

YOUTH AI SURVEY 2026

WORK, STUDY & LEISURE IN THE
AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

INDIA

COUNTRY POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief presents country-specific findings from the Youth AI Survey 2026, a multi-country study examining how young people aged 18-35 use, experience, and think about artificial intelligence. Conducted by Restless Development, the University of Cambridge Centre for Human-Inspired Artificial Intelligence, and Makerere University, the survey collected 1,864 responses from young people primarily across Africa and South Asia, with the United Kingdom as a high-income comparator.

This brief draws on responses from 125 young people in India (data collected 4-22 March 2026) and is intended for national and state-level government bodies, NGO partners, local and international funders, technology companies, and youth organisations working in the Indian context.

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1. INTRODUCTION & COUNTRY CONTEXT

Country Context

India is home to the world's largest youth population, with over 600 million people under 25 and nearly 65% under 35, making young people's engagement with AI a matter of national importance. Digital adoption has grown rapidly, supported by expanding smartphone ownership and low mobile data costs, and India now has over 1 billion internet users. Yet access remains uneven. While urban centres such as Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Hyderabad benefit from stronger digital infrastructure, many rural and semi-rural areas continue to face lower connectivity and limited access to devices. These divides are further shaped by gender, caste, income, language, and geography.

Affordability also remains a critical dimension of digital inclusion. Rising living costs, particularly in urban areas, affect households' ability to access devices, internet services, and paid digital platforms. Reflecting this, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Broadband Commission and the former Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) define affordable connectivity as entry-level broadband costing less than 2% of monthly gross national income (GNI) per capita, recognising that meaningful access depends not only on network availability but also on whether households can sustainably afford digital participation. In India, entry-level mobile broadband has been estimated to cost approximately 1.1% of monthly GNI per capita, placing the country below the 2% affordability threshold and suggesting that mobile connectivity is broadly affordable at the national level. However, affordability challenges persist for fixed broadband and among lower-income households, indicating that national averages may not fully capture inequalities in meaningful digital access.

Against this backdrop, India's National AI Strategy ("AI for All") positions AI as a driver of inclusive growth, while AI tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and local-language platforms are becoming increasingly visible across education, work, and everyday life.

This brief is timed to contribute to ongoing national conversations about inclusive AI governance, the National Digital Literacy Mission, and India's emerging data protection framework. It highlights what young people in India are actually experiencing, rather than what policy frameworks assume, and identifies practical entry points for government, civil society, and funders.

“AI may take away jobs from many people, but it can also provide new job opportunities. The question is whether people are prepared.”

YOUNG PERSON, INDIA

2. ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

About the Respondents

Of 125 respondents aged 18-35, surveyed between 4 and 22 March 2026, the majority were rural-based (59%), female (58%), and engaged primarily in studying or informal work. This demographic profile, distinct from the urban, tech-sector profile that typically dominates AI narratives in India, surfaces concerns about access, skill gaps, and structural inequalities that national AI strategies have yet to adequately address. The India sample is notably younger and more rural than the 11-country aggregate. Over half of respondents (57%) were aged 18-23, compared to a survey-wide average of 35% in this bracket. This younger skew, combined with a predominantly rural sample, is significant: it captures a demographic often missing from AI research yet directly affected by the design and deployment of AI tools. The gender split (58% female) slightly exceeds the 11-country average of 52%, though females in India use AI less frequently than males do, even though they outnumber males in the sample.

One distinctive feature of the India data is the high reported rate of disability: 30% of respondents identified as living with a disability; the highest proportion of any country in the survey, and substantially above the 11-country average of 6.4%. Most are identified as neurodivergent. This finding warrants further investigation and suggests that, for some in this sample, AI tools may serve as a meaningful accessibility aid. It also raises questions about how AI systems accommodate diverse cognitive and physical needs in the Indian context.

125

Total respondents
March 2026

58 %

Women
vs 52% across 11
countries

59 %

Rural dwellers
vs 24% survey
average

57%

Aged 18-23
(largest group)
vs 35% across 11
countries

30%

Bachelor's degree
or above
comparable to 11-
country avg

30%

Reported with a
disability
Highest of all 11
countries

3. HOW YOUNG PEOPLE IN INDIA USE AI

11-COUNTRY BENCHMARK

11-country average: 64% use AI daily

11-COUNTRY BENCHMARK

11-country average: 64% use AI daily

AI use is widespread but below the 11-country average. Around 54% of India respondents use AI daily, and a further 18% use it weekly, leaving roughly a quarter using it monthly or never. This positions India alongside Angola and the UK as countries with comparatively lower daily AI uptake among respondents, in contrast to Tanzania and Kenya, where daily use exceeds 90%. Among those who do not use AI, the reasons in India are split between lack of access and low digital skills, whereas in the UK, ethical concerns dominate. India was among the countries where non-use of AI was highest relative to other surveyed countries, with 4% of respondents reporting they had never used AI, and a further 16% reporting only monthly use.

Learning and education dominate AI use. Education and learning are the most common use category (69% of respondents), followed by social media (39%) and productivity tools (30%). Academic support (30%) and learning new skills (54%) are closely aligned, reflecting a student-heavy sample. Notably, only 18% of India respondents report using AI to earn income directly, above the 11-country average of 14%; yet this remains small relative to the ambition expressed by respondents for AI to drive economic opportunity. The gap between skill-building use and income generation is a persistent pattern across the survey and is particularly visible in India.

Key Findings: AI Use Patterns

- Primary use: Learning new skills is the most commonly reported use of AI in India (54%), consistent with the 11-country pattern but below the survey benchmark of 60% for urban respondents and 56% for peri-urban respondents. Education and learning, as a broad category, reaches 69%.
- Income gap: Despite frequent AI engagement, only 18% of India respondents report directly earning income through AI; slightly above the 11-country average of 14%, but still modest. The reported impact of AI on income and employment is among the highest in the survey for India, alongside Tanzania and Kenya, though this reflects aspiration as much as current reality.

- Rural majority, lower use: India is the only surveyed country in which rural respondents outnumber urban respondents. Rural respondents show lower AI uptake across all uses. This structural difference significantly shapes the data and should inform how findings are interpreted and which interventions are prioritised.
- Gender gap in daily use: Males are substantially more likely to be daily AI users (66%) than females (47%), a gap of nearly 20 percentage points. The largest gender gap in specific uses is in finding work (males: 32%, females: 22%) and earning income (males: 25%, females: 16%). Females are 12.8 percentage points more likely to report never using AI.



"I am teaching females to use AI to create content. I am concerned about how AI and the digital space is reproducing the power structures that already exist in our society offline."

YOUNG FEMALE, INDIA

4. WHO BENEFITS, WHO DOESN'T?



The barriers young people in India face in accessing AI are distinct from those in both the African countries surveyed and the UK. High data costs are cited by 41% of respondents, lower than in most African countries, but notable given India’s relatively competitive mobile data market. This finding may reflect the quality and reliability of connectivity more than its cost, as weak connectivity is cited by 24% of respondents. Fear of scams (21%) ranks higher in India than in most other countries, indicating a specific trust and safety concern that intersects with AI use and may deter engagement, particularly among females and first-time users.

Low digital skills (11%) are a less prominent barrier in India’s data than in countries like Uganda or Zimbabwe, yet given that 59% of respondents are rural-based, this figure likely understates the challenge for the broader youth population. The high disability rate (30%) in this sample also raises questions about whether AI tools are accessible to respondents with varying physical and cognitive needs; an area that deserves attention in platform design and policy.

Language & Cultural Representation

Language is a significant dimension of India’s AI equity challenge. English is the dominant language used to access AI (73% of respondents), despite Hindi being used by 44% and local languages by 15%. Strikingly, when asked what language they would prefer for AI, 19% named local languages (their mother tongue), higher than the current availability suggests. This preference aligns with research showing that AI tools are creating a new global linguistic hierarchy that disproportionately benefits English speakers (Occhini et al., 2026). India’s extraordinary linguistic diversity, with 22 officially recognised languages and hundreds of spoken dialects, means English-only or Hindi-only AI tools systematically exclude large segments of the youth population.



"AI should be accessible in our local languages. Many rural young people can't fully benefit when tools only work well in English."

YOUNG FEMALE, INDIA

Gender Gaps in AI Knowledge & Economic Impact

India is an outlier in one important respect: the self-reported AI knowledge gap between males and females is narrower here than in almost any other country surveyed. Males (28%) and females (30%) report similar levels of high AI expertise, in contrast to the 15-percentage-point gap observed across the full 11-country dataset. However, this does not translate into equal use. Daily AI use among males (66%) substantially exceeds that among females (47%), and males use AI more for income-generating and work-finding purposes. This disconnect between claimed knowledge and actual usage patterns among females may point to confidence and access barriers that limit how knowledge translates into practice, rather than a lack of capacity.

The survey data also indicate that India, alongside Tanzania and Kenya, has significant gender gaps in the reported impact of AI on income and employment. Males are more likely to work in sectors where AI tools are being integrated into production, such as IT services, freelancing, and digital content creation; while females remain concentrated in sectors with slower AI adoption. This pattern, if not actively addressed, risks deepening existing occupational segregation.

In India, 28% of males vs 30% of females report 'a lot' of AI knowledge; an unusually narrow gap for this survey	11-COUNTRY BENCHMARK 11-country average: 38% of males vs 23% of females report 'a lot' of AI knowledge
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5. YOUNG PEOPLE’S AI CONCERNS

Concern about AI is high and consistent across all five domains surveyed. Environmental impact is the top concern in India, with approximately 50% of respondents expressing high levels of worry, above the 11-country average of 42%. The power of AI companies (51% high concern) and data ownership (41% high concern) follow closely. These concerns are expressed at rates broadly comparable to or above the survey average, reflecting a population that is not simply optimistic about AI but acutely aware of its structural risks.

The gender pattern in India aligns with the female-dominant concern profile seen in the UK and Zimbabwe. Females express higher levels of concern about data ownership (43% vs 32% of males reporting 'a lot'), while concern about AI company power is roughly equal across genders. This female-dominant concern profile suggests that young females in India perceive data-related risks with particular intensity; a finding that resonates with broader literature on gendered experiences of surveillance, digital harassment, and privacy violation in India’s online spaces.

Across the full 11-country dataset, daily AI users are the most concerned about AI risks; not the least. Daily users show the highest concern across all five domains, with the largest gap on data ownership (58% of daily users express high concern vs 37% of non-users).

In India, 54% of respondents use AI daily, and concern levels across all domains are high. Those already embedded in AI systems are the most motivated to see them better governed.

This reflects grounded concerns about scams, data misuse, and the spread of false information. India’s experience of AI-generated misinformation in political and social contexts makes these concerns tangible rather than abstract.

Misinformation concern is also above the survey average (72% vs 64%), with India ranking among the top three countries for expressed concern alongside the UK and Nigeria.

What would make AI safer?

Stronger laws (44%) and better reporting systems (44%) are the top priorities for making AI safer among Indian respondents, aligning with the broader 11-country finding that AI safety is understood primarily as a governance challenge. Digital literacy training (34%) and platform accountability (29%) follow.

Notably, 26% of India respondents called for AI design that considers females, a figure above the 11-country average of 23%, reflecting awareness that current tools embed assumptions that do not serve females’ experiences equally.



Misinformation & safety

72% are concerned about AI misinformation vs 64% across 11 countries	74% say safety concerns limit their AI use highest of all surveyed countries	44% want stronger laws on AI most common response
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India stands out sharply on safety: 74% of respondents say safety concerns limit or sometimes limit their AI use; the highest rate in the survey.



"AI in itself is not the problem, but how it is being used; and who is shaping its development; that is the question we need to take seriously."

YOUNG FEMALE, INDIA

6. EMPLOYMENT, FUTURES & SENTIMENT

47% of India respondents expect AI to improve employment & economic opportunities in the next 5 years

11-COUNTRY BENCHMARK

11-country average: 50% expect a positive impact on employment

India's employment expectations are cautiously optimistic but deeply uncertain. Nearly half (47%) expect AI to improve their economic opportunities over the next five years, just below the 11-country average of 50%, while 32% expect it to make things worse. Concern about income sources being affected by AI is significant: 25% are very worried, and a further 27% are somewhat worried, while 30% say they are simply not sure. The high uncertainty (30% "not sure") is itself a finding: many young people in India are navigating AI's labour market implications without access to the information or support they would need to form a clear view.

Education and learning remain the domain where optimism is strongest: 74% of India respondents expect AI to improve their education and learning over five years, broadly aligned with the 11-country average of 71%. Online safety, by contrast, draws the most pessimism: 56% of India respondents expect their online safety to worsen due to AI; the highest negative rate for this indicator across surveyed countries and well above the 11-country average of 37%. This reflects both the scale of India's online harassment problem and the perceived failure of current platforms to adequately protect users.

India's sentiment toward AI in the workplace sits in a mildly positive territory (sentiment score: +0.12 for males, +0.20 for females), consistent with the survey's broader finding that countries where AI is seen as a development opportunity tend toward aspirational rather than sceptical sentiment. However, the polarisation of income concern, with nearly a third both worried and a significant share uncertain, suggests that this optimism is conditional and fragile. It depends, in respondents' own framing, on whether AI becomes more accessible, more affordable, and developed with Indian users rather than for them.

7. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Three cross-cutting findings define India's AI story as told by this survey. First, the promise of AI as an educational tool is real; young people, including females and rural respondents, are actively using it to learn and fill gaps in formal education. But this benefit is unevenly distributed: rural access, language barriers, and a persistent gender gap in daily use mean that the gains are clustering among those already better positioned. Second, concern about safety and governance is not a niche worry; it is the dominant frame through which India's young AI users understand the technology. Safety concerns limit use for three in four respondents, and online safety is the area where pessimism is most acute. This is a governance failure as much as a technology one. Third, the disability finding, where 30% of India respondents identify as living with a disability, mostly neurodivergence, is too significant to dismiss as a sampling artefact. It may signal that AI tools are being actively sought by people with learning differences as a functional support, and warrants dedicated follow-up research.

Together, these findings suggest that India's AI trajectory depends on decisions being made now; in boardrooms, parliament, and classrooms; about who AI is designed for, who governs it, and who pays for access. Young people are already in the system. The question is whether the system is being designed with them.

FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

- Accelerate India's National AI Strategy implementation with an explicit equity lens: set targets for rural AI access, gender-disaggregated digital literacy benchmarks, and localised AI tool funding under BharatNet and Digital India.
- Strengthen the Digital Personal Data Protection Act's provisions for young people, particularly around consent, data portability, and redress mechanisms; and ensure enforcement is visible and accessible.
- Mandate meaningful youth participation, particularly from rural and under-resourced communities, in national AI advisory and regulatory bodies as a substantive voice in governance design.

FOR TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES

- Invest substantially in Hindi and regional-language AI models that cover not just translation but also cultural context, local knowledge, and dialect sensitivity. The 19% of Indian respondents who prefer local-language AI represents a real and underserved need.
- Design and test AI products specifically for rural contexts: lower data requirements, offline functionality where feasible, and user testing conducted with rural youth rather than metro-based focus groups.
- Take online safety seriously as a design priority. The 56% of India respondents who expect online safety to worsen due to AI reflects a trust gap that platforms have a responsibility to close through transparent content moderation, harassment reporting systems, and proactive safeguards.
- Engage with India's disability community and neurodivergent users to understand how AI tools are being used as accessibility supports, and deliberately build on that use case.
- Fund AI digital literacy programmes that reach rural and peri-urban young females; not general "digital skills" programmes, but AI-specific training that builds both technical competence and critical awareness of AI's risks and governance gaps.
- Support community-level AI awareness campaigns (cited by 26% of India respondents as a priority) that go beyond promotional messaging and include honest discussion of AI misinformation, data privacy, and users' rights.
- Commission follow-up qualitative research to understand the disability findings, the high rate of safety concern limiting use, and the gendered patterns in AI adoption across rural India.
- Ensure India's perspective, especially from rural, low-income, and linguistically diverse communities, is represented in international AI governance conversations, including at the UN, G20, and multilateral tech policy forums.

FOR RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT & NGO PARTNERS

- Integrate AI literacy into existing youth leadership and civic engagement programmes in India, framing AI not just as a tool to use but as a system to understand, question, and shape.
- Develop peer-to-peer AI education models for rural youth, drawing on Restless Development's community mobilisation experience, and pilot localised content in Hindi and regional languages.
- Advocate alongside young people for youth-inclusive AI governance in India's regulatory process, using this survey data as an evidence base and supporting young people to give testimony, write submissions, and engage media.
- Partner with disability-led organisations and neurodivergent-led groups to co-design research into how AI tools are functioning as accessibility aids for this community; and to advocate for this use case to be supported by policy.



"I would like to see a shift towards developing AI that is not solely profit driven, but that keeps people's and our planet's best interests in mind and seeks to improve the human experience as opposed to devising ways to negate and invalidate it."

30-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, URBAN INDIA

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