bharat Innovates 2026 in France. The range is remarkable. Indian companies are building quantum cybersecurity platforms, AI systems for industrial safety, advanced robotics, multilingual AI models, climate technologies and next-generation healthcare solutions. Many of these ventures have emerged from India's academic and research ecosystem, reflecting the growing relationship between higher education and enterprise creation.

What India must strengthen now

As India moves towards the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, the ability to convert knowledge into practical, scalable outcomes is important. Economic growth alone will not define a nation's status as a developed nation. The ability to create original technology, strengthen research capability and build globally competitive institutions will matter just as much.

There are a few areas that deserve attention as India strengthens its innovation ecosystem. Industry-academia partnerships need to become more sustained and long-term. Many breakthrough technologies require patient capital, deeper research cycles and continuous collaboration between scientists, entrepreneurs and industry leaders.

India also needs stronger pathways that accelerate research from the laboratory into products and enterprises. Young innovators often struggle during the transition from early experimentation to commercial deployment. Better support systems for testing, mentoring, funding and market access can help bridge this gap. Finally, innovation ecosystems grow stronger when they remain globally connected.

International collaboration in research, technology and education creates opportunities for shared learning and faster progress. Platforms such as Bharat Innovates are important because they allow Indian innovators to engage with global investors, institutions and industry leaders at a meaningful level.

Innovation will shape India's global role

India has entered a phase where innovation is becoming part of the national imagination. It can be seen in classrooms, start-ups, research labs, manufacturing facilities and young companies trying to solve problems with ambition and speed. The opportunity now is to sustain this momentum with patience, institutional depth and long-term thinking. The countries that shape the future will build ideas, talent and institutions that influence the world. India has every opportunity to become one of them.

*Views expressed are personal. The writer is a Trustee, Shiv Nadar Foundation*

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