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THE GREAT URBAN REWIRING

Shadow to Silicon: How India's Cities Are Being Rebuilt for 2047

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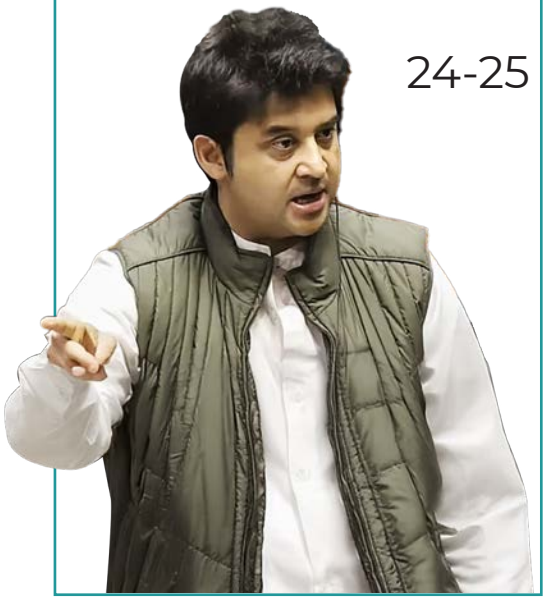
Northeast Pivot

From Promises to **Pavement**



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Jay Prakash Gupta

INDIA'S URBAN RESET

India's cities are undergoing a major reset, combining technology, infrastructure, and sustainable planning to shape the urban future.

India is standing at the threshold of a profound urban transformation. For decades, the country's cities grew faster than their infrastructure, producing crowded roads, stressed utilities, and sprawling informal settlements. Urban expansion often followed economic momentum rather than long-term planning. Today, however, a new vision is emerging—one that seeks not merely to expand cities but to fundamentally reset how they function.

This urban reset is being driven by a combination of technology, infrastructure investment, and policy reform. Cities are gradually shifting from reactive administration to data-driven governance. Integrated command centres, digital public services, and smart infrastructure are allowing urban authorities to monitor traffic, manage utilities, and respond to emergencies with greater speed and efficiency. What once required multiple offices and paperwork can increasingly be handled through streamlined digital systems.

Equally central to this reset is the push for sustainable growth. Electric mobility, green buildings, renewable energy, and climate-resilient infrastructure are becoming critical elements of urban planning. The goal is not simply to accommodate rising populations but to create cities that are cleaner, more efficient, and capable of supporting long-term economic growth.

Yet the success of India's urban reset will depend on inclusivity. Millions still live in informal neighbourhoods where access to housing, sanitation, and reliable services remains limited. Urban transformation cannot be confined to central districts or technology hubs; it must extend to the edges of cities where the majority of new residents will settle.

If executed thoughtfully, this reset could redefine India's development trajectory. By 2047, the nation's cities could evolve from congested growth centres into engines of innovation, sustainability, and opportunity—driving India's next era of progress.

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The **Bamboo** Gateway

Guwahati's new terminal blends high-tech transit with the soul of the Northeast.

Travelers landing in Assam this December were greeted by a forest made of glass and steel. On December 22, the new nature-themed terminal at Guwahati Airport took flight, inspired by the region's iconic bamboo craft. But the real heavy lifting is happening in Dibrugarh, where a ₹10,601 crore fertilizer plant just kicked into gear. Together, these projects are turning the "Gateway to the Northeast" into a massive industrial engine, ensuring that both people and local economies are moving faster than ever before.

Navi Mumbai Takes Off

A decade-long dream nears reality as India's newest aviation hub prepares for its first flight.

The skyline of Navi Mumbai looks very different this month. The Navi Mumbai International Airport (NMIA) reached full operational readiness in December, signaling an end to the congestion at its sister airport across the creek. While planes prepped for takeoff, the state's power grid got its own boost with the commissioning of the Subansiri Lower Project Unit-2. Between a new global flight path and a strengthened power line, Maharashtra is reinforcing its status as the nation's primary logistics and energy powerhouse.

Hansi's New Identity

Haryana's map gets an update as Hansi steps out from Hisar's administrative shadow.

On Christmas Eve, the residents of Hansi received a gift decades in the making: the official title of Haryana's 23rd district. By peeling Hansi away from the sprawling Hisar district, the state government is betting on "hyper-local" governance. For the average citizen, this means shorter trips to the DC office and faster red-tape cutting. It's a classic move in administrative decentralization—bringing the seat of power closer to the people who actually live, work, and vote in the region.

The **Three-Hour** Dash

Engineers clear the final hurdles for a record-breaking expressway connecting Delhi to the hills.

The long, grueling crawl from Delhi to Dehradun is officially a thing of the past. As December wrapped up, construction crews laid the final layers of asphalt on the Delhi-Dehradun Expressway. With the full corridor now prepped for its January grand opening, the travel time is set to plummet to under three hours. It's not just a road; it's an economic corridor that brings the Himalayan foothills within commuting distance of the capital, promising a massive boom for Uttarakhand's tourism and trade.

The **Digital Beat**

Microsoft and Maharashtra Police team up to give detectives an AI-powered edge.

Policing in Maharashtra just got a "Copilot." Following a visit from Microsoft's Satya Nadella on December 15, the state police launched a first-of-its-kind investigative AI tool. This isn't science fiction—it's a system that scans through massive datasets to find patterns in crimes that human eyes might miss. By integrating predictive policing, Maharashtra is moving from reacting to crimes to anticipating them, giving officers a high-tech shield against an increasingly digital underworld.

AI Joins The **Cabinet**

Good Governance Day sees the launch of digital tools designed to kill bureaucracy.

December 25 wasn't just a holiday; it was a "Digital Upgrade" day for the Union Government. The highlight? An AI Recruitment Rules Generator for the DoPT. What used to take months of manual drafting by tired officials now happens in minutes. By launching five such AI-powered initiatives, the government is signaling a shift from "paper-first" to "data-first" governance, aiming to make the wheels of the Indian bureaucracy spin at the speed of silicon.

Connecting Andhra's Last Mile

The digital divide in Andhra Pradesh is closing fast following a landmark agreement between Digital Bharat Nidhi and the state government. Backed by ₹2,432 crore in federal funding, the partnership targets the expedited rollout of the Amended BharatNet Programme. The initiative will modernize infrastructure across 13,426 Gram Panchayats, shifting older networks to resilient ring topologies while adding 480 newly created local divisions. Beyond cables and speed, the project aims to deliver over 500,000 rural home fiber connections. Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia emphasized that this "democratization of technology" will empower villagers with seamless access to telemedicine, e-education, and digital governance, ensuring rural talent reaches the global stage.

Government Turns Junk into Gold

The Indian government's "Waste to Wealth" initiative has hit a staggering milestone, generating ₹4,405.28 crore from scrap sales since 2021. The latest 'Secretariat Reforms' report reveals that March 2026 alone saw 5,188 sites cleared, freeing 4.34 lakh sq. ft. of office space and raking in ₹115.85 crore. Beyond the revenue, the drive is sparking creativity and speed. Waste materials are being reincarnated as benches and public art by the Ministry of Railways and Department of Atomic Energy. Meanwhile, digital "delayering" has slashed bureaucratic red tape, cutting file transaction levels by nearly half to accelerate national decision-making.

India's Organ Donation Revolution

India's organ transplantation landscape has undergone a historic transformation, achieving a staggering fourfold increase in procedures over the last decade. Annual transplants surged from under 5,000 in 2013 to nearly 20,000 by 2025, driven by the National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organization (NOTTO). Bolstered by Prime Minister Modi's 'Mann Ki Baat' appeals, public participation has reached new heights, with 4.8 lakh citizens registering via a streamlined Aadhaar-based system. Remarkably, India now leads the world in complex hand transplants. Through digital reforms and "Green Corridors" for rapid transport, the nation has built a responsive, ethical ecosystem that delivers world-class clinical outcomes at a fraction of global costs.

Namo Bharat Reshapes NCR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi ushered in a new era of infrastructure by inaugurating India's first Namo Bharat Rapid Rail and the Meerut Metro. The project marks a global first, with both rapid rail and metro services operating on the same station and track, seamlessly connecting intra-city travel with a direct corridor to Delhi. The Prime Minister highlighted that the "Double-Engine" government's work culture ensures projects are completed day and night once the foundation is laid. Beyond mobility, the corridor empowers local MSMEs by enabling direct global exports and honors the legacy of Chaudhary Charan Singh through farmer-centric development.

Cultivating India's Next-Gen Scientists

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has taken a decisive step toward future-proofing the nation's health security by concluding SANVAD 2026. This three-day national conclave, hosted at the National Institute of Malaria Research in New Delhi, brought together 400 doctoral scholars to bridge the gap between academic rigor and real-world community impact. Industry veterans and policymakers, including ICMR Director General Dr. Rajiv Bahl, challenged scholars to move beyond "tick-box research" and focus on high-quality, impactful science. From mastering systematic reviews to exploring global career pathways, the assembly provided a roadmap for researchers to lead in pharmaceutical innovation and evidence-based policy. The rotating initiative now moves to Hyderabad for 2027, continuing its mission to decentralize and strengthen India's scientific leadership.

Bachchan Joins Skill India Mission

In a major push toward a Viksit Bharat, Minister Shri Jayant Chaudhary has launched the "Badhna Hai Toh Yahan Judna Hai" campaign to accelerate India's digital skilling ecosystem. Partnering with legendary actor Amitabh Bachchan, the initiative aims to drive nationwide awareness for the Skill India Digital Hub (SIDH). SIDH has already onboarded over 1.5 crore candidates, serving as a unified AI-enabled platform for upskilling and reskilling. Designed as a mobile-first experience, it offers industry-aligned courses in over 21 languages, featuring digitally verified credentials and QR-code-enabled CVs. By consolidating government resources, SIDH democratizes access to lifelong learning, ensuring every citizen—from students to entrepreneurs—can future-proof their careers in the era of AI and automation.

India Gears Up for CWG 2030

India's sporting stature reached a new peak as the nation secured hosting rights for the 2030 Commonwealth Games, a move hailed by top athletes as a precursor to the 2036 Olympic bid. Olympic medalist Rupinder Pal Singh and boxer Rohit Tokas welcomed the news, noting that competing on home soil after 20 years will provide an "experience of a lifetime" and trigger a massive infrastructure boom. The announcement coincided with the 62nd Fit India Sundays on Cycle, which saw 25 lakh citizens participate across 1,000 locations. Organized alongside ESIC's 75th-anniversary celebrations, the movement continues to promote sustainable mobility and fitness as a Jan Andolan, cementing India's identity as a rising global sports powerhouse.

India's Pharma Leap

In a major strategic push under the Chintan Shivir series, the Government of India and industry leaders have outlined a roadmap to double the nation's pharmaceutical market value to $130 billion by 2030. Following a 9.4% growth in exports—reaching $30.47 billion in FY 2024–25—the focus is now shifting from volume to high-value segments like biologics and biosimilars. A cornerstone of this transition is the newly announced Biopharma SHAKTI initiative. With a ₹10,000 crore outlay, this flagship program aims to capture 5% of the global biopharmaceutical market by strengthening domestic manufacturing and reducing import dependence.

Amaravati to Anchor India's Quantum Future

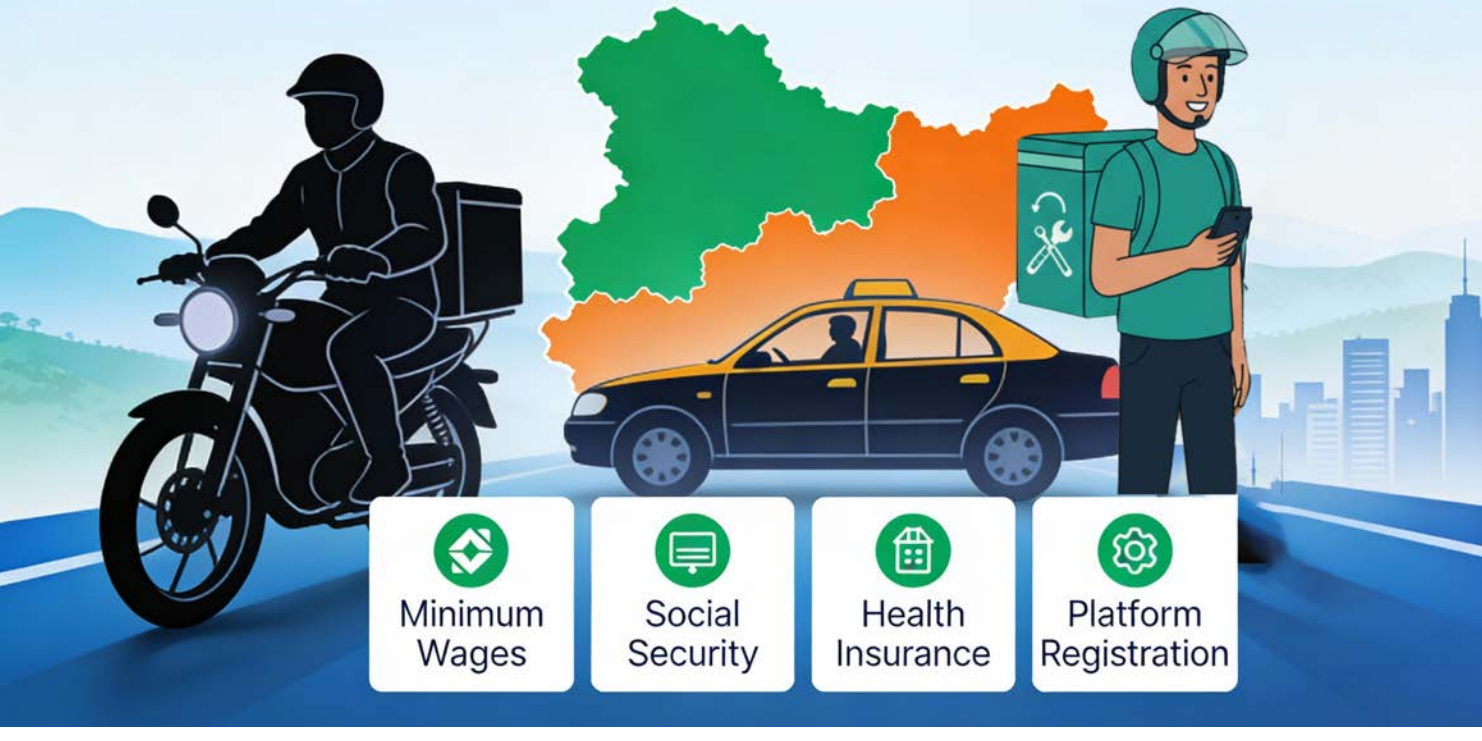
India's deep-tech landscape is shifting to Amaravati following a landmark pact between NIELIT and the Andhra Pradesh government to establish the nation's first dedicated Quantum and AI University. Signed during the India AI Impact Summit, the campus will serve as the centerpiece of the state's ambitious "Quantum Valley" initiative. Moving beyond traditional academics, the university will focus exclusively on frontier domains like quantum algorithms, AI-quantum convergence, and cybersecurity. As a Deemed-to-be University, NIELIT's new hub will integrate high-performance computing labs and deep-tech incubators. This strategic move aims to nurture a specialized workforce, positioning India as a global nucleus for next-generation innovation and research.

Deep-Sea Access to Boost Seafood Exports

India has unlocked a new frontier for its marine fisheries sector with the national launch of the Access Pass for Fishing in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Launched on February 20, 2026, from Veraval, Gujarat, this digital initiative empowers fishers to venture beyond traditional 50-nautical-mile limits into the vast 200-nautical-mile EEZ. Issued free of cost via the ReALCRaft online portal, the Access Pass targets mechanized and large motorized vessels, while exempting traditional, non-motorized crafts to protect small-scale livelihoods. By integrating with MPEDA and EIC for digital health and catch certificates, the system ensures end-to-end traceability required for premium international markets. This shift to sustainable harvesting of high-value oceanic species like tuna is projected to significantly elevate India's standing as a global seafood export powerhouse. ■

SAFETY NET FOR THE APP ECONOMY

Rights for Gig



With gubernatorial assent to a first-of-its-kind welfare law, Jharkhand becomes India's fourth state to formally protect platform-based workers-reshaping the rules of the digital labour market. **By Ravindra Kr. Sharma**

On December 18, 2025, Jharkhand took a decisive step toward formalising the app-driven workforce as Governor Santosh Gangwar gave assent to the Jharkhand Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2025. The move places the state alongside Rajasthan, Karnataka and Bihar in enacting dedicated legislation for gig workers—one of the fastest-growing yet least protected segments of India's labour force.

Bringing the "Invisible" Worker Into Law

For years, delivery partners, cab drivers and on-demand service providers have powered Jharkhand's digital economy without the safeguards of formal employment. The new Act changes that equation by statutorily recognising gig workers, striking a balance between platform flexibility and social security.

Benefit	Description
Minimum Wages	Ensures fair pay standards for all gig roles
Social Security	Life, disability, and old-age coverage
Health Insurance	Medical support and accident benefits
Platform Registration	Mandatory aggregator compliance
Welfare Board	State oversight for grievances

The law creates a legal bridge between the algorithm-driven marketplace and the welfare obligations traditionally associated with organised labour—an intervention that could redefine labour governance in eastern India.

What the Law Delivers

A statutory Welfare Board: Headed by the State Labour Minister, the board will register gig workers and platform aggregators such as Swiggy, Zomato, Ola and Uber, and oversee welfare implementation.

A dedicated Social Security Fund: Financed through a 1–2% welfare cess on every platform transaction, the fund will provide accident, health and life insurance, along with maternity benefits and old-age support—shifting the welfare burden from individuals to the platform economy.

Universal ID and portability: Each registered worker will receive a Universal ID and unique account number, ensuring benefits remain portable even when workers move between platforms.

Minimum earnings and due process: For the first time, per-transaction payments will be benchmarked to a minimum wage framework. Platforms must also give a 14-day notice before blocking a worker, with disputes routed through a dedicated e-grievance redressal cell.

Jharkhand's new law creates a welfare board, social security fund, universal IDs, minimum earnings, and due process-bringing protection, portability, and accountability to the gig economy for the first time.

Why It Matters

Beyond welfare, the Act introduces an element of algorithmic accountability, curbing arbitrary deactivations and opaque pay structures. By embedding rights, due process and funding mechanisms into law, Jharkhand signals that the digital economy cannot exist outside social responsibility.

Smart View: By reassigning social security obligations from the worker to the platform, Jharkhand is advancing a model of "compassionate capitalism." Its emphasis on transparency and grievance redressal sets a new benchmark for digital labour governance—one that other states in eastern India are likely to watch, and perhaps replicate.

In a sector defined by flexibility and precarity, Jharkhand's new law offers something rare in the gig economy: certainty. ■

Brahmaputra Underwater Tunnel

India's first road-cum-rail underwater tunnel promises to revolutionize connectivity, boost trade, and strengthen national security in the Northeast, says Ravindra Kumar Sharma

Assam is set to script history in India's infrastructure journey. Chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has approved a 33.7 km twin-tube underwater tunnel beneath the Brahmaputra River. With two-lane roads in each tube and integrated rail infrastructure in one, this ₹18,662 crore project will connect Gohpur (NH-15) to Numaligarh (NH-715). India's first underwater road-cum-rail tunnel — and only the second of its kind globally — it marks a bold leap in connectivity and strategic strength for Assam and the Northeast.

"This tunnel is not just about faster travel—it is about strategic connectivity and economic empowerment for India's Northeast," said a senior government official.

Currently, the 240 km journey between Gohpur and Numaligarh via the Kaliabhambhora bridge takes six hours, meandering through Kaziranga National Park and Biswanath town. The new 4-lane access-controlled corridor will slash travel times, smooth freight movement, and integrate Assam with Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and the wider Northeast.

Beyond transport efficiency, the tunnel carries strategic significance. By enabling rapid mobilization of defense forces, equipment, and logistics across sensitive border areas, it strengthens India's national security posture. Multi-modal integration—including highways, railways, airports, and inland waterways—ensures resilient supply chains and disaster response capability.

The corridor links 11 economic, 3 social, and 2 tourist nodes, including Numaligarh Industrial Area and Kaziranga National Park, while connecting four railway stations, two airports, and two inland waterway terminals. The project is projected to generate 80 lakh person-days of direct and indirect employment, catalyzing regional economic growth.

Spanning 15.79 km underwater, the twin tubes will be constructed using state-of-the-art TBM (Tunnel Boring Machine) technology, with cut-and-cover sections for both road and rail. Once operational, the tunnel will become a strategic artery, facilitating trade, enhancing mobility, and boosting the Northeast's industrial and defense potential.

"For the first time, India will have a world-class underwater transport corridor that blends economic, social, and strategic imperatives," remarked a senior engineer involved in planning.

This visionary project embodies PM GatiShakti principles, merging multimodal connectivity, industrial development, employment generation, and national security into one monumental infrastructure achievement. ■

Brahmaputra Tunnel at a Glance

Feature	Detail
Project Length	33.7 km
Underwater Tunnel	15.79 km twin tube
Total Capital Cost	₹18,662 crore
Road Lanes	2 lanes each tube (4 lanes total)
Rail Integration	One tube with railway line
Major Nodes Connected	11 Economic, 3 Social, 2 Tourist
Rail Connectivity	Rangia~Mukongselek & Furkating~Mariani Lines
Airports	Donyi Polo Holongi Airport, Tezpur Airport
Inland Waterway Terminals	Biswanath Ghat, Tezpur
Employment Potential	80 lakh person-days
Strategic Advantage	Rapid Defence Mobilization, Trade Corridor, Regional Integration

The corridor connects 11 economic, 3 social, and 2 tourist nodes — including the Numaligarh Industrial Area and Kaziranga National Park — while linking four railway stations, two airports, and two inland waterway terminals. Expected to generate 80 lakh person-days of employment, the project is set to accelerate regional growth.

Five-Minute AI Care

Ai-powered primary healthcare access available nationwide in every local language

At the India AI Impact Summit 2026, Mukesh D. Ambani unveiled *Jio Arogya AI*, a voice-enabled primary healthcare platform designed to provide first medical guidance within five minutes on any mobile phone in local Indian languages.

Developed by Reliance Industries through its AI subsidiary, Reliance Intelligence, the platform functions as an AI-powered primary screening system aimed at expanding access to early-stage healthcare—particularly in underserved rural regions. The solution uses an AI-enabled diagnostic kiosk, described as a "smart mirror," capable of scanning eyes and skin to generate preliminary health assessments within minutes.

The system screens key health parameters, analyses potential risk factors, categorises patients by urgency, and recommends specialist referrals where necessary—while ensuring that treatment decisions remain under the supervision of qualified medical professionals. It also integrates portable X-ray and electrocardiography (ECG) services, tele-consultation capabilities, and medicine ordering through a unified digital interface.

Patients can interact with a multilingual, voice-based AI assistant designed to simulate doctor-like consultations for primary care, chronic disease management, and preventive health guidance.

Jio Arogya AI forms part of Reliance's broader AI-native product ecosystem, which includes Jio Shikshak (AI teaching assistant in 22 languages), Jio Krishi (satellite-driven voice advisories for farmers), Jio Bharat IQ (AI-enabled service companion), and Jio Frames—an AI-powered smart glasses device supporting real-time translation and voice-activated assistance.

Ambani also announced a planned ₹10 lakh crore investment over the next seven years to develop AI-ready data centres and edge compute infrastructure, including multi-gigawatt facilities under construction in Jamnagar. The initiative is aimed at delivering low-latency, affordable AI services by embedding compute capabilities directly into Jio's nationwide network.

Positioning AI as a public digital utility, Ambani noted that reducing the cost of intelligence—much like mobile data—will be central to enabling inclusive, scalable access to healthcare, education, and governance services across India. ■

Deepfake Rules Ahead

Centre Weighs Age Limits for Social Media Access

The Union government is in discussions with social media platforms to introduce age-based access restrictions and stronger safeguards against deepfakes, signalling tighter online safety norms for children.

Speaking at the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi, Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said consultations are underway to determine regulatory pathways on synthetic media and underage platform use.

Globally, Australia has enforced a nationwide ban on social media accounts for users under 16, while the United Kingdom and France are exploring similar age-verification laws.

In India, Andhra Pradesh and Goa are studying the feasibility of restricting minors' access to social media platforms.

Recent amendments to IT Rules now bring AI-generated content within due diligence norms, requiring platforms to label synthetic media and comply with takedown orders within three hours, as the government signals a tougher stance on online harms. ■

Beyond the Summit

India's AI summit shifts focus from headlines to governance, signaling stronger child safety, synthetic media regulation and sectoral accountability frameworks.

When the India AI Impact Summit concluded in New Delhi, public attention had already shifted. Headlines focused on organisational lapses, the widely reported Galgotias University episode, and the political debate that followed. Disruption overshadowed direction.

Yet beneath the noise, the summit marked a quieter — and potentially consequential — shift in India's approach to artificial intelligence governance.

Across keynote addresses and sectoral sessions, policymakers outlined emerging positions on child safety, synthetic media

regulation, sector-specific oversight, and accountability in high-risk AI deployments. Those signals may endure longer than the controversy.

A Global South Frame

At the opening session, Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw announced the New Delhi Frontier AI Commitments, a voluntary framework bringing together global frontier AI firms and Indian companies to promote responsible and inclusive AI development.

India's AI strategy, he said, rests on five layers: applications, models, compute, talent and energy. The focus extends beyond technological growth to digital sovereignty and democratisation — particularly for multilingual and Global South contexts often underrepresented in global datasets.

The framework proposes generating anonymised insights from real-world AI usage to guide policy decisions on employment, productivity and economic impact. It also seeks stronger contextual evaluation through language datasets and benchmarks for underserved linguistic ecosystems.

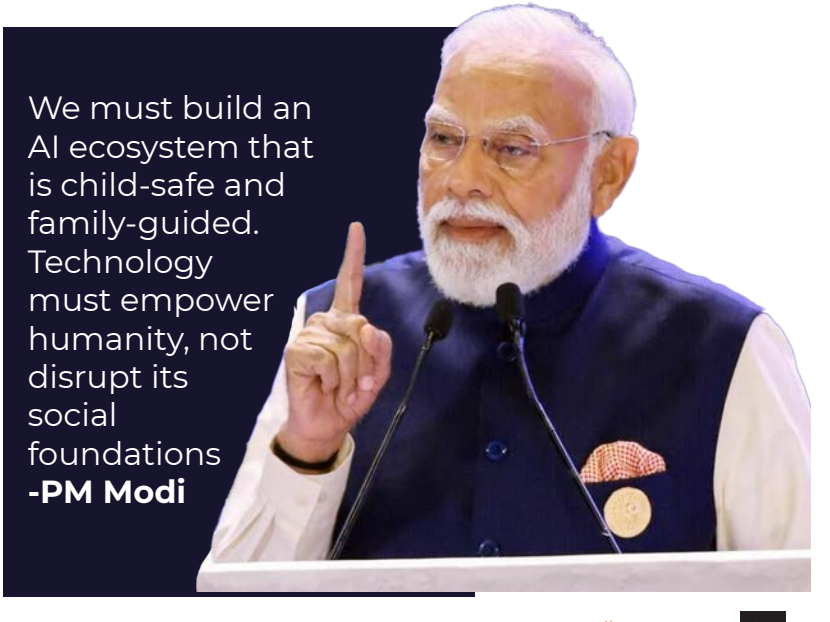
While voluntary, the initiative signals India's intent to shape global governance conversations, especially where equity and developmental priorities intersect.

Child Safety Moves to the Centre

Child protection emerged as a recurring theme throughout the summit.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised building a "child-safe and family-guided" AI ecosystem, arguing that online environments require the same care applied to educational curricula. His remarks, alongside ongoing government consultations with social media platforms, suggest a shift from voluntary safeguards toward enforceable compliance.

Structured age-verification systems, platform-side enforcement responsibilities and reduced reliance



on self-declared user inputs are under active consideration. Officials confirmed discussions with major platforms on age-based access restrictions and safeguards against deepfakes.

Taken together, the direction indicates that age gating may move from being a user responsibility to a platform compliance mandate.

Healthcare as a Governance Testbed

One of the summit's most concrete developments came from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which introduced the Strategy for Artificial Intelligence in Healthcare for India (SAHI).

Rather than proposing a standalone AI law, the framework integrates governance into existing sectoral regulation. It categorises AI use cases by risk and differentiates between administrative tools and high-impact clinical applications, aligning deployment with data protection and medical ethics standards.

Complementing the strategy is BODH, a benchmarking platform developed in collaboration with national health authorities. It aims to evaluate AI systems for performance and bias prior to deployment, signalling a move toward pre-deployment scrutiny in mission-critical sectors.

Authenticity Labels and Synthetic Media

Synthetic media regulation formed a parallel governance priority.

The Prime Minister called for global standards to address misinformation and deepfakes, proposing authenticity labels for AI-generated content — similar to nutrition labels on packaged goods — to help users distinguish between human-created and machine-generated material.

Recent amendments to India's IT Rules reflect a tightening stance. AI-generated content now falls within due diligence norms, and platforms must label permissible synthetic media while responding to government takedown requests within shortened timelines.

The regulatory emphasis appears to be shifting from post-facto moderation toward proactive transparency.

Sovereign Models and Broader Access

The summit also highlighted product-side momentum aligned with India's sovereign AI ambitions. Indian firms introduced foundational language models designed for multilingual interaction and enterprise-grade reasoning, reportedly trained on domestic compute infrastructure.

Efforts to extend AI access beyond smartphones — including integration into feature phones and wearable devices — reflect a broader policy objective: widening digital inclusion, particularly in rural and low-connectivity regions.

Autonomy and Accountability

Across defence, healthcare and financial infrastructure discussions, a common principle emerged: AI may accelerate decision-making, but accountability remains human.

Military officials underscored that AI can enhance speed and precision but cannot replace command authority in mission-critical contexts. Healthcare experts raised concerns about workforce preparedness as AI systems enter clinical workflows. Financial sector participants highlighted new liability questions as agentic AI systems begin acting autonomously rather than merely recommending actions.

As one participant noted during infrastructure sessions: agents cannot take accountability — humans and institutions do.

A Layered Governance Model

Rather than advancing a single omnibus AI law, the summit discussions suggest India is developing a layered governance model. Oversight is being integrated into existing regulatory systems while targeted sectoral frameworks emerge where risk is highest.

THREE TRAJECTORIES ARE BECOMING VISIBLE:

- Movement toward enforceable age-verification and synthetic media controls
- Expansion of sector-specific governance in healthcare and finance
- Reinforcement of accountability norms as AI systems gain autonomy
- The summit closed amid controversy, but its policy questions remain active. As attention shifts from announcements to enforcement, the coming months will determine whether these signals translate into institutional practice — or remain aspirational frameworks in a rapidly evolving technological landscape. ■

From Promises to **Pavement**

In India's Northeast, the government says the next chapter is about turning signed agreements into roads, rails and real jobs. **By JP Gupta**

When Jyotiraditya Scindia leaned forward to describe the Northeast as India's "first frontier," it sounded less like a slogan and more like a pivot.

For decades, the region was spoken of in terms of distance — from Delhi, from markets, from opportunity. Now, in conference rooms and review meetings, it is being framed as a gateway: to Southeast Asia, to new supply chains, to a younger workforce ready to anchor the next phase of growth.

But between ambition and arrival lies a harder story — the journey from memorandum to material.

Over the past 19 months, the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) has conducted roadshows, investor summits and outreach campaigns across India and abroad. The Rising Northeast Investors Summit 2025 alone helped generate ₹4.48 lakh crore in investment interest, resulting in 939 memorandums of understanding and letters of intent across energy, agri-food processing, and IT services.

On paper, it reads like acceleration. On the ground, the picture is more layered.

In states where terrain bends into hills and highways give way to narrow mountain roads, execution is rarely straightforward. Clearances must move through multiple administrative layers. Land records are often complex. Logistics can stretch timelines beyond projections.

Scindia acknowledged this friction — what he called the "implementation gap."

The government's response has been administrative rather than rhetorical. State-level nodal officers are being appointed as single-window anchors for investors. Field Technical Support Units have been deployed to troubleshoot regulatory bottlenecks. Chief Ministers across all eight Northeastern states now lead Sectoral High-Level Task Forces designed to align state and central priorities.

It is an attempt to replace fragmentation with coordination.

Under what officials describe as the "Ashtalakshmi" framework, these task forces are not symbolic committees but execution platforms. One state may focus on tourism circuits; another on food processing clusters; another on cross-border logistics. Fisheries, dairy and poultry value chains are being developed under a protein self-reliance push. Handloom and handicraft exports are being aligned with global markets.

The Northeast, in this telling, is not a single story — but eight simultaneous transitions.

Infrastructure remains the visible spine of that transformation.

Airports that once saw limited connectivity now operate with expanded routes; the count of operational airports has risen from nine to 17. Railway lines are inching toward a milestone long promised: connecting all eight state capitals by 2029. The Agartala-Akhaura rail link with Bangladesh promises to redraw trade distances, shortening the path between India's Northeast and regional ports.

For local entrepreneurs, these changes are less about symbolism and more about cost curves — fewer transit days, lower freight bills, broader markets.

Budgetary backing has followed rhetoric. The mandated 10 percent Gross Budgetary Support allocation for the Northeast reached ₹1,02,749 crore this fiscal cycle, reinforcing the Act East Policy not as a diplomatic aspiration but as an infrastructure program.

Yet numbers alone do not define transformation.

In the hills of Meghalaya, young graduates talk about IT hubs that would allow them to work without migrating. In Assam's industrial corridors, small manufacturers watch the rollout of the UNNATI (Uttar Poorva Transformative Industrialization) scheme, which offers capital incentives for setting up units locally. In Tripura, cross-border trade infrastructure is altering conversations about market access.

Seventy percent of the region's population is under 28 — a demographic statistic that policymakers cite frequently. But statistics do not build factories; implementation does.

That is why the current phase feels different. The conversation has shifted from announcing MoUs to tracking milestones. Review meetings are reportedly focused on project grounding rates — how many agreements have translated into land acquisition, foundation work, procurement contracts. ■

Policy Meets Pavement

The Northeast's transformation is entering its most difficult phase — execution.

Critics note that past investment waves have struggled to sustain momentum, slowed by geography, logistics and historical underinvestment. Supporters argue that new institutional mechanisms — nodal officers, task forces and structured monitoring — reflect lessons learned.

In policy terms, it is cooperative federalism. In practical terms, it is a test of coordination over complexity.

The memorandums are signed. The budgets allocated. The committees formed.

Now, progress will be measured not in announcements, but in delivery — bridges built, rails laid and jobs created.

From Veils to Volts

In Rajasthan's Thar Desert, semi-literate village women are becoming solar engineers - and carrying clean energy from sand dunes to the world. **By Nivedita**

At dawn in Rajasthan's Thar Desert, the sun rises without apology. For generations, it dictated the rhythm of life — harsh, unrelenting, a force to endure rather than embrace. Women woke before first light, finished chores before heat thickened the air, and retreated indoors as the day turned unforgiving. Electricity was uncertain. Kerosene lamps flickered. Darkness arrived early.

Today, that same sun is being rewired into opportunity.

In villages scattered across the desert, women in bright ghagras and once-familiar ghunghats kneel beside solar panels, testing voltages with steady hands. They solder circuit boards, assemble lanterns, climb modest rooftops to secure modules against desert winds. They are known simply as Solar Didis — elder sisters of sunlight.

Their revolution does not shout. It hums.

SANTOSH'S MORNING

Before sunrise, Santosh's courtyard glows with a lantern she built herself. By mid-morning, she is repairing panels, testing batteries and fixing faulty switches at the village solar centre. Toolkit in hand, she installs new systems and teaches families to trust the sun.
Once silent, she now speaks with authority. By evening, she mentors women across continents. Different languages. Same light.

THE CLASSROOM WITHOUT BOOKS

In Tilonia, a small town in Ajmer district, the Barefoot College does not resemble a conventional engineering institute. There are no thick textbooks, no whiteboards filled with equations. Instead, there are wires coded by colour, diagrams made of symbols, and hands learning by repetition.

Many of the women who arrive here have studied only until primary school. Some cannot read or write. None introduce themselves as engineers.

Yet within months, they are building solar lanterns from scratch.

Training begins with touch. Red wire to red socket. Blue to blue. Panels tilted toward the sun. Batteries assembled piece by piece. Mistakes are corrected not with reprimand but with demonstration. Practice precedes theory.

Illiteracy, here, is not a barrier - it is a design principle.

The women return to their villages not as trainees, but as technicians responsible for installing and maintaining entire micro-grids. They are not visiting contractors. They are neighbours, daughters-in-law, mothers — and now, electricians.

Trust travels faster when it wears a familiar face.

Rajasthan Chief Secretary V. Srinivas interacts with Solar Didis during a demonstration at Barefoot College, Tilonia, as women showcase their solar engineering and electrical skills under the Rajeevika–NRLM initiative.

POWER BEYOND WATTS

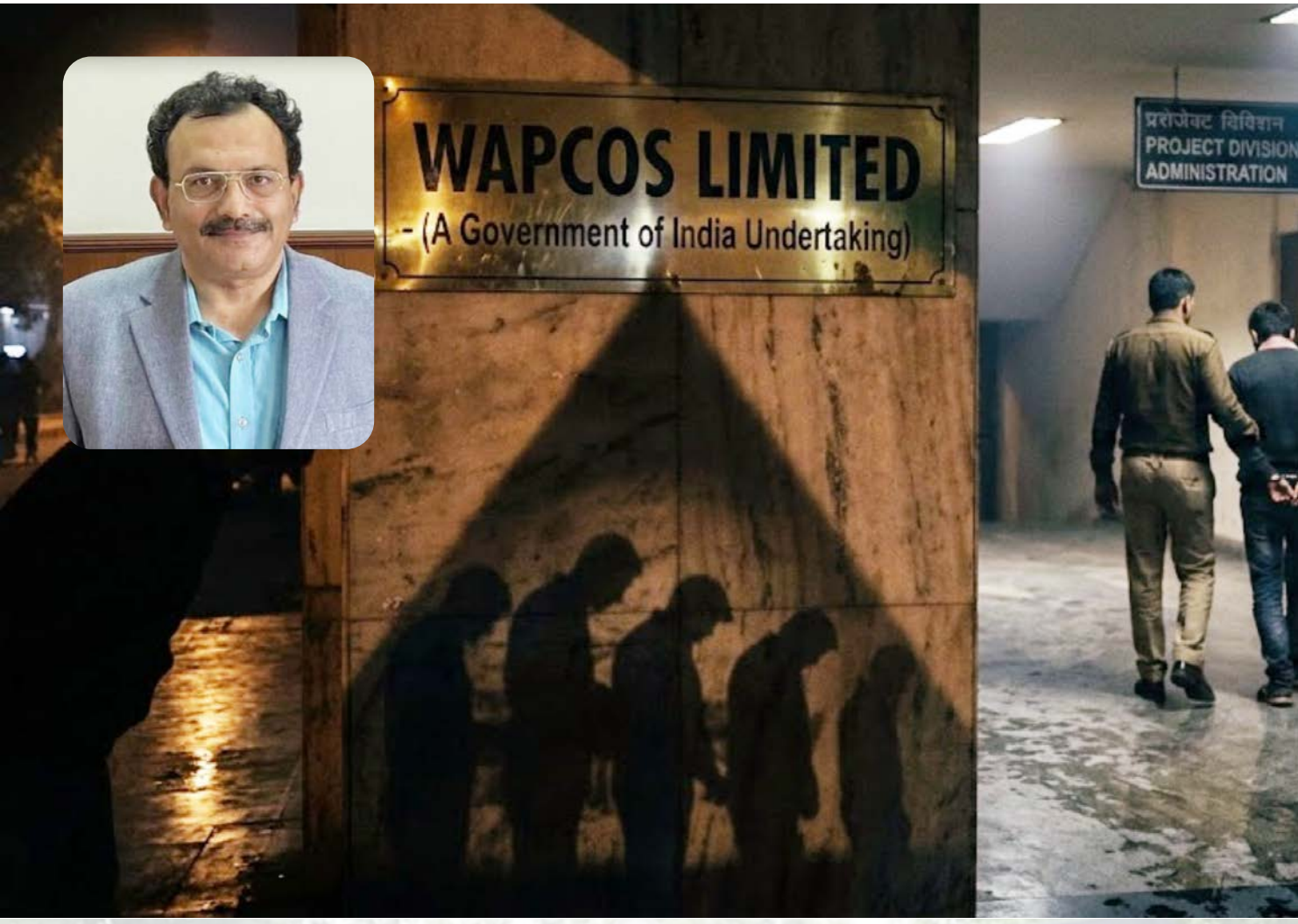
- When a Solar Didi installs a panel, more than a bulb turns on.
- Kerosene fades. Children study longer. Shops stay open. Savings grow.
- But the real shift is quieter. Income brings voice. Skill brings respect. A woman with a toolkit reshapes tradition. Solar power does not just light homes — it changes who holds power within them.

A MODEL THAT TRAVELS

- What began in Rajasthan now reaches villages across Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America.
- Different languages. Different landscapes. The same sun.
- Women train, return home, and electrify their own communities. The model succeeds because it builds local hands, not dependence.

WHEN THE LIGHTS COME ON

- At dusk, the desert flickers to life — constellations across sand.
- Each bulb tells a story: of confidence gained, fumes erased, futures extended past sunset.
- The change is gradual. Steady.
- Their revolution does not roar. It glows. ■



Deepening Shadows Over WAPCOS

CBI Trap Reveals Massive 'Power Pyramid' and Systemic Graft generates image

-SG Desk

ARCHITECTURE OF CENTRALIZATION

At the centre of the controversy is an internal administrative restructuring that reportedly consolidated project monitoring and billing oversight at the New Delhi headquarters under senior functionaries, including Pradeep Kumar Dhama. While the move was officially positioned as an effort toward "operational efficiency and accountability," contractor bodies now allege that the shift created procedural chokepoints—where project certifications, milestone approvals, and deviation sanctions became contingent on centralized clearance. Multiple vendors operating in the water infrastructure domain claim that eligibility criteria in select tenders were modified through corrigenda after initial publication—raising concerns about competitive neutrality in public procurement. Sources within the consultancy ecosystem have also flagged the alleged role of external "facilitators" who, despite not being on formal payrolls, were said to have participated in internal consultations and vendor interactions—blurring the line between administrative oversight and private influence.

What began as a tactical sting operation by the Central Bureau of Investigation has rapidly spiraled into a high-stakes exposure of alleged institutionalized corruption within WAPCOS Limited, a premier public sector consultancy under the Ministry of Jal Shakti.

The arrest of Project Manager Pankaj Dubey while allegedly accepting a ₹10 lakh bribe—described by investigators as a mere "installment" of a much larger payoff—has pulled back the curtain on what sources describe as a sophisticated internal "power pyramid" designed to centralize administrative discretion and facilitate systemic rent-seeking across project lifecycles.

"What appears on the surface as a routine trap case may, in fact, be the visible tip of a far more layered administrative structure," said a senior official familiar with PSU vigilance systems. "The real question is not about one transaction — it is about the ecosystem that made such a transaction possible."

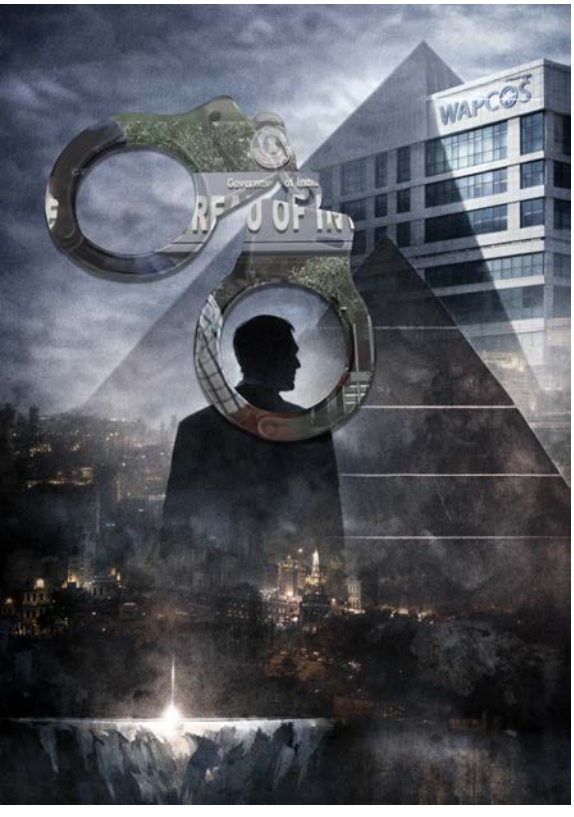
The Trap That Cracked the Ceiling

According to officials familiar with the development, the Anti-Corruption Bureau of the CBI acted on a formal complaint that pointed to a demand for illegal gratification in exchange for project clearances. After verification, the agency moved in on Dubey and several private intermediaries in a coordinated operation.

Subsequent searches across Lucknow, Deoria, Ghazipur, and Bhubaneswar reportedly yielded incriminating financial records, internal communications, and unaccounted cash—suggesting the alleged wrongdoing may not be confined to a single operational node.

Procurement specialists and PSU insiders note that in tightly regulated consultancy frameworks such as that of WAPCOS, field-level project managers typically lack the delegated authority to independently clear multi-crore tenders or authorize substantial bill releases.

"In consultancy-led EPC monitoring models, the technical and financial knots are usually tied at headquarters," said a senior infrastructure consultant with prior PSU experience. "A project manager may be the interface—but not the origin—of financial discretion."



Vigilance Under Scrutiny

The unfolding developments have ignited a broader institutional debate around internal vigilance mechanisms within WAPCOS. Critics point to a pattern of delayed audits and reactive oversight, arguing that repeated operational red flags—ranging from contractor complaints to payment delays—failed to trigger timely internal reviews.

The role of the Chief Vigilance Office has come under particular focus, with stakeholders questioning whether the existing vigilance architecture was adequately empowered to initiate suo motu investigations into procurement anomalies or billing deviations.

Compliance with procurement transparency norms issued by the Central Vigilance Commission—including those related to e-Reverse Auctions for high-value tenders—may now come under retrospective scrutiny as investigators widen the ambit of inquiry.

Projects Under the Microscope
Investigative attention is reportedly shifting toward a set of high-value, l ow-transparency assignments executed under centrally monitored frameworks, including:

Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) projects in Uttar Pradesh and Odisha, where alleged clearance-linked payments may have impacted contractor selection and execution quality.
International consultancy assignments in parts of Africa and Central Asia, where sub-contracting practices are being examined for compliance with project deliverables and diplomatic commitments.
Riverfront and basin management works under the Namami Gange Programme, where monitoring certifications and payment approvals are reportedly being audited for procedural integrity.

Following the Money Trail

Legal analysts anticipate that the case may evolve into a multi-layered financial probe under the Prevention of Corruption Act and relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), particularly those pertaining to criminal conspiracy and cheating.

Investigators are understood to be examining digital transaction trails, vendor-bank linkages, and encrypted communication platforms to identify what officials describe as “institutional enablers”—individuals who may have provided administrative cover or procedural legitimacy to questionable decisions.

The investigative focus is now expanding beyond transactional culpability toward systemic accountability.

The Question Before the Ministry

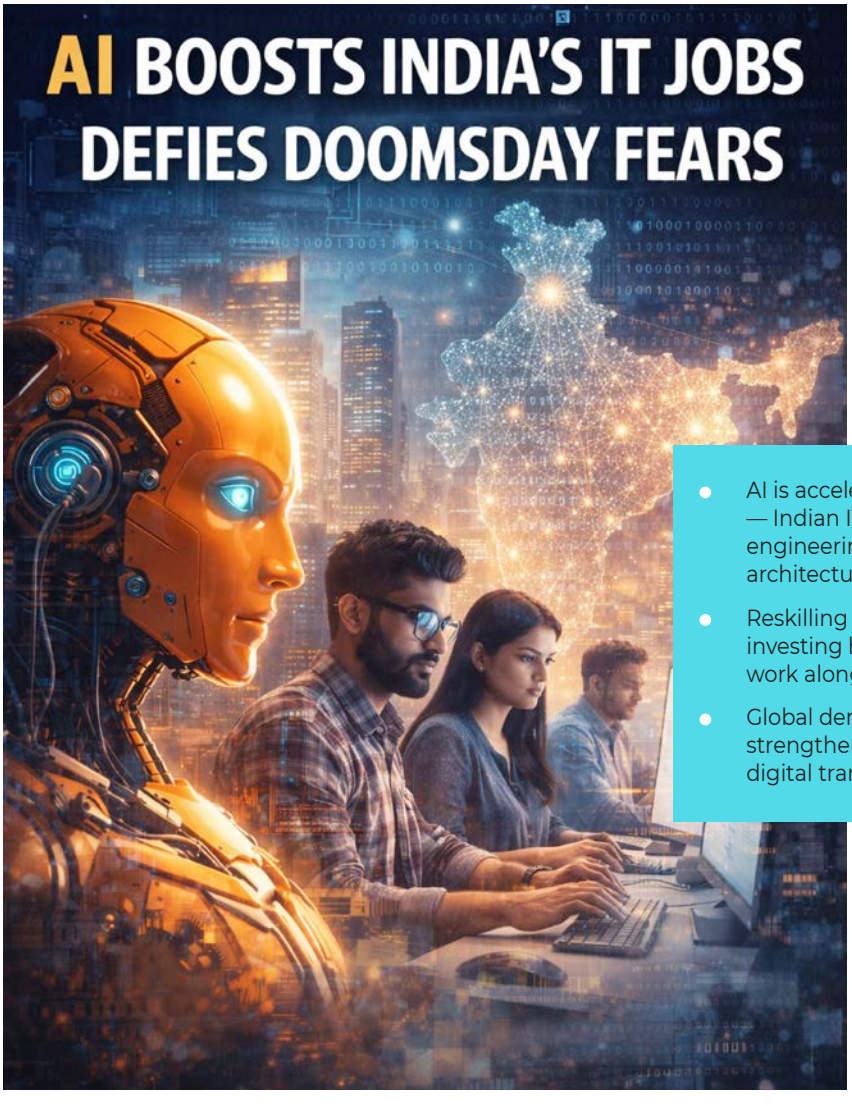
As WAPCOS confronts what could become its most significant governance crisis in recent years, the question echoing through the corridors of the Ministry of Jal Shakti is no longer whether corruption occurred—but how deeply embedded it may have been within decision-making frameworks.

Is the arrest of a project-level functionary the culmination of a localized graft case?

Or the first in a sequence of disclosures that may reshape oversight norms across India’s PSU consultancy ecosystem?

For now, the answers may lie in audit trails, procurement files—and in how far the investigation is allowed to climb the pyramid.

If you’d like, I can adapt this into a print-ready magazine feature with pull quotes, timelines, and an investigation flowchart for your Smart Governance layout. ■



India's IT firms embrace generative AI without mass layoffs, boosting productivity and demand for skilled workers, a new ICRIER-OpenAI study reveals.

By Sourab Mittal

STUDY CHALLENGES JOB LOSS NARRATIVE

A comprehensive survey of 650 IT companies across 10 cities from November 2025 to March 2026 shows generative AI reshaping work rather than replacing it. Titled "AI and Jobs: This Time Is No Different," the report finds no widespread displacement, with AI complementing human roles like software development and data administration that see rising demand. Ronnie Chatterji, OpenAI's chief economist, notes AI organizes work to enhance talent, urging skill alignment.

PRODUCTIVITY SURGES, HIRING SHIFTS SUBTLY

Productivity gains dominate: Across 1,900 affected divisions, improvements outpace declines 3.5-to-1, with one-third reporting higher output and lower costs without job cuts. Hiring moderates at entry levels—tied to post-pandemic trends—not AI alone, while mid- and senior roles stay stable. Notably, 63% of firms seek "hybrid" talent blending domain expertise with AI skills.

- AI is accelerating hiring, not replacing it outright — Indian IT firms are expanding roles in AI engineering, data science, cybersecurity and cloud architecture.
- Reskilling is driving growth, with companies investing heavily in upskilling existing employees to work alongside automation and generative AI tools.
- Global demand is fueling expansion, as India strengthens its position as a leading AI services and digital transformation hub for international clients.

UPSKILLING LAGS DESPITE MOMENTUM

Over half of firms offer AI training or awareness, 38% plan more, but only 4% cover over half their workforce. Barriers include trainer shortages, costs, ethics, and readiness, signaling preparation gaps. ICRIER's Shekhar Aiyar calls for evidence-based policy: reassurance without complacency as global AI demand promises net IT job growth.

PATH FORWARD FOR INDIA'S DIGITAL EDGE

The study positions India's IT sector for adaptation-driven expansion, not contraction, amid evolving roles. Policymakers and firms must prioritize broad upskilling to capitalize on AI's productivity edge. As adoption deepens, hybrid skills will define the workforce of tomorrow. ■

MGNREGS Morphs into VB-G RAM G

Big Bucks, Bigger Betrayals

MGNREGS reborn as VB-G RAM G gets Rs 95,692 crore, but 21% wage cuts in Rajasthan and 3% full-job households expose the same old rural betrayal. **By JP Gupta**

India's flagship rural employment scheme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), has undergone a major restructuring into VB-G RAM G for the fiscal year 2026-27. This revamped program receives a substantial Rs 30,000 crore allocation, while the broader VB-G RAM G framework secures Rs 95,692 crore. These funds signal renewed commitment to rural job creation, but historical performance data reveals deep-rooted issues in implementation, wage adequacy, and worker entitlements. As policymakers pivot to VB-G RAM G, addressing these gaps will be crucial for its success.

EMPLOYMENT TRENDS: Declining Full-Year Participation

Over the past decade, MGNREGS has provided an average of 48 workdays per household annually—a modest figure that underscores limited access to sustained employment. More

WAGE DISPARITIES: Inadequate and Delayed Payments Persist

Wage determination under MGNREGS—and now VB-G RAM G—relies on an unchanged methodology tied to state minimum wages, failing to keep pace with inflation and rising living costs. Data from select states highlights a consistent gap between notified rates and actual payments, eroding worker trust and purchasing power.

State	Notified Wage Rate (Rs/day)	Average Wage Paid (Rs/day)	Shortfall (%)
Andhra Pradesh	307	268	13%
Chhattisgarh	261	245	6%
Gujarat	288	264	8%
Karnataka	370	342	8%
Rajasthan	281	221	21%
Tamil Nadu	336	268	20%
Telangana	307	259	16%

concerning is the sharp drop in households achieving the scheme's promised 100 days of work: from 7% in 2024-25 to just 3% recently. This trend reflects structural hurdles like delayed fund releases, poor planning at the panchayat level, and competition from other schemes, potentially leaving millions of rural workers underserved.

Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu show the starkest shortfalls, often due to administrative delays or funding crunches. Experts recommend revising the base rate formula to index wages against CPI for rural laborers, a reform yet to materialize in VB-G RAM G.

UNEMPLOYMENT ALLOWANCES: A Neglected Safety Net

The scheme mandates unemployment allowances for unfulfilled work demands, yet compliance remains abysmal. From 2019-25, only 8% of due allowances were disbursed nationwide. As of February 2026 in FY 2025-26, this has plummeted to just 2%. This systemic failure exposes workers to financial distress and questions the scheme's legal enforceability under the MGNREGA Act.

VB-G RAM G: Opportunities and Unresolved Risks

With tripled funding compared to recent MGNREGS budgets, VB-G RAM G aims to integrate technology for better demand registration and real-time monitoring, potentially boosting efficiency in states like Rajasthan and Bihar. However, retaining the old wage methodology and poor allowance track record risks repeating past mistakes. For rural economies—especially in aspirational districts—success hinges on transparent audits, digitized wage credits, and state-level capacity building.

This restructuring offers a reset, but without tackling wage gaps and entitlements, VB-G RAM G may struggle to deliver a transformative impact for India's 10 crore-plus rural households. Policymakers must prioritize data-driven reforms to restore faith in public employment guarantees.

Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu exemplify the starkest challenges in MGNREGS implementation, with the highest wage shortfalls and systemic delays that VB-G RAM G must urgently address.

RAJASTHAN: Employment Crash and Allowance Neglect

Rajasthan faces a severe decline in MGNREGS performance, generating just 9.71 crore person-days by June 2025-26—down from 13.99 crore the prior year—due to slashed labor budgets from 27 crore to 12.5 crore days. Only 7% of households achieve 100 days of work amid rising registrations, fueling demands for unemployment allowances that go unpaid. With a 21% wage gap (notified Rs 281 vs. average Rs 221), rural livelihoods are at risk as VB-G RAM G rollout looms without clear state-specific fixes.

TAMIL NADU: Wage Arrears Burden Top Performer

Despite leading in manpower generation and women participation, Tamil Nadu grapples with Rs 1,635 crore in pending MGNREGS wages as of early 2025, plus Rs 999.51 crore liabilities by March 2026 , threatening over 1 crore workers. Average workdays fell to 48.86 in 2024-25 from a 2023-24 peak, with a 20% wage shortfall (Rs 336 notified vs. Rs 268 paid). The state urges central intervention ahead of VB-G RAM G, highlighting how arrears undermine even high-performing regions. ■

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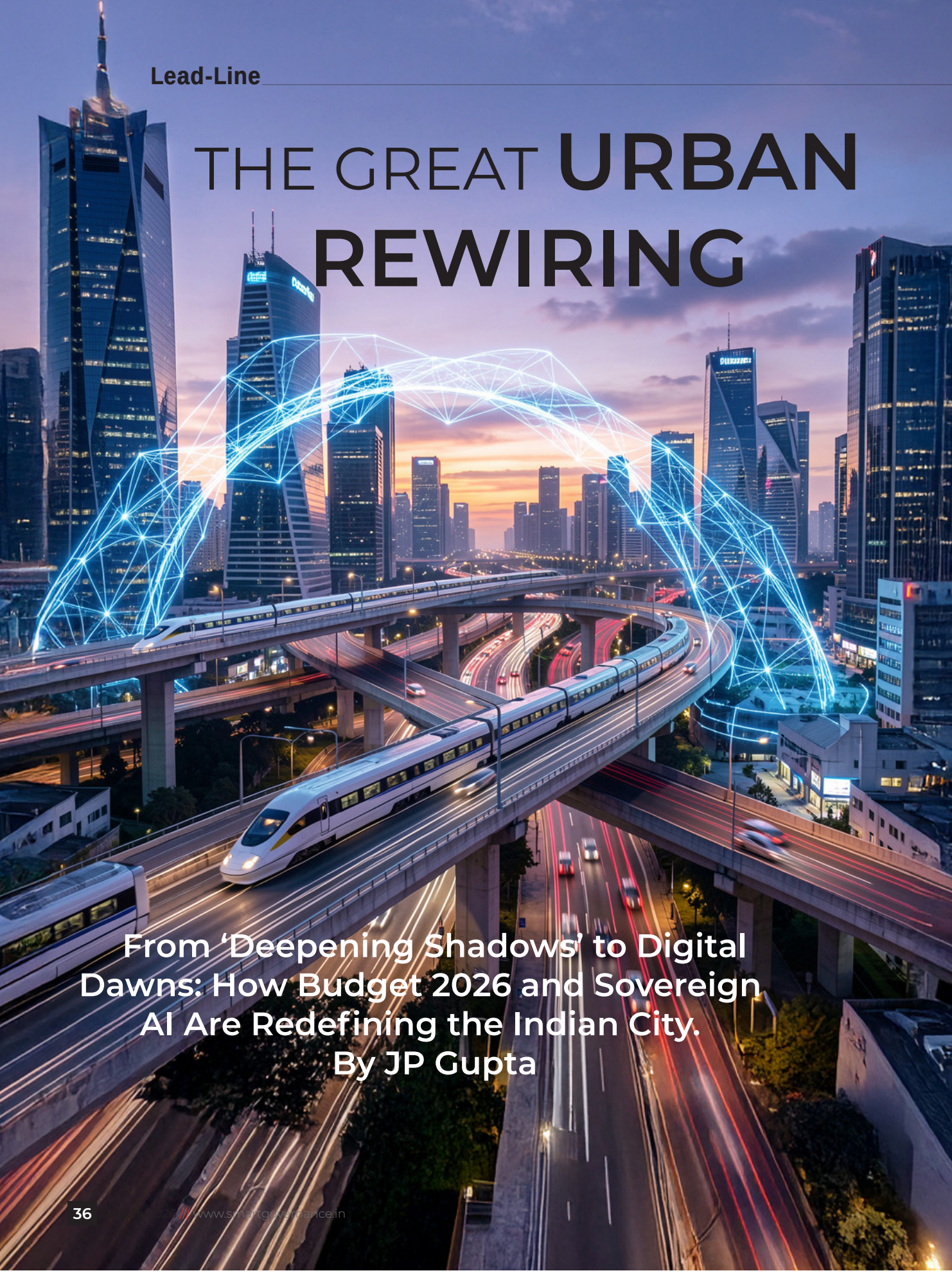
THE GREAT URBAN REWIRING



From 'Deepening Shadows' to Digital Dawns: How Budget 2026 and Sovereign AI Are Redefining the Indian City.

By JP Gupta

India's cities are undergoing their most consequential transformation since liberalization. The spring of 2026 finds the urban republic at a crossroads: exposed institutional fragilities on one side, and an audacious digital reset on the other.

The recent corruption investigation involving WAPCOS Limited has intensified scrutiny of legacy administrative structures. Allegations of centralized discretion and opaque project clearances have sharpened a national debate: can India's trillion-dollar urban future be built on systems that citizens no longer trust?

The answer emerging from Union Budget 2026–27 is unequivocal. The 100 Smart Cities Mission has formally given way to a new paradigm — City Economic Regions (CERs). The shift is not cosmetic. It marks a move from beautified enclaves to integrated economic powerhouses powered by Sovereign AI, high-speed rail and predictive governance.

The Indian city is no longer a standalone municipality. It is becoming a data-driven regional engine.

I. The Policy Pivot: Birth of the City Economic Regions

The Smart Cities decade focused on "Area-Based Development" — retrofitted corridors, command centers and tech-enabled surveillance. CERs expand that vision outward.

Backed by a ₹35,000 crore envelope, CERs merge urban cores with surrounding industrial belts and rural peripheries. The model identifies each region's economic DNA — textiles in Coimbatore, IT in Bengaluru, semiconductors in Gujarat — and aligns infrastructure to accelerate productivity.

Unlike earlier grants, CER funding operates in "Challenge Mode." To access up to ₹5,000 crore per region, applicants must demonstrate:

Digitized municipal finances

Time-bound building approvals

AI-driven grievance redressal

Reduction in bureaucratic clearances

Early pilot clusters include the Bhubaneswar–Puri–Cuttack tricity hub and the Varanasi spiritual-tech corridor.

The message is clear: economic coherence now outranks ornamental modernization.

What Changes Under CER?

- Cities expand into regional economic clusters
- Funding tied to digital governance benchmarks
- AI integrated into finance, land and transport systems
- Rural peripheries formally linked to urban supply chains

States as Laboratories of Reform

While New Delhi architects the framework, states are writing the operational manual.

Gujarat: The Semiconductor Surge

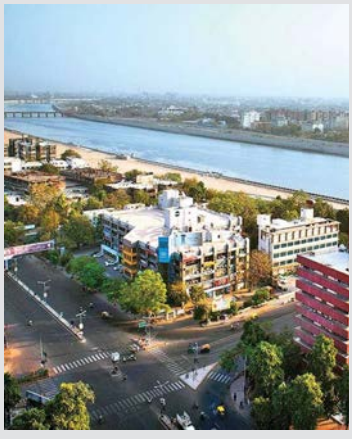
- On March 1, 2026, the Micron facility in Sanand began shipping India's first domestically manufactured memory modules — a symbolic leap toward semiconductor sovereignty.
- Meanwhile, Dholera Special Investment Region has emerged as India's first greenfield "Semi-City," integrating renewable power, automated logistics and digital land management. Gujarat's transition from pharmaceutical hub to chip corridor reflects the CER ethos: industrial depth anchored by urban systems.

Kerala: The Invisible State

- In Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala's K-SMART platform has made governance nearly invisible. Residential building permits are processed via automated AI in under a minute. Certificates once requiring physical visits now exist purely as verified digital records.
- This is governance without queues — and without intermediaries.

Puducherry: Scale as Advantage

- The Integrated Command and Control Centre in Puducherry demonstrates how smaller territories can innovate faster. AI-driven traffic systems, e-bus fleets and heritage-zone environmental monitoring operate from a single data spine.
- Technology here is not spectacle; it is infrastructure.



Three Models of Urban Leadership

GUJARAT: Industrial sovereignty through semiconductors
Kerala: Certificate-less, AI-driven governance
Puducherry: Compact, integrated smart surveillance

III. The New Urban Hierarchy

The 2026 Smart City ranking reflects a philosophical shift. Metrics now privilege carbon reduction, AI integration and citizen services over surface infrastructure.

INDORE: Cleanliness icon turned carbon credit trader

Surat: Near-perfect surveillance uptime

AHMEDABAD: 5G poles safeguarding heritage precincts

PUNE: India's densest electric bus network

CHANDIGARH: National leader in public bicycle sharing

What distinguishes India's emerging urban leaders in 2026 is not merely the scale of their infrastructure, but something far less visible and far more consequential — governance latency, the time it takes for a system to respond to its citizens. The defining metric of modern cities is no longer flyovers constructed or towers inaugurated, but responsiveness measured in seconds rather than weeks. In this recalibrated urban order, AI has become the invisible civil servant.

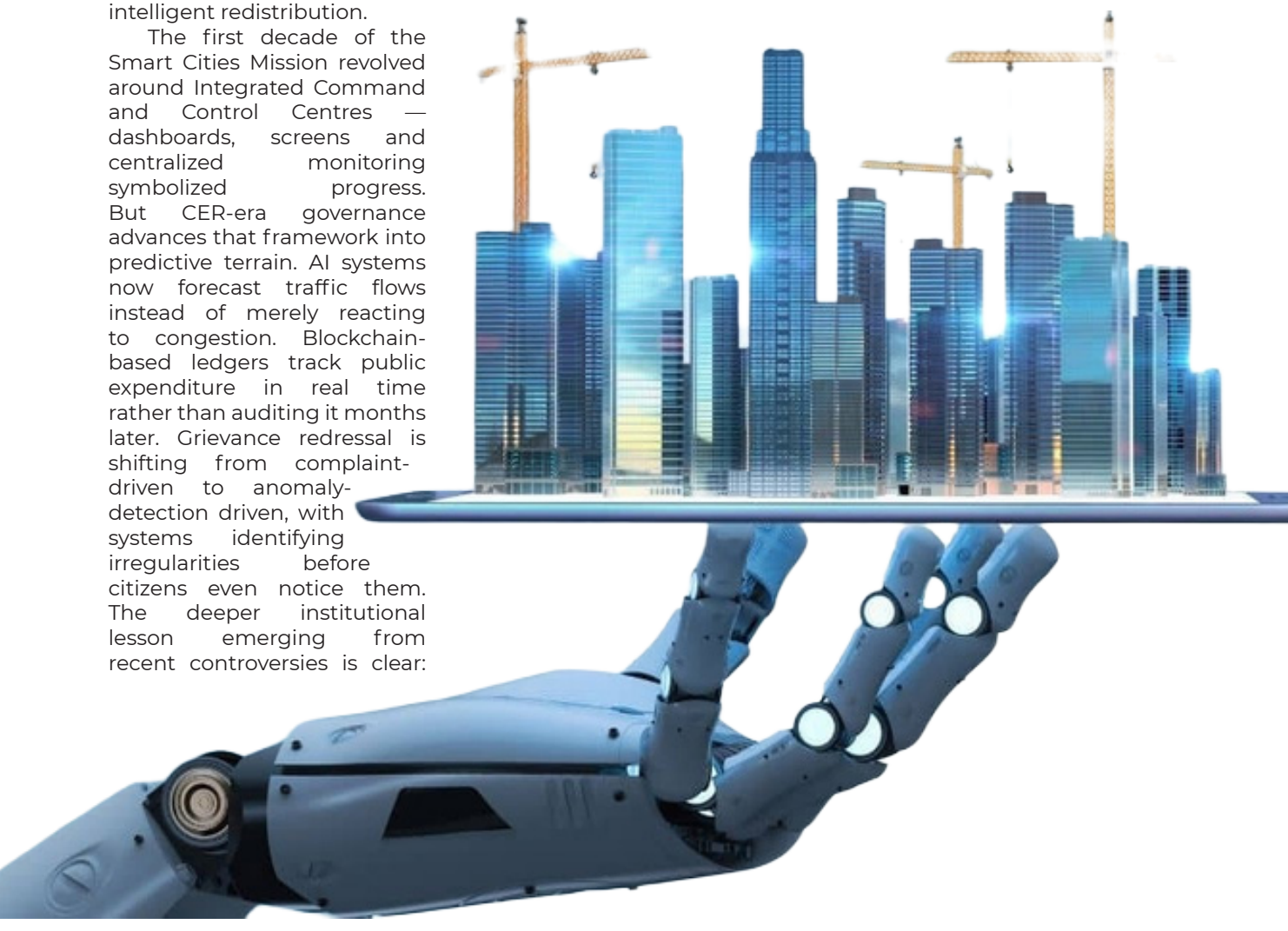
Urban value is no longer anchored to municipal boundaries; it is aligning itself with rail lines. Seven high-speed corridors under development are dissolving traditional city limits and giving birth to commuter megaregions, compressing what were once two-hour intercity journeys into seamless daily commutes. As geography compresses, property logic is undergoing a reset. Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) is reshaping how India builds and buys, turning satellite towns once dismissed as peripheral outposts into premium residential destinations. Investors are recalibrating maps and families are recalibrating aspirations. Cities such as Lucknow and Nagpur are witnessing steady inflows of mid-to-luxury capital, driven not only by connectivity but by regulatory clarity and infrastructure visibility. Predictability, not proximity, has become the new premium. At the core of this shift lies a silent technological overhaul: sovereign AI clusters embedded within digital property registries now conduct automated due diligence in seconds, flag encumbrances instantly, and compress registration timelines from weeks into near-real-time transactions. Data has become the new location advantage.

Tier-2 cities are emerging as the unexpected beneficiaries of this transition. Rail-led connectivity compresses commute times without inflating cost structures, land remains comparatively affordable while appreciation curves steepen, and AI-driven land record systems reduce fraud risk while strengthening buyer confidence. With expanding CER designations enhancing governance credibility, investor sentiment is tilting away from saturated metros toward intelligently connected secondary hubs. The outcome is not decentralization, but intelligent redistribution.

The first decade of the Smart Cities Mission revolved around Integrated Command and Control Centres — dashboards, screens and centralized monitoring symbolized progress. But CER-era governance advances that framework into predictive terrain. AI systems now forecast traffic flows instead of merely reacting to congestion. Blockchain-based ledgers track public expenditure in real time rather than auditing it months later. Grievance redressal is shifting from complaint-driven to anomaly-detection driven, with systems identifying irregularities before citizens even notice them. The deeper institutional lesson emerging from recent controversies is clear:

The Governance Latency Index

- What truly defines a 2026 smart city? Speed, transparency, predictability.
- Response Time: Citizen services delivered in seconds, not weeks
- Real-Time Audit Trails: Blockchain-backed expenditure tracking
- AI-Led Approvals: Automated clearances with minimal human discretion
- Transit Multiplier Effect: Rail corridors driving economic density
- Data Sovereignty: Domestic AI systems securing civic infrastructure



digital infrastructure is not a luxury upgrade, it is a structural safeguard. Transparency by design reduces discretionary chokepoints, automation narrows the space for opacity, and accountability becomes embedded rather than episodic.

India's evolving urban model rests on four interlocking pillars: sovereign AI enabling domestic data control and predictive analytics; regional integration aligning urban and rural economies; transit connectivity powered by high-speed rail and TOD ecosystems; and governance automation ensuring time-bound, transparent service delivery. Together, these pillars are redefining what a city means. The urban story of 2026 is not purely technological; it is profoundly ethical. The exposure of weaknesses within legacy administrative systems has underscored a simple truth — modernization without accountability is fragile. CER frameworks and sovereign AI architectures represent attempts to engineer integrity into the scaffolding of growth.

India's urban future will not ultimately be measured by skyline height, but by system trust. The cities pulling ahead share common characteristics: approvals are instantaneous, audit trails are fully digital, citizen interfaces are seamless, and public services function without friction. In this rewired city, governance follows the citizen — not the other way around. The Great Urban Rewiring represents India's most ambitious civic experiment since independence, seeking to replace opacity with algorithms, hierarchy with networks, and delay with predictability. The shadows of the past have not vanished, but they have clarified what is at stake. As India advances toward Viksit Bharat @2047, the most powerful infrastructure may not be highways, corridors or glass towers, but trust encoded in software and visible in response times.

Sovereign AI

Domestic data control powering predictive analytics, automated approvals and real-time monitoring.

Regional Integration (CER Model)

Urban-rural economic alignment creating larger, competitive City Economic Regions.

Transit Connectivity

High-speed rail corridors and Transit-Oriented Development reshaping growth patterns.

Governance Automation

Time-bound, transparent and paperless service delivery reducing discretion and delays.

Core Insight:

The future city is not defined by concrete — but by code, coordination and citizen trust.

Governance is no longer a static office housed within a building; it is a dynamic service layer that moves with the citizen. In 2026, the most effective government is the one you do not notice because it is already working quietly in the background. India's cities are not merely expanding — they are rewiring, structurally, economically and morally, toward a future where data, transparency and human dignity coexist. The Great Urban Rewiring has begun. ■

Purvodaya Power Rising

Massive infrastructure push and strategic investments are transforming Northeast India into a powerful gateway for growth, connectivity and regional development

For decades, India's Northeast was described in terms of remoteness — a narrow corridor at Siliguri, distant capitals and fragile connectivity. In 2026, that vocabulary is rapidly being replaced by a new one: corridors, command centers, solar grids and high-speed rail. Backed by a record ₹11,486 crore investment under the Union Budget 2026-27, the government's "Purvodaya" vision has repositioned the eight Northeastern states — the "Ashtalakshmi" — from frontier outposts to strategic growth engines.

The shift is visible in expanded airport terminals, AI-enabled surveillance grids, solar-powered border villages and fast-tracked rail alignments. The transformation is fiscal, physical and geopolitical — linking India's Northeast more tightly to the ASEAN heartland while strengthening internal economic resilience.

- ₹11,486 crore investment push in Union Budget 2026–27 to accelerate development across the eight Northeastern states.
- ₹6,812.30 crore allocation to MDoNER and 3.258% central tax devolution share, strengthening fiscal autonomy for the region.
- 48 projects worth ₹6,044+ crore under PM-DevINE, focusing on connectivity, healthcare systems and industrial clusters.

The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) has received ₹6,812.30 crore in direct allocation, marking roughly a 20% increase. More significantly, the Northeast's share in central tax devolution now stands at 3.258%, granting states greater fiscal autonomy. Officials describe the change as structural rather than incremental. Under the PM-DevINE scheme, 48 projects worth more than ₹6,044 crore have already been sanctioned, targeting connectivity, health systems and industrial clusters.

The emphasis is on saturation - ensuring development reaches remote districts rather than remaining confined to capital cities.

Agartala has emerged as a flagship example of urban transformation. The Tripura capital is among 31 cities nationwide to have completed its Smart Cities Mission projects, finalizing 77 initiatives ranging from underground cabling to tech-driven waste management. Building on that momentum, Budget 2026 introduces City Economic Regions (CERs), supported by a ₹5,000 crore fund. Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Silchar, Imphal and Agartala are positioned as regional economic anchors integrating peri-urban belts, logistics corridors and industrial nodes into unified growth clusters.

Connectivity remains the backbone of the transformation. In February, projects worth ₹5,450 crore were inaugurated in Assam, headlined by the ₹3,000 crore Kumar Bhaskar Varma Setu over the Brahmaputra. The new terminal at Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi International Airport has lifted annual passenger capacity to 13.1 million, reinforcing Guwahati's role as a regional aviation hub. The Varanasi–Siliguri High-Speed Rail corridor has been fast-tracked, promising to halve travel time between northern India and the Northeast. Under PM-eBus Sewa, 100 electric buses have been deployed in Guwahati as part of a larger 4,000 e-bus rollout across Purvodaya states.

Beyond hard infrastructure, Budget 2026 introduces a dedicated Northeast Buddhist Circuit scheme aimed at preserving monasteries in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Mizoram while upgrading pilgrim amenities. Officials say the initiative seeks to tap into Southeast Asia's high-value tourism market, linking spiritual heritage to economic opportunity.

Driven by record investments, new transport corridors, smart urban hubs and border development initiatives, the Northeast is rapidly evolving into a strategic economic and connectivity hub under the Purvodaya vision

Perhaps the most symbolic shift is occurring along India's remote frontiers. Under the Vibrant Villages Programme, 455 villages in Arunachal Pradesh have been prioritized for comprehensive development. A ₹69.52 crore off-grid solar initiative is electrifying previously underserved border settlements, while high-speed telecom networks are extending digital services into areas once defined by isolation. Policymakers describe it as a "border-first" doctrine — eliminating remoteness as a strategic vulnerability.

- Major infrastructure expansion including the ₹3,000 crore Kumar Bhaskar Varma Setu, upgraded Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi International Airport terminal and the proposed Varanasi–Siliguri High-Speed Rail Corridor.
- Border development surge through the Vibrant Villages Programme, prioritising 455 villages in Arunachal Pradesh with solar power, telecom and infrastructure upgrades.

The Northeast of 2026 is not defined by distance but by direction. Economic corridors are narrowing the psychological weight of the Siliguri bottleneck. Airports are linking cities directly to global markets. Solar grids are illuminating frontier hamlets. Analysts say the Purvodaya framework reflects both economic calculation and geopolitical foresight — strengthening infrastructure and governance capacity to transform the region into a forward-facing bridge to ASEAN economies.

Challenges remain, including terrain constraints and environmental sensitivities. Yet the scale and pace of current investments signal sustained political commitment. If earlier decades were marked by cautious incrementalism, 2026 represents acceleration.

The sunrise promised under Purvodaya is no longer rhetorical. ■

States Go AI

From Odisha's language models to Uttar Pradesh's AI City and Tamil Nadu's sovereign compute parks, India's states are turning artificial intelligence into the next frontier of governance, by **JP Gupta**

India's artificial intelligence story is no longer being written only in corporate labs or national policy corridors. Increasingly, the real experimentation is happening at the state level, where governments are deploying AI not as an abstract technology but as a practical tool for solving everyday governance challenges.

Across the country, a new generation of state-led initiatives is emerging—each reflecting a distinct administrative philosophy. Odisha is focusing on language-first governance, Uttar Pradesh is building massive compute infrastructure to power predictive administration, and Tamil Nadu is investing in sovereign AI ecosystems rooted in linguistic and technological self-reliance. Together, they reveal how India's federal structure may become the engine of practical AI governance.

ODISHA: The Language of Governance

In eastern India, Odisha is quietly transforming itself into what policymakers describe as an "AI-to-Impact" laboratory, focusing on the last mile of public service delivery. At the heart of the effort

UTTAR PRADESH: The AI City Vision

While Odisha focuses on language and service delivery, Uttar Pradesh is pursuing scale. Under the UP AI Mission, the state government has committed ₹2,000 crore, part of a broader infrastructure vision estimated at ₹10,732 crore, to transform Lucknow into India's first AI City.

The initiative aims to build one of the country's largest public AI computing backbones, potentially supporting more than 10,000 GPUs for research, governance and industry applications. Alongside infrastructure, the state is investing heavily in human capital through the AI Pragya program, which seeks to train 10 lakh citizens—from gram pradhans and teachers to students and entrepreneurs—in basic AI literacy.

Early deployments have already demonstrated the model in action. During the 2025 Mahakumbh, authorities rolled out Kumbh Sah'AI'yak, a multilingual AI chatbot powered by Bhashini, guiding millions of pilgrims with real-time information on routes, services and safety.

Officials are now expanding similar systems to manage urban traffic flows, detect illegal mining operations and support rural healthcare initiatives, including AI-assisted breast cancer screening programs. The long-term ambition is to move toward predictive governance, where data-driven systems help anticipate problems before they escalate.

is the development of an Odia Large Language Model designed to move the language from what technologists call a "low-resource" digital environment to a high-impact governance platform.

Through a state initiative known as AIKosh, more than 1,600 Odia literary and administrative works—ranging from classical texts to policy records—have been converted into structured datasets to train AI systems. This linguistic foundation supports a broader platform known as the Governance AI Assistant, a model-agnostic gateway that integrates AI tools into everyday administrative workflows across departments.

Perhaps the most innovative experiment lies in what officials call "quiet governance." AI-driven voice systems call citizens in local dialects to collect feedback on government programs and services. Because the interaction happens through spoken language rather than text, even citizens with limited literacy can participate. In Odisha's model, AI does not merely digitize governance—it speaks the language of the people.

Tamil Nadu: Building Sovereign AI

Further south, Tamil Nadu is charting a different path—one centered on technological autonomy. In March 2026 , the state signed a landmark agreement with Sarvam AI to establish a ₹10,000-crore Sovereign AI Park in Chennai, the first initiative of its kind in India.

The project aims to build a full-stack AI ecosystem integrating computing infrastructure, language models and government datasets within a single controlled environment. At the core of this effort is the Digital Sangam initiative, which seeks to develop Tamil-first foundational AI models by linking classical Tamil vocabulary with modern governance applications.

By training AI systems on literary archives, government records and administrative texts, the state hopes to ensure that future digital services communicate naturally with citizens in Tamil. The park also creates what policymakers describe as a "trust boundary," where data, models and computing power operate within a secure state ecosystem, reducing dependence on external technology platforms.

Officials estimate the initiative could generate around 1,000 deep-tech jobs, while positioning Chennai as a national hub for language-based AI innovation.

A FEDERAL LABORATORY FOR AI GOVERNANCE

Taken together, these initiatives highlight a broader transformation in India's governance landscape. Instead of a single national blueprint, states are experimenting with localized models of AI-enabled administration, shaped by their economic priorities, linguistic identities and governance needs.

Odisha's focus on language inclusion, Uttar Pradesh's investment in computational scale and Tamil Nadu's pursuit of sovereign AI infrastructure represent three distinct pathways toward embedding artificial intelligence within the machinery of the state.

If these experiments succeed, India's next wave of digital governance may not emerge from a single capital. It may arise from a network of state-level innovation laboratories, each redefining how technology can strengthen public administration and bring government closer to the citizen. ■

The Agentic **Bureaucracy**

Agentic AI is reshaping governance by executing administrative tasks, coordinating departments, and delivering public services through autonomous systems embedded within government operations.

From answering questions to executing governance—how Agentic AI is turning digital tools into autonomous colleagues within the machinery of the state.

For nearly a decade, governments around the world experimented with chatbots—digital assistants designed to answer citizen queries, retrieve documents, or guide users through bureaucratic procedures. These systems marked the first meaningful intersection between artificial intelligence and public administration. Yet their capabilities remained limited. They could inform citizens, but they rarely had the authority or capacity to act.

That paradigm is now shifting rapidly. A new generation of systems known as Agentic AI—autonomous digital agents capable of executing multi-step workflows—has begun redefining how governments operate. Instead of merely answering questions, these systems

can complete entire administrative processes, coordinating across departments, verifying compliance, and delivering outcomes with minimal human intervention. In effect, the conversation in governance technology has moved from AI as a search engine to AI as an operational colleague embedded within the bureaucracy.

Traditional AI systems in government largely functioned as knowledge portals layered over departmental databases. A citizen might ask how to obtain a building permit or register a business, and the system would simply return instructions or redirect the user to relevant forms. Navigating the administrative maze still required citizens to move between multiple portals, offices, and approvals.

Agentic AI changes this model entirely. In the emerging architecture, a citizen simply states the desired outcome—"Apply for a commercial construction permit." An AI agent then orchestrates the entire workflow behind the scenes. The system retrieves land records, verifies zoning compliance with the urban planning department, cross-checks environmental regulations, calculates fees through finance systems, and initiates digital approvals. If documents are missing, the agent prompts the applicant. If inspections are required, it schedules them automatically. Instead of navigating bureaucratic pathways, citizens interact with a single intelligent interface that coordinates the state's administrative machinery.

This transition from information delivery to action execution represents one of the most significant shifts in digital governance since the rise of e-government portals two decades ago. Governance is gradually moving away from procedural navigation toward outcome-oriented service delivery.

Behind this transformation lies a new technological architecture designed specifically for governments. One of the central concerns for policymakers has been how to deploy powerful AI systems without exposing sensitive public data to external technology ecosystems. At the India AI Impact Summit 2026, policymakers and technologists discussed emerging frameworks aimed at solving this challenge—most notably the concepts of Domino Workspace and Sovereign AI.

Domino Workspace represents a secure computational environment where government departments can deploy specialized AI agents without transferring sensitive datasets outside institutional boundaries. Each department retains control over its data while allowing AI agents to collaborate across systems through governed interfaces. The result is what experts describe as federated governance intelligence—AI systems capable of working across ministries and departments while keeping core datasets localized and protected.

- **Agentic AI moves governance from information delivery to action execution.**
- **Autonomous AI agents can complete entire administrative workflows.**
- **Systems coordinate multiple government departments automatically.**
- **Domino Workspace and Sovereign AI protect sensitive government data.**

Complementing this is the broader doctrine of Sovereign AI. Governments are increasingly building domestically controlled AI infrastructure—from data repositories and compute environments to model training frameworks—to ensure strategic autonomy. Rather than depending entirely on global technology platforms, the goal is to develop

- **Civil servants shift from file processing to human-in-the-loop decision making.**
- **Routine tasks like verification, compliance checks, and approvals become automated.**
- **Governments gain faster, simpler, and more transparent public services.**
- **New challenge emerging: AI burnout among officials handling complex cases.**

national AI stacks that can power governance applications while keeping critical state data within sovereign boundaries.

In practice, this architecture allows governments to deploy task-specific AI agents across a wide range of administrative functions. Human resource screening, procurement verification, compliance monitoring, budget auditing, and project approvals can all be supported by specialized digital agents operating continuously within government systems. The technology effectively creates an invisible operational layer running beneath traditional bureaucratic structures.

For civil servants, however, the rise of agentic systems signals a profound shift in everyday work. Routine administrative tasks—document verification, eligibility checks, and workflow routing—are increasingly handled by AI agents that operate around the clock. Instead of processing repetitive paperwork, administrators are beginning to supervise algorithmic processes and intervene only when anomalies arise.

In this emerging model, the civil servant evolves into what governance scholars describe as a human-in-the-loop strategist. Their role moves away from file processing toward resolving complex policy dilemmas, adjudicating disputes, and ensuring that automated decisions remain legally and ethically sound.

Yet the transformation brings an unexpected challenge that policymakers are only beginning to recognize: AI Burnout. As autonomous agents handle routine and straightforward cases, the workload left for human officials becomes disproportionately complex. Civil servants increasingly deal only with contentious approvals, ambiguous regulations, legal disputes, and politically sensitive cases. The easy work disappears; what remains are the most difficult decisions.

This concentration of high-stakes responsibilities can lead to heightened cognitive stress and decision fatigue among administrators. Governments experimenting with agentic systems are therefore exploring safeguards—rotational case management, AI-assisted decision support tools, and expanded institutional support for public officials handling complex cases.

The rise of Agentic AI represents far more than a technological upgrade. It signals a deeper restructuring of the administrative state itself. For citizens, governance could soon become faster, simpler, and far less opaque. A single intelligent interface may eventually handle everything from permits and licenses to welfare benefits and regulatory compliance.

For governments, the challenge will be balancing efficiency with accountability—ensuring that automated decision-making remains transparent, auditable, and aligned with public values. And for civil servants, the future workplace will include a new kind of colleague: autonomous AI agents that never sleep, never tire, and increasingly share responsibility for running the machinery of the state.

The bureaucratic file may not disappear. But in the age of agentic governance, it may no longer be carried by human hands alone. ■

REBEL'S ROAD BACK

After decades in Jharkhand's forests, a feared extremist recounts violence, survival and the difficult decision to surrender, by Pravin Tiwari

For nearly two decades, Ramdeo Oroan's name carried a shadow across the forested belt of Gumla and Bishunpur in Jharkhand. Villagers associated him with armed patrols, extortion networks and the quiet but constant presence of insurgent groups operating deep within the region's dense terrain. Today, however, the 45-year-old former operative speaks of a different future—one shaped by surrender, rehabilitation and the hope of rebuilding a life beyond the jungle.

Oroan's journey into the armed movement did not begin with ideology. In his earlier years, he worked as a small contractor and was known locally as a talented football player. But that life gradually unraveled. According to his account, members of an extremist faction began pressuring him for financial support and cooperation. Threats grew frequent, and with little protection available, he found himself drawn into the very network he feared.

His first arrest came in 2004. After being released from jail in 2005, Oroan says he struggled to return to normal life. Instead, he retreated into the forests and became increasingly entangled in the militant structure operating across the region. Over the years, he witnessed violent clashes, factional rivalries and repeated encounters with security forces. Many of his associates were killed during these confrontations, often leaving behind caches of sophisticated weapons recovered by police. For Oroan, the turning point came as government authorities expanded rehabilitation policies encouraging insurgents to surrender. Conversations with intermediaries and officials convinced him that leaving the movement might finally be possible.

Now preparing to lay down arms, Oroan says he hopes his decision will persuade others still hiding in the forests to reconsider their path. After years defined by conflict and survival, he believes the long road back to society has finally begun. ■

KEY TURNING POINTS

- Former contractor and football player before entering the insurgent network.
- Arrested in 2004; released in 2005 before disappearing into forest operations.
- Witnessed multiple encounters where associates were killed and weapons recovered.
- Influenced by revised rehabilitation policy and discussions with police officials.
- Preparing to surrender and encourage remaining members to return to civilian life.

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मुख्यमंत्री अत्यंत पिछड़ा वर्ग सिविल सेवा प्रोत्साहन योजना

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