

Guest Column| Case for intelligent conscience, missing ministry of AI

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In 2017, the UAE startled the world by appointing a minister of state for artificial intelligence. What seemed like a symbolic flourish became a strategic anchor: A full cabinet seat for AI, later expanded to cover the digital economy and remote work. It was a declaration that in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, artificial intelligence was not a laboratory hobby, it's a national priority.

Singapore has followed with precision. Its National AI Strategy 2.0, launched in 2023, is a whole-of-nation plan to harness AI for growth, safety, and social good. China has binding rules for algorithmic recommendation and generative AI, making providers responsible for accuracy, bias, and security. Japan, more softly, has embraced "agile governance" iterative standards, safety-by-design, and co-regulation with industry. Across Asia, the pattern is unmistakable: AI is treated as a system, not a side project. And systems get ministries, strategies, and institutions.

The US, UK, and EU are stress-testing, regulating, and scaling. Whether by statute, standards, or institutes, governments elsewhere are not dithering. They are building frameworks that give clarity to innovators and confidence to societies.

India, meanwhile, is still debating whether AI even deserves a portfolio at all.

\$4-trillion blind spot

We are a \$4-trillion economy, the world's largest democracy, and the deepest reservoir of STEM talent on the planet. Yet we have no ministry for AI. No manifesto, no funding, not even the designation of AI as an industry. Authority remains scattered between MeitY, NITI Aayog, the RBI, and line regulators. Yes, we have the IndiaAI Mission, and a proposed IndiaAI Safety Institute. But without legislative ownership and enactment, they risk becoming another set of files in a bloated docket.

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In sunrise sectors, our reflex has been fear first, vision later. Online money gaming has been legislated as illegal. Crypto is taxed into flight. Fintech founders reel under circulars that change faster than their roadmaps. Instead of creating magnets, we manufacture mazes.

The national irony: A \$4-trillion economy still behaving like a supplicant. We cheer when doors abroad crack open, and panic when they close. Our national mood swings with H-1B allocations in Washington rather than with innovation in Bengaluru. Why should India, with its scale, talent, and capital, define itself by the doors others open for us? Why are Dubai and Singapore, tiny dots on the map, magnets, while India is still treated as a stopover?

In 2023, Indian-origin founders raised over \$20 billion abroad, while at home frontier-tech ventures raised under \$2 billion. We are a talent superpower behaving like a venture lightweight. We are catching up to the past, not building for the future.

Code for conscience

Artificial intelligence is rewriting the terms of human agency. It diagnoses disease, drafts contracts, moves markets, and manufactures persuasion. It's no longer a tool; it's terrain. India needs a ministry of AI not as another department but as the mind of the State, an institution able to think about thinking itself.

Yet even that will not be enough. The next frontier is not artificial intelligence but artificial conscience. Technology will soon mirror human cognition; the real question is whether it can also mirror human compassion. Machines can replicate reason; only we can preserve compassion.

India's advantage lies not only in its engineers but in its ethos. For centuries, our civilization has treated intelligence as a moral function, Buddhi guided by Dharma. We taught the world zero; now we must teach it the value of one, the oneness of code and conscience. If intelligence is the new oil, conscience is the new compass.

To lead in this era, India must do what it once did best: Codify. We need a code of intelligent conduct, a living framework for the age of algorithms. It would define rights, duties, and boundaries for artificial agents, balancing innovation with accountability.

Such a code could be India's civilizational contribution to the 21st century, drawn not from borrowed jurisprudence but from our own ethical roots: Karma, ahimsa, and self-restraint. Where once we adopted Western law, we can now offer the world a model born of Vedic balance and constitutional clarity.

The rise of AI will test not just economies but identities. When machines draft our contracts, screen our résumés, and predict our choices, they also begin to define fairness itself. If we don't embed conscience into code now, we risk being governed by what we created, systems without soul, precision without empathy.

India's gift to the world need not only be its coders; it can be its conscience. By writing the world's algorithms, we have already proved we can think. Now we must prove we can care.

Innovation with humanity

India today leads in talent but not in traction. Our brightest coders, engineers, and innovators still see opportunities offshore, building empires for others under H1B visas, while our own innovation ecosystem waits for structure and scale. We have become the world's largest exporter of intellect instead of the incubator of its future.

If India builds the right infrastructure, governance, and capital pathways, our talent would no longer be in transit but in transformation, investing, co-founding, and creating here. The ministry of AI could be the anchor for that ecosystem, turning brain drain into brain capital.

If we hesitate, we will remain coders of someone else's conscience, brilliant but borrowed. If we act, we could give the world not merely intelligence but intelligent conscience. That is India's unfinished ministry. And it's waiting to be built.

The real test of intelligence is not what we can automate, but what we choose to protect. Let India be the place where innovation still remembers its humanity.

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