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The next DPI — how India can commoditise AI

Srivatsa Krishna

IAS officer

India made identity, payments, and data free. Intelligence is next. No other country has deliberately built all three as a digital public infrastructure (DPI) stack at India's scale. Others have developed only pieces of this. Estonia has a world-class digital identity system, but nothing comparable to UPI. Brazil's Pix is an excellent free payments rail, but it stands alone. Singapore has Singpass and SGFinDex, while Europe has open banking and data portability. India's genuine claim to global leadership in public digital infrastructure lies in this unique combination. Its distinctiveness is not any single component, but the integration of Aadhaar, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and DEPA/Account Aggregator as interoperable public digital rails.

Between September 2016 and 2019, the cost of a gigabyte in India fell from about $4 to under 30 cents, making it among the cheapest in the world. The result was not a telecom story. It was a civilisational one: 500 million people came online in half a decade, powering India's digital economy such as payment volumes, the startup ecosystem, the direct-benefit transfers reaching the last village. Aadhaar enrolled 1.4 billion people and turned identity verification from an expensive paper process to a low-cost API call. UPI made digital payments effectively free, processing around 20 billion transactions a month at near-zero cost. India made data free not by subsidising it, but by letting one player absorb the fixed costs of a nationwide 4G network, price at marginal cost, and force every incumbent to match or die.

India should not be in the capital race to the bottom which we would lose to hyperscalers, and it is the intelligence equivalent of nationalising the telecoms. India crashed the price of data by engineering conditions and competition. So, the target is inference, not training: relentlessly drive down the cost of using a model. It released spectrum, created a demand shock, and let ferocious competition do the rest. The state built the road and set the rules; the market crashed the price. A billion people came online not because data was gifted, but because its cost fell below the threshold of thought. And the case for making it free — or as close to free as a gigabyte of data — is not utopian. It is the same case, run on the same playbook that worked three times before.

This is the model India should now apply to its fourth foundational utility: intelligence itself. Intelligence is no longer a luxury software product; it is foundational infrastructure.

The trade running against India

The global artificial intelligence (AI) race is currently operating under an extractive economic model, and India — despite its immense demographic dividend — is on the losing side of the trade. India serves as the world's digital quarry. India supplies an outsized share of the world's raw intelligence. Its engineers build and fine-tune the frontier models of Silicon Valley. Its digitised public life — languages, documents, transactions, behaviour — becomes training data.

Its universities and diaspora furnish a disproportionate slice of the research talent behind every major laboratory. Each day, Indians generate vast data; Indian engineers build Silicon Valley's frontier models; and Indian workers label datasets to make them safer. Yet, Indian startups must rent that intelligence back as dollar-priced API tokens, subject to export controls and hosted on distant servers. India exports talent, data, and usage, then imports the finished intelligence at high-margin, per-token prices on terms set in San Francisco. The pattern is familiar. Ship out the cotton, buy back the cloth. India recognised that trap in textiles centuries ago. It should recognise it in intelligence now.

Making Artificial Intelligence affordable and ubiquitous should become India's next transformative public infrastructure revolution

India's AI token economy

India's national AI token economy should be built on the following pillars. First, making intelligence free is raw compute power. Through the IndiaAI Mission, backed by an outlay of about ₹10,372 crore, the government is building a public-private partnership model — not a state-run data centre monopoly. By empanelling private cloud providers and aggregating demand, it has onboarded over 38,000 GPUs, with plans to scale to 1,00,000. Eligible startups and researchers can access compute for about ₹65 per GPU hour, a fraction of global market rates.

India's grid planning does not yet treat AI load as a category. The single highest-leverage intervention available to the government is boring: fold compute into the National Electricity Plan, fast-track transmission to data-centre clusters, and dedicate renewables generation, including nuclear, to inference the way it once dedicated coal linkages to steel. Cheap electrons are the new cheap spectrum.

Second, cheap compute is useless without models to run on it. Currently, the most capable foundation models are closed source and owned by western tech giants. If Indian startups build their businesses on top of these proprietary APIs, they remain economically subservient. A single pricing change or policy shift in San Francisco can wipe out an entire sector in Bengaluru. India must mandate that foundational AI models become public goods.

The government must leverage its most valuable asset: linguistic and demographic data. The state should aggregate anonymised public data (legal rulings, agricultural data, educational curricula in all 22 official/scheduled languages) and make them available exclusively to researchers building open-source models. Further, any AI model developed using state-subsidised compute or public datasets must be released under an open-weights license. This mirrors the UPI philosophy: the government builds the rails, makes the protocol free, and lets private companies (Google Pay) compete on the user experience. By flooding the market with highly capable, open-source Indic LLMs (Large Language Models), India commoditises the "intelligence" layer. When foundational models are free and open, the economic value shifts from the model creators to the application builders — exactly where India's strength lies.

Third, the unified intelligence interface (UII) or distribution. How does a rural farmer or a Tier-3 developer access this free intelligence? An API gateway built on the principles of DPI, a UPI for AI. UPI's genius was not free payments as such; it was interoperability. A common protocol let any app talk to any bank, and switching costs fell to zero. Intelligence needs the same: an open, standardised interface through which any application can call any model — sovereign or private, open or proprietary — with shared standards for identity, consent, billing and safety.

Just as UPI abstracts away the complexity of inter-bank transfers, a national API gateway would abstract away the complexity of AI inference. Startups, government agencies, and educational institutions could plug into this gateway to access a suite of open-source models (translation, vision, text generation) for fractions of a penny.

To kickstart the ecosystem, the government could offer a national "freemium" model. Verified Indian startups or students through Aadhaar-linked digital identity could get monthly free API tokens, subsidised by the state. When startups scale and become profitable, they move to a commercial tier, paying slightly more for compute, which subsidises the free tier.

Additionally, a tenth of the fertilizer subsidy could be diverted to tokens for research and development institutions and schools. When intelligence becomes nearly free, sectors constrained by scarce human capital transform. A rural doctor, aided by AI trained on Indian data, can treat more patients with fewer errors; India's 300 million students get 24X7 personalised AI tutors in local dialects; a Karnataka farmer can settle a crop-insurance claim by voice in Kannada, with AI accessing land records.

The next great equaliser

In sum, free identity and cheap data did not make Indians rich; they made mass participation frictionless. Free intelligence can do the same. Nobody foresaw that near-free data would create the world's largest payments system, short-video platforms, and QR-code vegetable vendors.

Near-free intelligence could be just as generative if the state primes it with token entitlements for students and teachers, citizen services in local languages, and affordable tools for 60 million small businesses. India's leadership in the AI economy is contingent on developing an open-source ecosystem with open weights no-kill switch models that expand competition, choice, opportunities and innovation. The goal is not better chatbots; it is making cognition no longer a class privilege.

The views expressed are personal

In India, the term "Public Key Infrastructure" is used in the context of

(a) Digital security infrastructure

(b) Food security infrastructure

(c) Health care and education infrastructure

(d) Telecommunication and transportation infrastructure

Consider the following statements about G-20 :

1. The G-20 group was originally established as a platform for the Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors to discuss the international economic and financial issues.

2. Digital public infrastructure is one of India's G-20 priorities.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only

(b) 2 only

(c) Both 1 and 2

(d) Neither 1 nor 2

Context (GS III – Science & Technology: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Public Infrastructure)

India is exploring ways to develop an inclusive and affordable AI ecosystem by leveraging its successful Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) model. The focus is on making AI accessible through interoperable platforms, indigenous innovation and public digital infrastructure.

Key Points

I. Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)
* India's DPI comprises Aadhaar, UPI and DEPA/Account Aggregator, which have reduced transaction costs and expanded digital inclusion.
* The DPI approach can be extended to AI by creating open and interoperable digital infrastructure.

II. India's AI Opportunity
* India possesses large volumes of data, skilled human resources and a vast digital user base.
* However, dependence on foreign AI models and computing infrastructure limits domestic value creation.

III. Measures to Strengthen India's AI Ecosystem
* Expand affordable computing infrastructure under the IndiaAI Mission.
* Promote open-source/open-weight foundation models.
* Develop a Unified Intelligence Interface (UII) for seamless AI access.
* Encourage public-private partnerships, responsible use of public datasets and multilingual AI development.

IV. Potential Benefits
* Greater technological self-reliance.
* Lower cost of AI adoption.
* Increased innovation and startup growth.
* Wider AI applications in governance, healthcare, agriculture, education and MSMEs.

V. Challenges
* High computing and energy requirements.
* Data privacy and cybersecurity concerns.
* Ethical AI governance and regulatory framew

The Bay of Bengal as India's SHANTI anchor

The Bay of Bengal region, one of the world's most disaster-prone regions, lacks coordinated mechanisms to respond to natural disasters. Non-traditional threats such as climate-induced disasters, illegal fishing, cyber vulnerabilities, and supply chain disruptions require regional cooperation beyond bilateral aid or maritime power. This gap – growing capacity without shared norms – highlights the need for stronger maritime security.

On July 13, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar introduced Securing Holistic Advancement through Norms, Trust and Integrity (SHANTI) while launching India's candidature for the UN Security Council (UNSC) for the 2028-29 term. Building on Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR), SHANTI provides a normative framework for shared maritime spaces, with the Bay of Bengal serving as the ideal region to operationalise it before expanding it across the wider Indo-Pacific.

The Bay's centrality

In recent years, the Bay of Bengal has moved from the margins to the centre of India's strategic thinking. Historically, it connected South and Southeast Asia through trade, culture, religion, and the exchange of ideas long before the Indo-Pacific entered diplomatic vocabulary.

Today, it links India's Act East policy with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), provides access to the strategically vital Malacca Strait, and connects the eastern Indian Ocean to major global trade and energy routes. China's heavy reliance on the strait – often described as the "Malacca dilemma" – has driven its expanding regional presence through ports and infrastructure projects, intensifying geopolitical competition. As economic connectivity, maritime governance, and strategic rivalry converge in the Bay, SHANTI offers a framework that places norms, trust, and integrity – not tonnage – as the currency of durable advantage.

Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy

Associate Professor at the School of International Relations and Peace Studies, and Coordinator of the Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies at Nalanda University, Rajgir, Bihar

Raghvendra Kumar

Post-Doctoral Fellow, Nalanda University, and a Non-Resident Fellow with the Africa Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia

The Bay of Bengal is an ideal testing ground for SHANTI's security vision

A maritime security evolution

As such, SHANTI can be best understood as a logical evolution of its maritime outreach. SAGAR, articulated in 2015, supplied the vision of 'equity in development' and MAHASAGAR, announced in 2025, expanded that vision's scope recognising the interconnectedness of security (both vertically among nations and horizontally in threat perception) in the wider Indo-Pacific and the Global South. SHANTI offers the grammar of maritime security framework, the norms, trust and integrity in cooperation through which vision can be translated into tangible action that is well received and reciprocated. It shifts the emphasis from competition to demand driven cooperation, from influence to non-prescriptive institution-building, and from episodic crisis management to long-term resilience. This shift – from protecting maritime spaces to governing shared maritime commons – reflects India's new security mantra. If SAGAR was a statement of intent and MAHASAGAR a statement of reach, SHANTI is a statement of method to situate India as the "preferred security partner" and "first responder".

Because the Bay of Bengal is a single interconnected system, its cyclones, fish stocks, shipping lanes and pollution cross national boundaries almost by default, and its littoral states face remarkably similar challenges and concerns – disaster risk reduction and response, coastal erosion, fisheries management, port resilience, undersea cable protection and climate adaptation.

Unlike the western Indian Ocean, which is marked by active conflict, fragile economy and contested spaces, the Bay of Bengal's strategic geography encourages cooperation. Yet, the region suffers less from a lack of institutions than from institutional fragmentation. What is missing is a common framework to align existing mechanisms. SHANTI fills this gap by providing principles to strengthen cooperation in maritime security, disaster response, the blue economy, and environmental resilience. India's geography gives it a natural convening role, but its centrality should rest on regional stewardship – not dominance – through trust-based, rules-based cooperation among states with shared challenges and opportunities.

Principles to practice

Taken together, these conditions make the Bay of Bengal India's most governable maritime sub-region – a natural laboratory where SHANTI can move from principle to practice before shaping wider cooperation across the Indian Ocean. This was reflected at the July 2026 BIMSTEC National Security Advisers' meeting in New Delhi, where member-states adopted common principles for maritime law enforcement and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. BIMSTEC also agreed to hold its first joint maritime security exercise in the Bay, in November 2026, while a white shipping information-sharing agreement remains under discussion. These initiatives reflect the norm-building and trust-based cooperation that SHANTI seeks to promote. Its lasting contribution, therefore, will not be another acronym in India's maritime lexicon, but a redefinition of security – from deterrence to resilience, from rivalry to shared responsibility, and from crisis management to governance of the shared maritime commons.

The views expressed are personal

Consider the following statements in respect of BIMSTEC :

I. It is a regional organization consisting of seven member States till January 2025.

II. It came into existence with the signing of the Dhaka Declaration, 1999.

III. Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Nepal are founding member States of BIMSTEC.

IV. In BIMSTEC, the subsector of 'tourism' is being led by India.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) I and II *(b)* II and III

(c) I and IV *(d)* I only

Context (GS II – International Relations: India's Maritime Policy, BIMSTEC & Indo-Pacific)

India has proposed SHANTI (Securing Holistic Advancement through Norms, Trust and Integrity) as a maritime governance framework to strengthen regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal through norms, trust and institutional partnerships.

1. SHANTI Framework

I. SHANTI stands for Securing Holistic Advancement through Norms, Trust and Integrity.
II. It seeks to institutionalise maritime cooperation based on rules, trust and shared responsibility, rather than strategic competition.
III. It complements India's maritime vision under SAGAR and MAHASAGAR by providing a governance framework for regional cooperation.

2. Objectives

I. Promote maritime security and a rules-based maritime order.
II. Strengthen cooperation in disaster management, humanitarian assistance, blue economy, fisheries, environmental protection and maritime law enforcement.
III. Build resilient regional institutions to address common transboundary maritime challenges.

3. Significance

I. Positions the Bay of Bengal as the starting point for India's cooperative maritime strategy due to its strategic location and shared regional challenges.
II. Reinforces India's role as a preferred security partner in the Indian Ocean Region through consensus-building rather than dominance.
III. Strengthens regional platforms such as BIMSTEC and advances India's Act East and Indo-Pacific vision.

Have fast-track courts delivered on the promise of speedy justice?

Bharat Chugh

Delhi-based advocate and former civil judge

Shruthi Naik

Senior resident fellow at Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, Delhi

PARLEY

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement to set up fast-track courts to hear paper leak cases has once again revived the debate over whether these specialised courts are the silver bullet to India's chronic judicial delays. Following the announcement, the Delhi High Court has constituted a fast-track court at the Rouse Avenue Courts Complex to exclusively hear cases under the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024. However, stakeholders have cautioned that fast-track courts also struggle with mounting pendency and resource constraints. So, have fast-track courts delivered on the promise of speedy justice? Bharat Chugh and Shruthi Naik discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Aaratrika Bhaumik**.

How effective have fast-track courts been?

Bharat Chugh: Fast-track courts have succeeded in delivering speed, but only for the limited category of cases assigned to them. That is because, in most instances, a fast-track court does not entail the creation of additional judges or judicial capacity. For example, take the proposed fast-track courts for exam leak cases. The judges presiding over these courts are typically drawn from the existing judicial system and reassigned from the cases they were already handling to hear these priority matters instead. Rather than expand the judiciary's capacity, fast-track courts redeploy existing judicial resources. As a result, while the designated cases move through the system more quickly, the matters those judges were previously handling are pushed further down the queue.

Shruthi Naik: The larger problem is that we rarely consider, at a structural level, what establishing a fast-track court actually requires. While funds may be allocated for judicial officers, support staff, and operational expenses, the real constraint is judicial capacity. If all we are doing is reallocating existing judges rather than expanding the system, we are simply shifting the backlog elsewhere. Equally important is whether the procedural reforms needed to support these courts are in place. Are witness depositions taking place in a timely and predictable manner? Are all stakeholders coordinating to ensure cases progress without unnecessary adjournments? Without these systemic changes, it is difficult to assess whether fast-track courts are truly delivering on their promise of speedy justice.

The Union Law Ministry recently said that Fast-Track Special Courts (FTSCs) are burdened with a backlog of nearly 2.45 lakh cases. What explains this pendency?

Prayer for justice: A child lights a candle after a march on the NEET paper leak issue in Shimla on July 25. PTI

SN: The Law Ministry's data includes the number of cases instituted, disposed of, and pending over the past three years. A closer look at those figures shows that the case clearance rate (the number of cases disposed of compared with the number of cases instituted) has remained below 100% each year. In other words, the system has consistently failed to keep pace with the volume of new cases being filed. In 2025, around 1.4 lakh cases were instituted, but only about 66,000 were disposed of. The remainder inevitably added to the backlog.

More importantly, if we want to assess whether fast-track courts are truly delivering speedy justice, we need robust data on the time taken to dispose of cases. While the National Judicial Data Grid provides pendency and disposal timelines for courts generally, it does not offer comparable data for FTSCs. Without that degree of transparency, it is difficult to evaluate whether these courts are fulfilling the objective for which they were established.

BC: The pendency in fast-track courts cannot be viewed in isolation. It has to be seen in the context of the overall burden on the justice system. Trial courts across the country are currently grappling with nearly 4.8 crore pending cases, of which roughly 74% are criminal matters. That is an enormous caseload, particularly when viewed alongside the limited judicial strength available to handle it. Every year, crores of fresh cases are instituted, spanning offences from acid attacks and chain-snatching to cybercrime and murder. That is the scale of the challenge confronting the justice system. Without addressing these systemic constraints, it is difficult to expect fast-track courts alone to bring about lasting improvements in the delivery of speedy justice.

> Ideally, we should be striving for a justice system that does not require fast-track courts at all. The very demand for specialised courts suggests that people have lost confidence in the ability of the regular justice system to deliver timely justice
>
> SHRUTHI NAIK

The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026, requires investigations into paper leak cases to be completed within two months and sets a three-month timeline for trials. Should laws prescribe such rigid timelines?

BC: The Supreme Court has repeatedly cautioned against prescribing rigid timelines for criminal proceedings because every case presents its own complexities. Criminal trials often involve chargesheets and evidence running into thousands of pages. Forcing proceedings into a rigid timeline may deprive the defence of a meaningful opportunity to prepare its case, thereby compromising the right to a fair trial. It can also leave courts with less flexibility to effectively manage witnesses, whose testimony is often crucial to the outcome of a case. Therefore, the objective should be to strike a careful balance between expeditious justice and procedural fairness, without sacrificing one in pursuit of the other.

SN: Before prescribing strict timelines, we need to ask whether the necessary institutional capacity actually exists. Do we have enough investigators, forensic laboratories, and judicial resources to complete investigations within the prescribed time? Can forensic reports be generated quickly enough? Can witnesses always be traced and examined without delay? While everyone wants cases to be concluded expeditiously, that objective cannot come at the cost of the quality of justice being delivered. Setting aspirational timelines to encourage the expeditious disposal of cases is one thing, but making them mandatory is quite another.

The Supreme Court has cautioned that arbitrarily designating cases for fast-track courts may violate the right to equality under Article 14 of the Constitution. What considerations should guide the selection of cases for fast-track courts?

SN: Ideally, we should be striving for a justice system that does not require fast-track courts at all. The very demand for specialised courts suggests that people have lost confidence in the ability of the regular justice system to deliver timely justice. More often than not, the decision to assign certain categories of cases to fast-track courts is driven by public sentiment. If individuals are entitled to equal protection of the law, they should also have an equal opportunity to access justice. These are difficult policy choices, and any decision to assign cases to fast-track courts must rest on a rational basis consistent with the guarantee of equality.

In 2019, FTSCs were constituted to ensure the time-bound trial of rape cases and offences under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act. Have these courts lived up to the purpose?

BC: A major challenge facing FTSCs is the acute shortage of resources. Strengthening the prosecution has never received the attention it deserves. Even in Delhi, it is not uncommon for a single public prosecutor to appear before multiple courts in a day, simply because there are not enough prosecutors. This is particularly concerning in complex criminal cases, where prosecutors often face teams of defence lawyers with far greater legal and research support. The same resource deficit is evident in forensic infrastructure. Paper leak cases, for instance, often hinge on digital evidence recovered from electronic devices, making cyber forensics critical. Yet forensic laboratories are severely understaffed and overburdened. Unless we strengthen the prosecution, expand forensic capacity, and fill judicial vacancies, FTSCs alone cannot deliver speedy justice.

What institutional reforms are required?

BC: A fast-track court is only as effective as the investigation that precedes it. If the objective is to deliver timely and well-reasoned judgments, the process must begin with a credible investigation. That requires adequately trained investigators, timely forensic assistance and the support necessary to gather reliable evidence.

SN: Lawyers, witnesses, investigators and prosecutors should know well in advance when they are required to appear so that hearings can proceed without disruption. Equally important is reducing avoidable delays. That means minimising adjournments and ensuring court directions are complied with promptly.

To listen to the full interview

Scan the code or go to the link

www.thehindu.com

Context (GS II – Polity & Governance: Judiciary, Judicial Reforms & Access to Justice)
The proposal to establish Fast-Track Courts (FTCs) for cases under the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 has reignited the debate on whether specialised courts ensure speedy justice or merely shift the existing judicial backlog.

1. Fast-Track Courts
I. Fast-Track Courts are special courts constituted to ensure expeditious disposal of specified categories of cases without creating a separate judicial hierarchy.
II. They generally utilise existing judges and judicial infrastructure; therefore, they often prioritise selected cases rather than expanding judicial capacity.
III. Their functioning must uphold Article 14 (Equality before Law), ensuring that classification of cases for fast-track treatment is based on a reasonable and non-arbitrary criterion.

2. Challenges
I. Fast-tracking selected cases may simply redistribute pendency instead of reducing the overall judicial backlog.
II. Persistent judicial vacancies, shortage of prosecutors, inadequate forensic laboratories and weak investigative capacity remain the principal causes of delay.
III. While Article 21 guarantees the Right to Speedy Trial as part of the Right to Life and Personal Liberty, speedy disposal cannot come at the cost of a fair investigation and fair trial.

3. Way Forward
I. Increase the number of judges, strengthen prosecution services and modernise forensic infrastructure instead of relying solely on Fast-Track Courts.
II. Ensure objective criteria for assigning cases to Fast-Track Courts while balancing efficiency with procedural fairness.
III. The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 provides stringent measures against examination malpractices, but its effective implementation requires adequate judicial and investigative capacity.

BUNIA

Congo says toll in fastest-growing Ebola outbreak has passed 1,500

REUTERS

The fastest-growing Ebola outbreak has killed more than 1,500 people in eastern Congo, official data released on Thursday showed, marking a 50% increase in around a week that shows the emergency continuing to outpace response efforts. As of Tuesday, 3,442 cases had been recorded, with 1,521 deaths. AP

Among the following, which were frequently mentioned in the news for the outbreak of Ebola virus recently?

(a) Syria and Jordan

(b) Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia

(c) Philippines and Papua New Guinea

(d) Jamaica, Haiti and Surinam

Context (GS II – Health: Communicable Diseases; Prelims – Ebola Virus Disease)

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is witnessing a major Ebola outbreak, underlining the importance of disease surveillance, vaccination and global health preparedness.

1. Ebola Virus Disease (EVD)

I. Ebola is a viral haemorrhagic fever caused by the Ebolavirus (Filoviridae family).

II. It spreads through direct contact with infected blood, body fluids or contaminated objects and has a high fatality rate.

III. Prevention relies on early detection, isolation, contact tracing and vaccination (Ervebo vaccine).

2. Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

I. Located in Central Africa, the DRC is one of Africa's largest countries and is traversed by the Congo River, the continent's second-longest river.

II. It shares borders with nine countries: Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Zambia and Angola.

III. The DRC is part of the Congo Basin, home to the world's second-largest tropical rainforest after the Amazon, making it ecologically significant.

India's refusal to uphold a global gig work law

Rejimon Kuttappan

is a workers' rights advocate

On June 12, in Geneva, the International Labour Conference adopted Convention No. 193, 'Decent Work in the Platform Economy', which is the first binding international treaty written for the rider, driver, picker and data-labeller who earns a living through an app. The vote was lopsided: 406 in favour (which included nations such as China, Brazil, Germany, France, South Africa, and Japan), 8 against, and 36 abstentions.

India abstained. Under the International Labour Organization's (ILO) tripartite system, each country votes through three delegates. Only India's government abstained; its employer and worker delegates voted in favour.

Abstention is not neutrality. It is a decision to maintain distance from a treaty that millions of workers waited two years to win.

What India walked away from

Convention No. 193 does what India's own laws refuse to. It extends a floor of rights to platform workers regardless of classification, even if a company calls them "employees" or "independent partners". Core protections, which include pay as per the statutory or negotiated minimum; on-time payment; occupational safety and health; and social security on terms no less favourable than what comparable workers receive, apply to all.

The Convention also enters territory no global standard has touched – algorithmic management, the opaque software that allocates work, sets pay, monitors performance, and silently deactivates accounts. Platforms must now disclose significant automated decisions, explain them in writing, and keep a human in the loop. Further, Article 9 of the Convention strikes at the gig economy's central fiction: governments must classify workers correctly, guided "mainly by the facts relating to the performance of work" and by what the worker does.

Convention No. 193 extends a floor of rights to platform workers regardless of classification, even if a company calls them 'employees' or 'independent partners'

It is no utopian document. It is a floor for worker's rights that India's gig workers currently do not stand on.

India's gig workforce stood at roughly 7.7 million in 2020-21. By NITI Aayog's own projection, it will reach 2.35 crore by 2029-30, about 6.7% of the non-agricultural workforce. This is no longer the urban side-hustle of marketing decks. Gig work is now becoming the mode through which India's cities are fed, moved and supplied.

Further, NITI Aayog data shows that about 39% of gig workers earn ₹10,000-₹25,000 a month and 34% earn ₹25,000-₹40,000, with wages stretched across 12-hour shifts; fuel paid for by the worker himself; and no overtime, because overtime requires an employer to exist. Only about 15% have any social security. The rest ride into Indian traffic each morning with no accident cover, no sick pay, no pension, and an algorithm that can switch off their income without explanation.

The government's defenders will say that India needs no Geneva treaty because it has its own framework. The Code on Social Security, 2020, part of the four Labour Codes brought into force in November 2025, was among the world's first central laws to define "gig worker" and "platform worker". It directs aggregators to pay 1%-2% of their annual turnover, capped at 5% of worker payouts, into a social security fund.

While on paper, this sounds like leadership, in practice, it is a promise printed and shelved. Neither the central law nor most of the State laws specify the nature, quantum or eligibility of benefits. The contribution mechanism remains largely un-operationalised and the schemes are notional. Meanwhile, the real laws have come from the States: Rajasthan's Platform-Based Gig Workers Act of 2023, and the welfare boards drafted in Karnataka and Telangana. The Centre abstains in Geneva while its own States legislate.

India's abstention at the Conference reads less like a one-off position than a habit. India is a founding member of the ILO and has ratified six of the eight core conventions. It has not ratified Convention No. 87 (Freedom of Association) or No. 98 (Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining) because they would give government servants the right to strike, which domestic rules bar. Nor has it ratified Convention No. 190 on violence and harassment at work.

A founder of the ILO that will not sign the ILO's own guarantees is not a country caught off-guard. It has a settled posture: endorse the principle but withhold the obligation. The logic is consistent. India ratifies Conventions only once national law is in full conformity. There is a federalism argument too, as labour is a concurrent subject. But abstention does not protect federalism; the States are already moving.

What abstention costs

When a country ratifies an ILO convention and writes it into domestic law, a worker can sue a platform for redress. Abstention forecloses that future. It tells every aggregator in India that the classification fiction is safe here and that the algorithm need not explain itself. It widens the gap between a delivery worker in China, who will have rights, and one in Chennai, who will not.

The government had a choice between the worker and the platform, and in one of the most public forums on earth it chose to make no choice at all, which, when one party holds the app and the other the handlebars, is the same as choosing the app.

The World Bank estimates that 154-435 million people already earn through platforms worldwide. Twenty-three and a half million of them will be Indian by 2030. They delivered the meal. The least their government owed them was a show of hands.

4. Which of the following international conventions have ***not*** been ratified by India ?

1. Employment Policy Convention
2. Abolition of Forced Labour Convention
3. International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
4. Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War
5. Convention on Reduction of Statelessness

Select the answer using the code given below :

(a) 2 and 4

(b) 1 and 2

(c) 3 and 4 only

(d) 3, 4 and 5

Context (GS II – Social Justice: Labour & Welfare; GS III – Economy: Labour Reforms; International Organisations – ILO)

The International Labour Conference (ILC) adopted ILO Convention No. 193 on Decent Work in the Platform Economy, the first legally binding international treaty on gig and platform workers. While the Convention was adopted by a large majority, India abstained from voting.

1. ILO Convention No. 193

I. It is the first binding international convention that establishes minimum labour rights for gig and platform workers, irrespective of whether they are classified as employees or independent contractors.
II. It provides for fair remuneration, timely payment, occupational safety, social security, algorithmic transparency, protection against arbitrary deactivation and access to grievance redressal.
III. Ratifying countries are required to align their domestic laws with the Convention.

2. India's Position

I. India abstained, stating that labour is a Concurrent List subject and domestic laws should be aligned before accepting international obligations.
II. India has already recognised gig workers and platform workers under the Code on Social Security, 2020, which provides for social security schemes funded through contributions from platform aggregators.
III. However, several welfare measures under the Code are yet to be fully operationalised, while some States, such as Rajasthan, have enacted separate legislation for platform workers.

3. Significance

I. The Convention seeks to establish a global minimum standard for the rapidly expanding gig economy and improve workers' social and economic security.
II. For India, balancing labour protection, platform innovation and employment generation remains the key policy challenge, given its large and growing gig workforce.

Activists raise transparency concerns as PM CARES Fund withholds audit statements since FY 2022-23

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

The Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) Fund has not made public any audited financial statements for the past three fiscal years even as activists raise concerns about its transparency.

The fund, a public charitable Trust established in March 2020 amid the COVID-19 crisis to support relief efforts during public health emergencies and other disasters, is chaired by the Prime Minister and funded entirely through voluntary contributions, according to information released by the Centre.

Chaired by the PM, the fund was set up in 2020 to aid relief efforts during public health emergencies and other disasters. FILE PHOTO

The last publicly available audited financial statements, for the financial year 2022-23, show an opening balance of ₹5,415.65 crore, voluntary contributions of ₹909.64 crore, total receipts of ₹6,723.07 crore, total payments of ₹439.38 crore, and a closing balance of ₹6,283.68 crore as on March 31, 2023. Audited financial statements for 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23 are available on the PM CARES website.

The absence of publicly available audit statements after 2022-23 is "extremely concerning", Anjali Bhardwaj, co-convener of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information, told *The Hindu*.

"The fund was presented as having been set up by the Union government, making it appear to be a public authority. Government employees also contributed from their salaries," Ms. Bhardwaj said.

"However, when information regarding the funds collected and spent was sought, the government maintained that the Trust is not a public authority under the RTI Act... At present, PM CARES remains outside the ambit of the RTI Act, parliamentary scrutiny, and audit by the Comptroller and Auditor-General," she said.

Information relating to the PM CARES Fund should be made available to the public, former Central Information Commissioner and RTI activist Shailesh Gandhi said.

'Falls in ambit of RTI'

"Legally speaking, the PM CARES Fund falls within the ambit of the RTI Act... In fact, anything associated with the Prime Minister, except matters affecting national security, should be open to public scrutiny. The trustees of the PM CARES Fund are Union Ministers. They are public servants and should be accountable," he said.

Context (GS II – Polity & Governance: Transparency, Accountability & RTI)

The non-disclosure of audited financial statements of the PM CARES Fund after FY 2022–23 has revived the debate over its transparency, accountability and applicability of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005.

1. PM CARES Fund

I. PM CARES (Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund) was established in March 2020 as a public charitable trust to provide relief during public health emergencies, natural disasters and other emergencies.
II. The Prime Minister is the ex-officio Chairperson, while the Defence Minister, Home Minister and Finance Minister are ex-officio Trustees.
III. The Fund is financed entirely through voluntary contributions from individuals, organisations and institutions, and does not receive budgetary support from the Consolidated Fund of India.

2. Constitutional and Legal Status

I. PM CARES is not a constitutional body, statutory body or constitutional fund. It is a public charitable trust registered under the Registration Act, 1908.
II. The Union Government has maintained that PM CARES is not a 'public authority' under Section 2(h) of the RTI Act, 2005; therefore, it is not directly subject to RTI provisions.
III. It is also not audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). Instead, its accounts are audited by an independent Chartered Accountant appointed by the Trust.

3. Issues and Concerns

I. Non-disclosure of recent audit reports has raised concerns regarding transparency, public accountability and financial oversight.
II. The close association of the Fund with constitutional functionaries has led to continuing debates on whether it should be brought under the ambit of the RTI Act and subjected to greater public scrutiny.
III. The issue highlights the broader governance challenge of balancing operational flexibility in disaster response with institutional transparency and accountability.