India's AI Governance Landscape: Insights from Elite Stakeholder Interviews

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Abstract

India's approach to AI governance differs substantially from Western regulatory frameworks, emphasizing voluntary guidelines and public-private partnerships over prescriptive legislation. While policy documents outline this strategy, little empirical research examines how key stakeholders interpret and implement these frameworks in practice. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 elite stakeholders across government, industry, civil society, and end-user sectors to understand their perspectives on India's governance approach. Our findings reveal significant tensions between developmental aspirations and ethical safeguards, highlight the substantial influence of private technology companies in contributing towards national policy, and expose critical gaps in addressing algorithmic fairness for India's diverse social contexts. This work contributes empirical insights into how India's distinctive governance model operates in practice and identifies key challenges for inclusive AI deployment.

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1 Introduction

As AI technologies proliferate globally, different regions have adopted varied governance approaches. While established frameworks like the European Union's AI Act embody a regulatory-heavy approach to emphasize trustworthiness, emerging economies like India present a starkly different narrative, one that must carefully interweave developmental priorities, technological sovereignty, and socio-cultural complexities [17, 18]. Rather than implementing rigid regulatory frameworks, India has chosen to eschew prescriptive legislation in favor of adaptive, innovation-oriented policies underpinned by voluntary guidelines and strategic public-private partnerships [21]. This approach directly reflects India's unique position as an emerging economy with significant developmental aspirations and complex socio-economic realities, where AI is envisioned not merely as a technological advancement but as a transformative catalyst for growth.

Despite growing academic interest in global AI governance, empirical research examining how stakeholders in emerging economies like India interpret and navigate these frameworks remains limited [26]. Most existing work focuses on policy analysis [5, 8, 17, 21, 22], leaving a gap in understanding ground-level implementation dynamics, stakeholder tensions, and practical challenges. This paper addresses this gap by presenting findings from semi-structured interviews with 14 elite stakeholders across India's AI ecosystem. We focus specifically on how key actors such as government officials, industry representatives, civil society members, and end-users perceive India's governance approach and navigate its implementation. Our research questions are:

(1) How do elite stakeholders perceive the balance between innovation enablement and ethical safeguards in India's AI governance framework?
(2) What role do public-private partnerships play in shaping AI governance in practice for India?
(3) What challenges do stakeholders identify in implementing India's governance approach?

Our findings reveal three interconnected tensions characterizing India's AI governance in practice. While policymakers and industry actors embrace the light-touch regulatory model as enabling responsible innovation, stakeholders from healthcare, agriculture, and civil society experience this flexibility as an accountability vacuum leaving vulnerable populations without meaningful recourse. The public-private partnerships celebrated in policy documents emerge as sites of asymmetric influence, where multinational corporations often shape national strategy in ways that prioritize market expansion over local equity. Finally, the aspiration toward culturally appropriate AI sits in tension with fairness frameworks and design paradigms that remain imported from Global North contexts, ill-equipped to address India's distinctive social cleavages of caste, language, and informal economic participation. Together, these tensions suggest India's governance model is structurally skewed working well for those positioned to benefit from rapid AI adoption while redistributing risks onto those least able to contest them.

Overall, this work contributes towards (1) empirical insights into elite stakeholder perspectives on India's AI governance implementation, (2) documentation of tensions between stated policy objectives and practical challenges, and (3) identification of critical

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gaps in addressing algorithmic fairness within India's socio-cultural context.

2 Background

2.1 India's AI Governance Framework

India has deployed a diverse range of policy instruments, demonstrating a multi-faceted approach to AI governance. For instance, in 2018 India established the AI Standardisation Committee in 2018 [20], and the launch of the National AI Portal (INDIAai) in 2020 [23] created a centralized knowledge platform. The emphasis on public-private partnerships, evidenced through initiatives like the NITI Aayog Cloud Innovation Center [2], reflects India's strategy for managing technological dependencies while maintaining some policy autonomy. The recent Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023 [24] further strengthens the regulatory framework around AI systems and data governance.

The NITI Aayog framework for *Responsible AI* emphasizes voluntary commitments and ethical guidelines, suggesting that companies will adopt trustworthy practices to maintain their market position and public reputation [3]. Within this framework, the state positions itself as a facilitator of the development of private sector AI, providing infrastructure and access to data while trying to maintain some control over the direction of development [22]. This is evident in key policy documents such as *the National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence* from 2018, *Principles for Responsible AI* framework, which emphasizes strategic and advisory approaches over strict regulation [1, 3] or the Reserve Bank of India AI report [7]. Most recently, a drafting committee constituted by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) in July 2025 was tasked with developing an AI Governance framework for India. This report was released in November 2025[1] where the main focus is to promote innovation, adoption, diffusion, and advancement of AI while mitigating risks through principles, actionable plans, and institutional support. The guidelines are explicitly called guidelines (not laws), highlighting a pro-innovation philosophy preferring a light-touch, risk-based governance model.

2.2 Critical Perspectives on Indian AI Policy

Indian scholarship has provided substantial critiques of the nation's AI governance approach, though these perspectives remain underutilized in international discourse. Marda [19] early work argued that technical limitations of AI systems should be reckoned with at policy development stages, noting that limitations and risks of data-driven decisions feature as retrospective rather than proactive considerations in Indian AI policy. This concern about treating ethical implications as afterthoughts rather than design principles resonates throughout subsequent scholarship [15].

The Centre for Internet and Society has extensively documented AI deployments across Indian sectors, revealing significant gaps between policy aspirations and ground realities [33]. Sambasivan and colleagues conducted foundational research demonstrating that conventional algorithmic fairness frameworks are West-centric and that several assumptions of algorithmic fairness are challenged in India, where data is not always reliable due to socio-economic factors, ML makers follow double standards, and AI evokes unquestioning aspiration [30]. Their work highlights how caste, religion, gender, and regional disparities create fairness challenges that Western frameworks cannot adequately address.

Recent analyses reinforce the above concerns amid India's push for AI leadership, with Dua et al. [12] critiquing the 2023 National Strategy on Artificial Intelligence's overemphasis on economic competitiveness at the expense of robust data protection and equity safeguards, leading to fragmented state-level implementations that exacerbate biases in welfare and policing systems. Similarly, Pandey [25] examines the MeitY Responsible AI guidelines, arguing they lack enforceable mechanisms for auditing socio-technical harms in multilingual, low-resource contexts, drawing on case studies of facial recognition failures in Aadhaar-linked services. Decolonial perspectives from Sethy [31] further underscore the imperative to reframe AI governance beyond Global North paradigms, advocating context-specific audits that prioritize community data sovereignty to mitigate caste-based exclusion in predictive policing and hiring algorithms.

Critics have also highlighted the ethics-washing phenomenon in Indian AI policy, where voluntary ethical frameworks substitute for regulatory accountability[2]. The lack of enforcement mechanisms means corporate compliance remains voluntary, raising questions about whether India's approach can adequately protect vulnerable populations. Overall, research on AI governance in India specifically remains limited in examining how stakeholders interpret and implement frameworks in practice, particularly regarding tensions between innovation and equity [32]. Our work addresses this gap by foregrounding stakeholder perspectives and the contradictions they navigate.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

We adopted an exploratory qualitative approach centered on elite stakeholder interviews. Drawing on Hertz and Imber [16] foundational definition, we conceptualize elites as individuals who occupy institutionally powerful positions that grant them disproportionate influence over the policies, practices, and discourses that shape AI governance in India. This includes not only those who hold formal authority such as government officials and senior policymakers but also those with proximate power: industry practitioners whose technical decisions embed values into deployed systems, civil society researchers whose framing of problems shapes policy debates, and domain professionals such as healthcare and defense personnels whose institutional endorsement legitimizes or contests AI adoption. Critically, we distinguish elite status from expertise alone; a farmer or a freelancer may possess deep domain knowledge yet lack the institutional positioning to actively challenge or reshape governance frameworks.

Our focus on elite discourse also acknowledges that AI governance policies emerge primarily from institutional stakeholders, though their impacts affect much broader populations. This methodological choice allows us to understand how policy actors navigate

[1] https://edu.nl/ht6b6

[2] https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/07/india-and-global-artificial-intelligence-governance?lang=en

governance frameworks while recognizing it captures elite perspectives rather than marginalized community experiences, a limitation that itself demonstrates the epistemic hierarchies in AI governance.

3.2 Participant Recruitment

We conducted semi-structured 1:1 interviews with 14 stakeholders representing diverse sectors of India's AI landscape (Table 1). Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, selected to represent key dimensions of digital governance: state institutions, economic actors, and civil society as articulated by Pohle and Thiel [27]. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted in English or Hindi based on participant preference. The sample included 5 women and 9 men with a mean age of 39 years. To maintain the anonymity of our participants, we only provide their work experience as less or more than five years.

3.3 Interview protocol

To systematically address our research questions, we developed a comprehensive interview protocol that aligns with various aspects of India's AI governance landscape we aim to investigate. Drawing from work by Weimer and Vining [34]'s framework for evaluating governance impacts, we structured our interview questions around five key categories that directly map to our research objectives: (1) General Perceptions regarding current state of AI governance, (2) Policy and regulatory framework by the government, (3) Public-private partnership, (4) Ethical considerations and specificity of the region, and (5) Challenges and opportunities.

Questions were tailored to each stakeholder's expertise while maintaining consistency across core themes and the protocol was iteratively refined. Participants provided informed consent, and all data was anonymized. The study followed institutional ethics guidelines for research with human subjects.

3.4 Analysis

We employed qualitative content analysis following established procedures by Elo and Kyngäs [13]. Two researchers independently coded all interviews, with ambiguities resolved through discussion. We used an iterative process to identify concepts, group similar ideas, and develop higher-level thematic categories. Analysis focused on identifying patterns, tensions, and divergences in stakeholder perspectives—particularly contradictions between stated beliefs and revealed concerns that could inform critical analysis.

4 Findings

4.1 General Perceptions: Developmental Aspirations vs. Resource Constraints

Stakeholders consistently emphasized India's ambition to leverage AI for socio-economic development, accepting calculated risks to enable rapid adoption. As P3 noted: "*India's approach to AI governance fundamentally differs from Western models. We're not just regulating technology; we're actively leveraging it as a development accelerator.*" However, this optimism was tempered by practical constraints. Technical practitioners highlighted infrastructural bottlenecks, particularly in rural areas, and insufficient sector-specific protocols. C3 (farmer) stated: "*I've heard that AI can revolutionize agriculture, but the lack of reliable infrastructure in rural areas limits its potential. Governance policies should address these foundational barriers before introducing AI solutions.*"

Healthcare and defense stakeholders emphasized the need for more rigorous oversight in high-risk domains. M1 noted: "*The current governance framework lacks sufficient clinical protocols for AI integration in healthcare. Patient data security must be prioritized while enabling AI-driven diagnostic innovations.*" Ethics-focused stakeholders (E1) highlighted that fairness and equity considerations remain insufficiently embedded in current frameworks, with vulnerable populations facing disproportionate impacts due to disparities in access, literacy, and dataset representation.

4.2 Policy and regulatory framework by the government: Divergent Views

Policy informers and AI developers generally viewed India's light-touch regulatory approach favorably. P2 explained: "*Our National AI Strategy focuses on enabling innovation while maintaining basic safeguards. We're conscious of not creating regulatory bottlenecks that might impede development.*" But this view was not universally shared. Healthcare professionals, defense personnel, and academics advocated for more structured approaches in their respective domains. M1 reported: "*Current regulatory frameworks need to incorporate specific clinical protocols for responsible AI deployment in medical settings, particularly regarding diagnostic applications and patient data protection.*"

L1 added: "*The light-touch approach must be balanced with more structured security standards in defense applications, where national security implications require specialized governance.*" This divergence suggests tensions between policy objectives of enabling innovation and sectoral needs for rigorous safeguards, particularly in high-stakes applications.

4.3 Public-Private Partnerships: Collaboration and Concerns

Stakeholders highlighted numerous government-industry collaborations, including the AI compute infrastructure (18,000+ GPUs), AIKosh Datasets Platform, and API-Setu open API platform[3]. P3 noted that the IndiaAI report emphasizes: "*Improving digital infrastructure and attracting private sector investment in AI infrastructure should be the priority*" While developers appreciated this collaborative approach (AID1: "*The government's approach enables meaningful dialogue and collaboration*"), several stakeholders raised concerns about corporate influence.

AS1 pointed out that India's National Strategy for AI acknowledges contributions from NVIDIA, Intel, IBM, McKinsey, and Accenture, while the Responsible AI document acknowledges Google experts which shows how major MNCs are influencing a national agenda on AI. E1 stated: "*The influence of tech giants on AI policy is undeniable. Although they drive innovation, their priorities may not always align with the broader public interest.*" C2 (banker) added concerns about vendor lock-in: "*The dominance of a few tech giants can stifle competition and innovation. In my sector, everyone uses Oracle's system where the dependence for any faults and bugs correction*

[3]We direct our readers to explore IndiaAI portal for further details on these collaborations: https://indiaai.gov.in/

ID	Type	Role	Exp.	AI Governance/Technical Relevance
P1	Policy Informer	Labor Specialist	<5 years	Workforce policy implications of AI automation and displacement (*Municipal Entity*)
P2	Policy Informer	Law Specialist	>5 years	Legal frameworks for AI regulation and compliance (*State Government*)
P3	Policy Informer	Scientist in Prime Minister's Office	>5 years	Science advisory role in national AI strategy development (*Union Government*)
P4	Policy Informer	Director General	>5 years	Administrative experience in AI policy implementation (*Union Government*)
AID1	AI Developer	Programming AI models	>5 years	Hands-on technical experience in AI model development
AID2	AI Designer	Engineering AI Pipeline	<5 years	Technical expertise in AI system architecture and deployment
AID3	AI Program Manager	Managing model deployment	>5 years	Operational AI governance, risk management, and oversight
C1	Freelancer	UI/UX Freelancer	>5 years	User interface design for AI system usability
C2	Banking Professional	Banker (Tech Division)	>5 years	Financial sector AI implementation and compliance
C3	Agriculturist	Farmer	>5 years	End-user perspective on AI applications in agriculture
E1	AI Ethicist	Thinktank Researcher	<5 years	Research in AI ethics, bias, fairness, and responsible AI
M1	Medical Professional	General Practitioner	>5 years	Healthcare AI applications and patient safety governance
L1	Defense Staff	Lt. Colonel	>5 years	Military AI applications and national security implications
AS1	Academic Staff	Assistant Professor in AI	<5 years	Academic research in AI and emerging technical developments

Table 1: Stakeholder Roles and Types

is too much." These findings reveal tensions between leveraging private sector resources and maintaining policy autonomy, with questions about whose interests shape national AI strategy.

4.4 Ethical Considerations: Context-Specific Challenges

Stakeholders emphasized unique ethical considerations specific to India's context. C1 highlighted: "*AI systems need to account for our diverse linguistic landscape and varying levels of digital literacy.*" P4 added: "*Designing trustworthy AI systems here requires understanding numerous cultural nuances. It's not just about language translation; it's about understanding how different communities interpret and interact with AI systems.*" M1 contributed an important healthcare perspective on cultural attitudes toward medical decision-making: "*In some rural regions of India, family members or community elders play a significant role in healthcare decisions, and patients may not be accustomed to making autonomous choices about their data.*"

Multiple stakeholders highlighted algorithmic fairness challenges specific to India's social structure. E1 stated: "*Challenges such as unreliable data due to social disparities, double standards in ML products, and unquestioning aspiration towards AI must be addressed. Policies should consider issues like caste, religion, gender, and ethnicity biases in models.*" AID3 noted: "*The AI sector's claim of being 'merit-based' masks how merit itself is a function of caste privilege. We need to address the stark socio-economic disparities between Indian engineers and marginalized communities.*"

4.5 Implementation Challenges

Stakeholders identified multiple structural challenges in implementing India's AI governance approach. P1 and P2 emphasized that traditional fairness metrics fail to account for India's complex social hierarchies and informal economy structures, noting that seemingly neutral data points like names, zip codes, and occupations can encode deep-rooted social biases in the Indian context. The digital divide emerged as a fundamental concern, with AID1 highlighting that skewed datasets where majority of Internet users are male which affects how AI systems learn and operate [4], while AID2 questioned how systems can serve linguistic diversity when only around 10% of Indians understand English [10]. C2 raised financial inclusion concerns about documentation barriers, noting that many AI-based services require extensive documentation that economically disadvantaged populations cannot provide, making them "document-poor" and systematically excluded.

5 Discussion & Conclusion

Our findings sheds light on fundamental contradictions in India's AI governance that stakeholders navigate but rarely acknowledge

explicitly. While policy discourse frames voluntary, partnership-based governance as enabling "*innovation with responsibility*, [6]" our interviews reveal this framing obscures how the approach systematically privileges economic actors while marginalizing ethical accountability. Of our 14 interviewees, those expressing satisfaction with light-touch regulation (P1-P4, AID1-AID3) occupy positions of relative power within the AI ecosystem, while those identifying critical gaps (E1, M1, AS1, C2-C3) represent sectors that experience AI deployment rather than shape it. This pattern reveals that India's governance model works well for those who benefit from rapid adoption while excluding voices demanding stronger safeguards [11, 28]. Critically, stakeholders repeatedly invoked "*local values*" and "*culturally appropriate*" AI, yet our findings show that multinational corporations acknowledged in national policy documents (NVIDIA, Intel, IBM, Google) are the primary actors defining these local values. This raises questions Indian scholarship has highlighted: whose "local" knowledge counts when frameworks are co-produced with Global North corporations whose business models depend on data extraction? *echoing* Feigenbaum and Nelson [14] thoughts.

Our findings suggest voluntary governance effectively privatizes benefits (innovation, market access, efficiency) while socializing costs (exclusion, discrimination, lack of recourse). Moreover, our methodological focus on elite stakeholders itself demonstrates a structural problem: AI governance debates occur primarily among those positioned to shape or benefit from systems rather than those most affected. When caste was raised by only two participants (E1, AID3) despite its centrality to Indian social structure, and no participants represented the informal economy (80%+ of workers [9]), this reveals how governance processes replicate rather than address the distance between models and oppressed communities [29]. Addressing India's governance challenges requires moving beyond voluntary v/s regulatory binaries to confront uncomfortable questions about power: mandatory fairness requirements rather than voluntary commitments, transparency about corporate influence on policy, redress mechanisms centered on affected communities, and infrastructure investment preceding deployment.

From a technology design perspective, our findings underscore that building AI systems for India's context demands a fundamental reorientation away from importing Western-designed models toward co-designing systems that are legible and accountable to the communities they affect. The infrastructural gaps highlighted by C3 and AID2 suggest that system architects must treat low-bandwidth environments, multilingual interfaces, and offline-first functionality not as edge cases but as primary design requirements. The algorithmic fairness concerns raised by E1 and AID3 point to the need for fairness audits that explicitly encode India-specific social axes such as caste, religion, gender, and regional identity rather than relying on proxy metrics borrowed from Western datasets and demographic categories. Crucially, the corporate influence documented in our findings implies that design decisions ostensibly framed as technical like what data to collect, which benchmarks to optimize, how to define fairness are in practice political choices, and governance-aware system design must make those choices visible, contestable, and reversible by affected communities rather than obscuring them behind claims of technical neutrality.

Our study has several limitations that future research should address. Our sample of 14 stakeholders, while strategically diverse, is relatively small and dominated by urban, English-speaking professionals, lacking representation from rural communities, informal sector workers, and marginalized groups most affected by AI deployment. Also, our focus on elite discourse captures how policy actors interpret frameworks rather than how ordinary citizens experience AI systems, and snowball sampling may have introduced selection biases. Finally, as India's AI governance landscape evolves rapidly, our findings represent a snapshot requiring longitudinal research to track change over time.

In synopsis, this paper examined India's AI governance through elite stakeholder interviews, revealing fundamental contradictions between developmental rhetoric and implementation realities. While India's light-touch, partnership-based model enables innovation, our critical analysis exposes how voluntary governance systematically privileges economic actors while redistributing costs to marginalized populations, with corporate influence shaping "local" policy frameworks and fairness considerations remaining performative rather than mandatory. Our findings, grounded in stakeholder perspectives and Indian scholarship, demonstrate that effective governance requires confronting power asymmetries rather than assuming collaborative partnerships can harmonize conflicting interests. Without mandatory fairness requirements, transparency about corporate influence, affected community participation, and foundational capacity building, India's governance approach will continue reproducing the social hierarchies and exclusions we document rather than addressing them.

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