

The India AI Impact Summit 2026, currently unfolding in New Delhi, India, offers the world a rare and timely opportunity to shift the global conversation on artificial intelligence from one dominated by existential fears and regulatory tug-of-war to a more pragmatic, inclusive vision centered on human progress and equitable growth. As someone accustomed to the AI discourse being framed largely in Silicon Valley boardrooms, Brussels regulatory halls, or Bletchley Park safety summits, this gathering feels refreshingly different. Hosted by the world's largest democracy and the first major AI summit in the Global South, it challenges the prevailing narrative and positions India as a credible bridge-builder in a fractured technological landscape.

For years, the AI debate in the West has oscillated between hype and alarm. On one side stand the tech optimists, figures like Sam Altman of OpenAI and Sundar Pichai of Alphabet, who emphasize AI's transformative potential to solve climate challenges, cure diseases, and boost productivity. On the other are the cautious regulators and ethicists warning of job displacement, bias amplification, misinformation, and even existential risks. Summits like the UK's 2023 AI Safety Summit and France's 2025 AI Action Summit have rightly prioritized frontier-model safety and international coordination on high-risk systems. Yet these gatherings have often felt insular, dominated by a handful of powerful nations and companies, with developing economies relegated to the role of rule-takers rather than co-authors.

Enter India. With its population of 1.4 billion, vast digital infrastructure (thanks to initiatives like Aadhaar and UPI), and a burgeoning talent pool, India produces more STEM graduates annually than any other country, the nation is uniquely positioned to reframe AI not as a threat to be contained but as a tool for inclusive development. The India AI Impact Summit, running from February 16 to 20 at Bharat Mandapam, embodies this shift. Billed as a transition "from dialogue to demonstrable impact," the event is anchored in the principles of People, Planet, and Progress. It brings together over 20 heads of state, including France's Emmanuel Macron, Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and others, alongside tech CEOs from

OpenAI, Anthropic, Google, Microsoft, and Nvidia, as well as representatives from the World Bank and civil society. More than 100 countries are participating, with an expected 250,000 visitors and an accompanying expo featuring 600 startups and pavilions from 30+ nations.

What stands out is the summit's deliberate emphasis on applied, real-world AI rather than abstract doomsday scenarios. Sessions focus on bridging the AI adoption gap between the Global North and South, where usage rates in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America hover below 10% while exceeding 50% in some wealthy nations. Discussions highlight building sovereign tech stacks, ethical governance, and AI's role in augmenting livelihoods, think AI-powered healthcare diagnostics in rural areas, precision agriculture for small farmers, or skilling programs to prepare workforces for an automated future. The World Bank's involvement underscores practical pathways: access to compute infrastructure, data resources, and applications that raise productivity and create jobs rather than merely displace them.

This approach resonates because it addresses a blind spot in Western AI debates. In the U.S. and Europe, much energy goes toward regulating frontier models, those massive systems that could one day approach artificial general intelligence. Valid as those concerns are, they can overshadow the immediate, tangible benefits (and risks) AI already delivers in everyday contexts. India's summit redirects attention to "small AI, big impact", deployable tools that strengthen public services, empower entrepreneurs, and support sustainable development. By hosting this in the Global South, India forces a reckoning: AI governance cannot succeed if it ignores the priorities of the majority of humanity.

India's credentials for this role are substantial. The country has quietly become an AI powerhouse. Its startups are innovating in vernacular-language models, affordable compute solutions, and sector-specific applications. Government initiatives under the IndiaAI Mission provide subsidized access to GPUs and datasets, democratizing AI development. Crucially, India's democratic framework, messy and vibrant, offers a counterpoint to the state-driven

models of China or the laissez-faire approach of early U.S. dominance. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted in inaugurating the summit, AI must serve humanity inclusively, not concentrate power further.

Critics might argue that India faces its own challenges: uneven digital access, data-privacy gaps, and risks of surveillance. Yet the summit's transparency, live sessions, multi-stakeholder panels, and a focus on measurable outcomes, suggests a willingness to confront these issues head-on. Unlike some prior forums accused of being performative, this one pairs high-level declarations with an expo showcasing real deployments and a push for concrete roadmaps on infrastructure sharing and talent mobility.

From Washington to Brussels, policymakers should view the New Delhi summit not as competition but as a complement. The West's strengths in frontier research and safety standards are indispensable, but they must be married to the scale and urgency of the developing world. India's convening power, drawing leaders from France to Brazil, tech titans from Altman to Pichai, demonstrates that a multipolar AI future is not only possible but necessary. If the summit delivers a shared roadmap for global AI governance that balances innovation, inclusion, and responsibility, it could mark a turning point.

The stakes are high. AI will reshape economies, societies, and geopolitics in the coming decades. A debate fixated on worst-case scenarios risks paralyzing progress or ceding leadership to unaccountable actors. By contrast, India's emphasis on impact, on using AI to lift billions while safeguarding values, offers a more hopeful, grounded path forward. As the summit continues, global capitals would do well to listen closely. The future of AI may not be decided in Palo Alto or Paris alone, but in places like New Delhi, where the technology's promise meets humanity's broadest needs.