

The present issue of the *Journal of Indian Research* arrives at a moment of profound consequence for India's developmental trajectory. The research papers featured in this issue, while distinct in their disciplinary focus, converge on a single overarching concern: how does India position itself as a rising economic power while ensuring that the gains of growth and transformation are equitably shared? One paper scrutinizes the disruptive potential of Artificial Intelligence on the Indian labour market; another maps the contours of India's trade relations within South Asia. Together, these illuminate two of the most pressing challenges confronting the Indian economy today — technological transition and regional economic integration.

Mehak Vishwakarma's study on "*AI and the Future of Work in India*" makes a compelling and timely contribution. As Artificial Intelligence permeates sectors from information technology to agriculture, its interaction with India's structurally fragile labour market raises concerns that go far beyond the conventional debate of jobs created versus jobs lost. India's labour force of over 640 million is predominantly informal, insufficiently skilled for the demands of a digital economy, and concentrated in sectors most vulnerable to automation. The author's conceptualisation of India's "double vulnerability" — the coexistence of a large low-skilled workforce and high susceptibility of such jobs to automation — is an analytically significant contribution that deserves policy attention. This is not merely an academic formulation; it captures a structural risk that could deepen inequality if AI adoption proceeds without commensurate investment in reskilling, social protection, and digital infrastructure.

The paper rightly cautions against viewing AI as a uniformly beneficial force. Labour market polarisation, skill-biased technological change, and the expansion of precarious gig work are real and measurable outcomes of unmanaged AI integration. For a country where nearly 80 to 90 per cent of workers operate outside formal employment, the risk is not simply one of job displacement but of systemic exclusion from the very economic transformation that AI promises to deliver. The policy recommendations — encompassing large-scale reskilling, strengthening labour protections for platform workers, reforming the education system, and bridging the digital divide — are well-grounded and merit urgent consideration by policymakers, industry stakeholders, and academic institutions alike.

The paper by Dr. Sukanta Sarkar, offers an empirically grounded study of India's trade balance with its South Asian neighbours under the SAARC framework. The findings are instructive: India maintains a trade surplus with all seven neighbouring countries, with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka emerging as its most significant trading partners in the region. The data spanning over a decade reveals a consistent pattern of Indian export dominance, underpinned by the country's comparatively advanced logistics infrastructure, as reflected in its Logistics Performance Index score that surpasses all other SAARC member states. The Trade Complementarity Index further highlights the scope for deeper economic integration, particularly with Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Yet the study also draws attention to the considerable barriers that continue to constrain intra-regional trade in South Asia. Administrative bottlenecks, non-tariff restrictions, poor transport connectivity, trust deficits, and political tensions — most acutely manifest in the near-collapse of trade with Pakistan since 2019 — have kept South Asia as one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. The decline in India’s exports to Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover similarly underscores how geopolitical instability can rapidly undermine decades of trade-building efforts. Strengthening regional economic cooperation through the SAFTA framework and investing in cross-border infrastructure must therefore be treated as strategic imperatives, not merely aspirational goals.

Read together, these studies point to a common thread that runs through contemporary Indian economic discourse: the gap between potential and realization. India possesses the demographic scale, technological talent pool, and regional economic centrality to emerge as a leading force in both the digital economy and South Asian commerce. However, structural vulnerabilities — informality, skill mismatches, infrastructure deficits, and geopolitical constraints — temper this potential significantly. The promise of AI-driven growth and deeper regional trade integration will only be fulfilled if India pursues these transformations through deliberate, inclusive, and institutionally supported frameworks.

The *Journal of Indian Research* is committed to facilitating rigorous scholarly engagement with questions of national importance. We believe that evidence-based academic inquiry — such as the two papers mentioned in this issue — plays an essential role in informing public debate and policy design. We invite contributions from researchers, economists, social scientists, and practitioners who share this commitment to understanding and advancing India’s development. It is our hope that this issue stimulates further dialogue on the complex interplay between technology, trade, and inclusive growth in the world’s most populous democracy.

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Editor