

Moving the Needle

September 2026 Edition



Table Of Contents...

01

India's Next Talent Advantage

India has built the policy architecture. The question is whether its talent pipeline can move fast enough

02

Creating Real Spaces of Safety:

Beyond Process, Infrastructure, and Segregation

03

From Infrastructure to Public Services:

How PPPs Are Shaping India's Next Growth Phase

04

An Examination System the Next Generation Can Trust: Beyond the Paper Leak

05

Pricing the UPI Rail:

The Incidence of Cost Before and After the Amendment to Section 10A

06

Primus Outreach Strengthening Food Security for a Growing India

Progress is never a single breakthrough. It is usually the continuous, at times seemingly redundant, quieter work of building systems that hold, systems that anticipate demand, protect the people they serve, and turn intent into outcomes on the ground. That is the thread running through this month's edition of Moving the Needle.

A quick glance through the articles of this month reflects this thread of breakthrough through unseen continuity.

India's Next Talent Advantage: The article looks past the reassuring hiring headlines to a structural problem: the entry-level rung that once built experienced engineers is closing faster than the education system can respond, even as AI-related roles multiply.

Creating Real Spaces of Safety: This one represents an uncomfortable truth: for many women in India, risk begins at home, not outside it, and argues for infrastructure, accountability, and positive masculinity over process and segregation.

From Infrastructure to Public Services: Traces how PPPs have moved beyond roads and airports into buses, sewage treatment, healthcare, and digital connectivity, with government increasingly paying for outcomes rather than assets.

An Examination System the Next Generation Can Trust argues that as India runs the world's largest testing apparatus, the answer to paper leaks must be designed into the system, not just punished after the fact.

Through Pricing the UPI Rail, the authors examine how a quiet amendment to Section 10A could redraw who bears the cost of India's UPI rail- merchant, consumer, or exchequer- and why the coming notification must be transparent about who pays, how much, and why

Strengthening Food Security for a Growing India features our collaboration with Tetra Pak and the International Council for Circular Economy, a reminder that food security is as much a systems challenge as a production one.

At Primus Partners, we believe every policy, partnership, and system we help build should be judged by one measure: whether it makes life more secure, more capable, and more dignified for the people it touches.

As Winston Churchill put it, "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us," the same is true of the institutions and systems this edition explores.

Happy Reading!

01

India's Next Talent Advantage

India has built the policy architecture. The question is whether its talent pipeline can move fast enough.

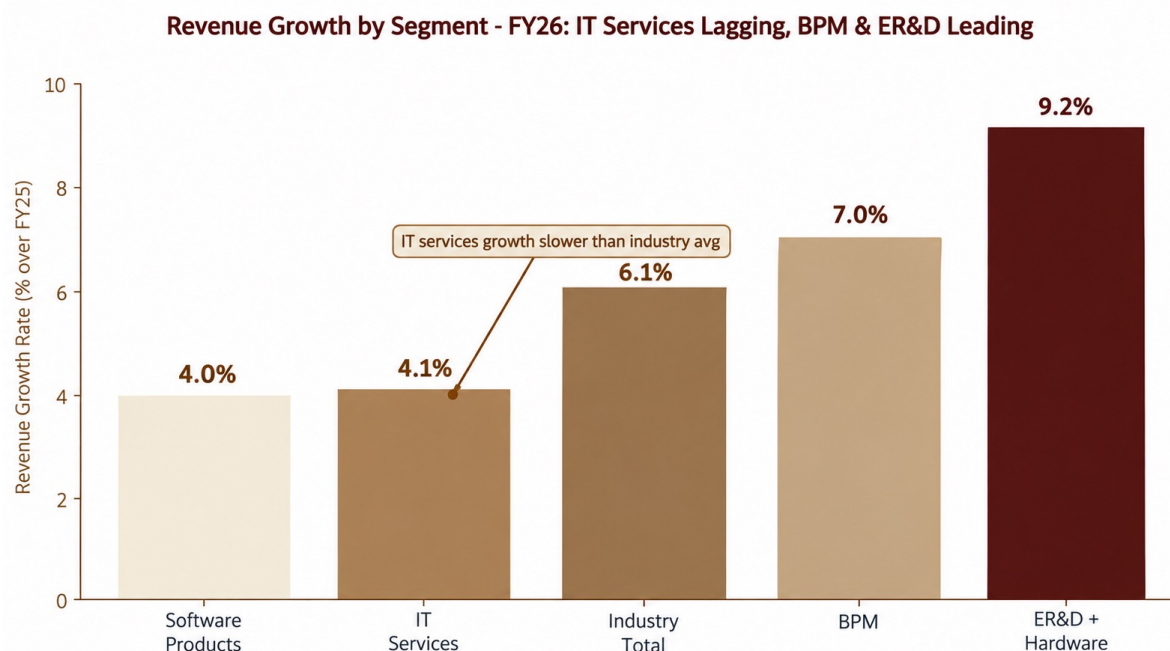


India's IT industry added 135,000 jobs in FY2026. But the headline masks a structural shift. The five largest IT services firms — TCS, Infosys, Wipro, HCL Tech, Tech Mahindra — reduced their combined workforce by 7,389. Much of the net growth came elsewhere: Global Capability Centres, mid-sized firms, and product companies. This reallocation is not a decline. It is repositioning. And it exposes a problem that policy alone cannot solve.

By 2027, AI-related job openings are projected to reach 2.3 million. India's available AI talent pool is estimated at 1.2 million. That gap represents a structural mismatch between demand velocity and supply capability. But the real problem is not simply the size of the gap. It is how that gap emerged. The mechanism that historically converted India's massive graduate base into globally employable technology talent is weakening precisely as AI demand accelerates. India's export engine has always run on one model: buy cheap talent, train, scale. That model is breaking. And it is breaking at the entry level.

1. The Hiring Model Is Changing

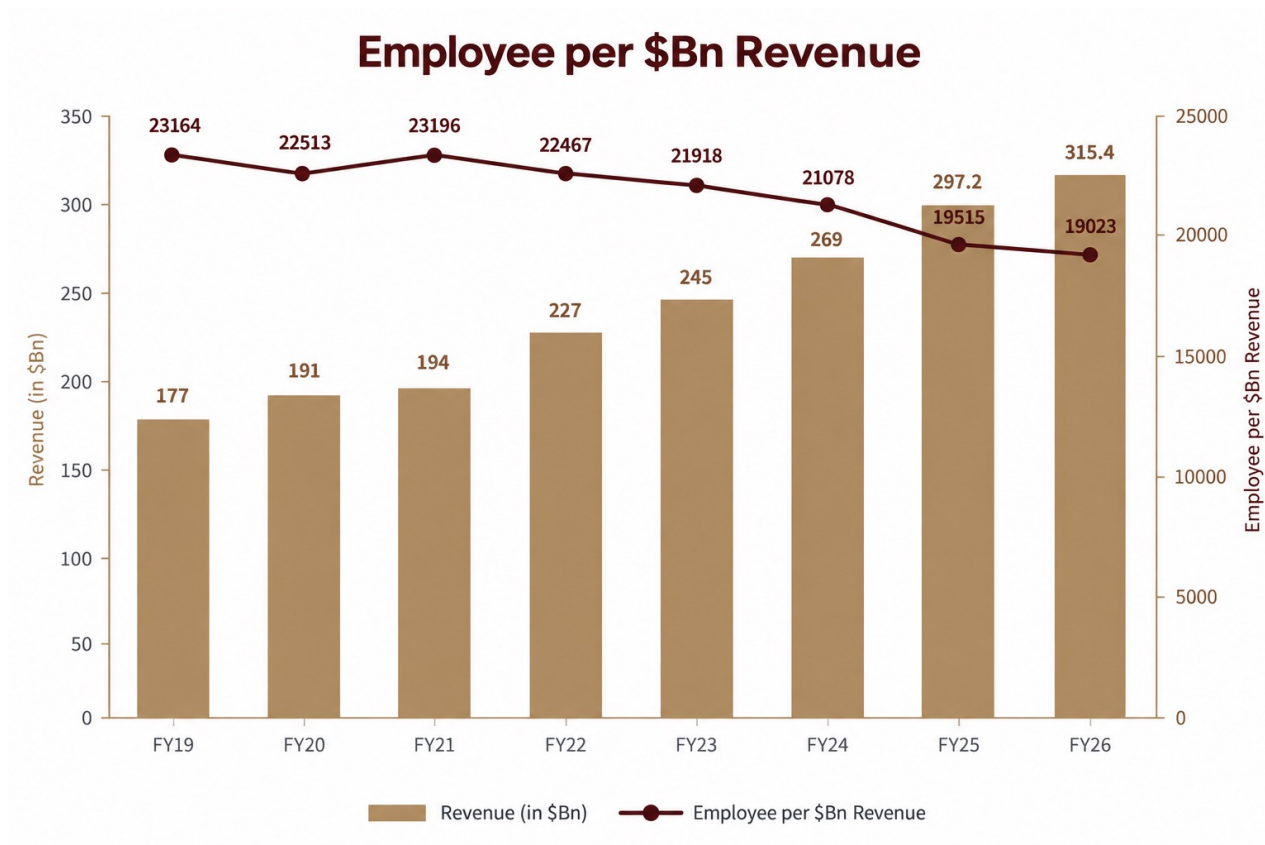
Employment growth in India's tech sector is no longer being driven by traditional IT services. IT services — at 47% of sector revenue — grew 4.1% in FY26, below the industry average of 6.1%. Business Process Management (BPM) grew 7.0%. Engineering R&D plus hardware grew 9.2%. These segments are smaller, but they represent where the market is actually moving.



Source: NASSCOM FY2026

This shift reflects a deeper change in how clients consume technology. Revenue per employee in IT services has flattened. Clients are increasingly paying for outcomes, not hours.

The traditional labour-intensive model — build large teams, bill by the month, extract margin on volume — is giving way to something else: smaller, outcome-focused units delivering specific capability. That is where GCCs operate. That is what the market is rewarding. But it is also what is creating the talent crisis.

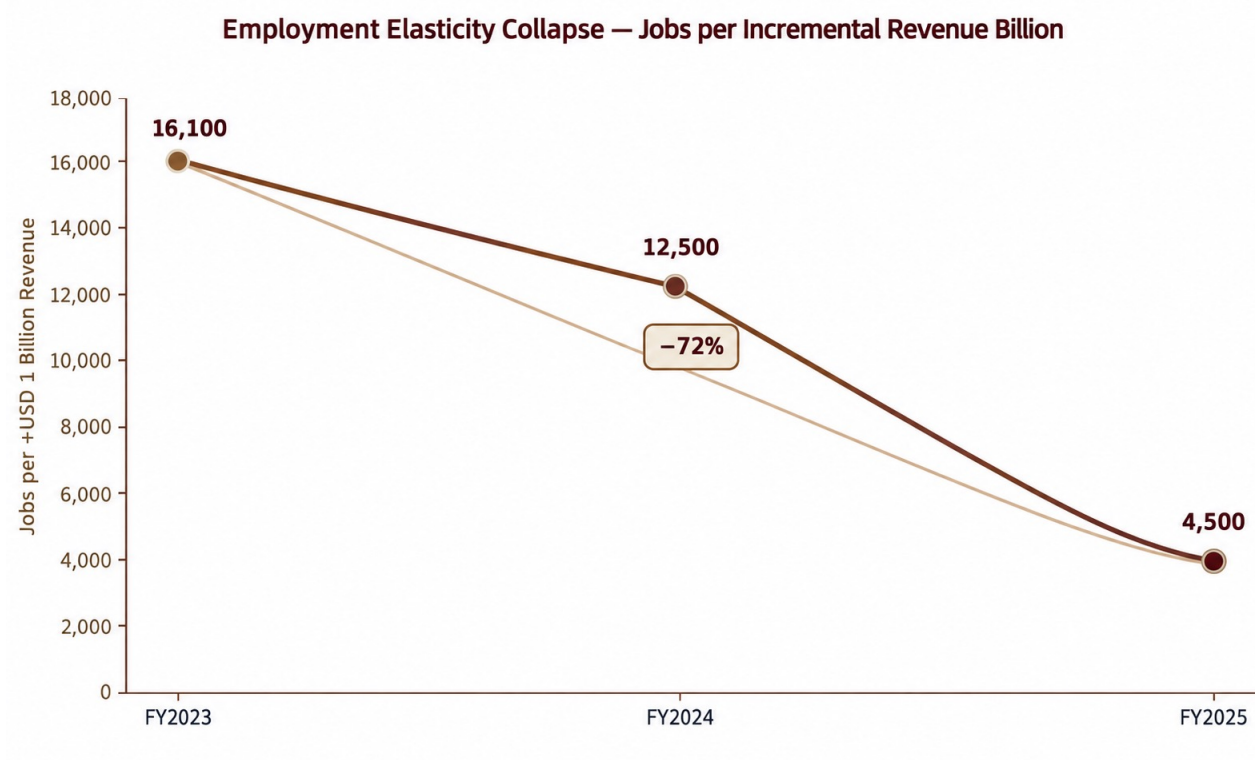


Each USD 1 billion of revenue now supports about 18,900 people, against 23,200 in FY19

2. The Old Fresher Pipeline Is Breaking

For 20 years, India's IT sector operated a predictable pipeline: universities produced graduates; IT firms hired them at volume; the pyramid absorbed them into entry-level coding, testing, and support work; and over years, they moved into experienced engineering roles. This model worked because the entry-level work was real work — it was just lower-paid and lower-skilled. It created experience and built capability.

That model is breaking because AI is absorbing the entry-level layer. Code generation, automated testing, conversational AI handling customer support calls — these are compressing the base of the pyramid. The employment elasticity data makes this visible: in FY2023, India's IT sector created 16,100 jobs per incremental USD 1 billion of revenue. In FY2025, it created 4,500. That is a 72% collapse.

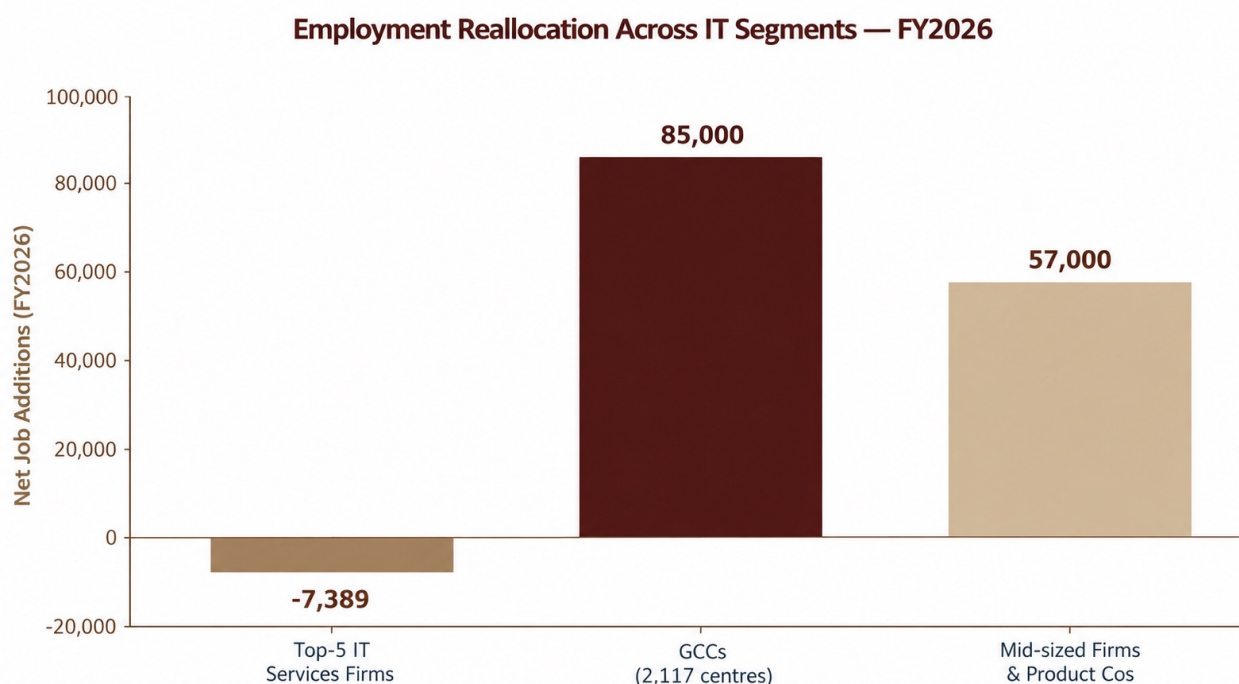


Source: NASSCOM Strategic Review 2026

The sector grew USD 52 billion from FY23 to FY25. But net hiring fell from 290,000 to 126,000 annually. The productivity gain is real. Companies are delivering more revenue with fewer entry-level people because AI is doing the work that junior engineers used to do. This creates an obvious problem: if AI absorbs the entry-level work, where does the next generation of experienced engineers come from? Fresher hiring has sharply weakened. The traditional pipeline is broken.

3. Growth Is Moving to GCCs and Capability-Led Work

Global Capability Centres absorbed an estimated 85,000 of FY2026's net employment additions. They now employ 2.36 million people across 2,117 centres — representing more than one-third of India's IT workforce. Crucially, two-thirds of mid-market GCCs now embed product and platform development teams alongside traditional business process operations. This signals where growth is concentrating: on outcome-focused, capability-specific delivery rather than labour-intensive services.

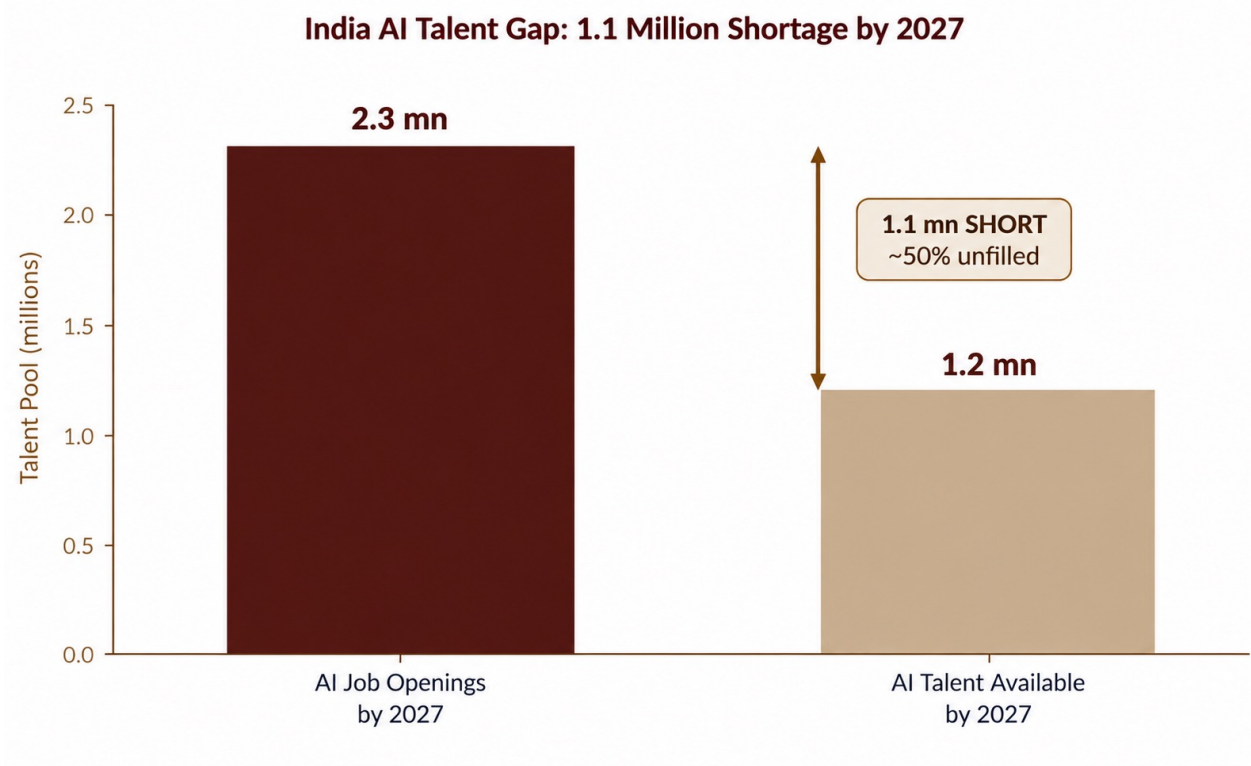


Source: NASSCOM Strategic Review 2026

GCCs operate on small, outcome-focused teams (typically 100-300 people) rather than labour pyramids. They can hire scarce talent at premium compensation without bloat. They price on outcomes, not hours. This is the natural organizational form for the new model. But it creates an immediate problem: GCCs need talent that the traditional education system has not trained, at a velocity the education system cannot match.

3. The Talent Shortfall

By 2027, AI-related job openings are projected to reach 2.3 million. The relevant measure of available talent is not the number of people who completed AI courses. It is the number of people who can perform AI-related work at the proficiency level employers require. By that measure, India has an available talent pool of approximately 1.2 million. The gap — roughly 1.1 million positions — represents a structural mismatch.



Source: NITI Aayog, Stanford AI Index 2026, NASSCOM Strategic Review 2026

Context matters. China produces 3.57 million STEM graduates annually. The United States, 0.8 million. India, 2.55 million. By sheer volume, India should have no problem. But composition and retention matter enormously. China builds AI platforms domestically and retains advanced talent. India continues to lose a significant share of its advanced AI talent to overseas opportunities, limiting domestic research and product capability. India's doctoral output — 24,000 per year — trails China (77,000) and the USA (40,000). The fresher hiring freeze at large firms has removed 30,000-40,000 annual absorptions. Traditional university pipelines cannot replace this alone.

Where Will the Next Generation of IT Talent Start?

The risk is not only a shortage of AI talent today. It is a shortage of experienced AI talent tomorrow.

The old model created a career pipeline: Graduate to basic coding/testing/support to experienced engineer to specialist to architect. Experience was built through entry-level work. If AI absorbs too much of that first rung, India cannot rely on the old pipeline to produce the next generation of experienced engineers.

India has built policy architecture to address this: the National Occupational Standards framework, the National Credit Framework, NEP 2020 mandates for curriculum reform, and Sector Skill Councils tasked with defining competencies. These frameworks are sound. But implementation remains uneven and has not yet operated at the scale or speed industry demand requires. Most universities are not structurally equipped to redesign curricula against a four-month industry demand cycle. Sector Skill Councils have published competency standards but lack enforcement mechanisms. The National Credit Framework exists, but institutional adoption is slow.

The gap is not policy. The gap is velocity. Policy moves in years. Industry demand moves in quarters. And the first rung, the entry-level work that historically created experienced engineers is fast disappearing.



What Must Happen in the Next 18 Months

Three things must happen in parallel. First, India needs to create a new first rung through apprenticeships and paid work-integrated learning. This requires scaling AI apprenticeships to 100,000+ annually as a primary pipeline, not an add-on. GCCs and industry have the capacity; they lack the regulatory certainty and financing models.

Second, India needs to convert the existing workforce. The fresher pipeline is closing, but India has 6 million IT professionals. Many, including QA testers, support staff, and junior developers, are being displaced by AI. Industry should build structured pathways to move them into AI-enabled roles. This requires investment in transition training, employer commitment, and measurement by employment outcome, not course completion.

Third, India needs to make industry demand visible to the education system. GCCs and industry should publish role-specific competency requirements and develop concrete standards defining what a Data Engineer or Platform Engineer needs to know. Universities need to track graduate employment outcomes and adjust curricula based on measurable hiring feedback. This closes the loop between what industry needs and what institutions produce.

International mobility is a fourth lever. India should also facilitate mid-career talent recruitment from Vietnam, Philippines, and Eastern Europe to offset the shortfall while domestic supply builds.



The Test for India's Next Technology Cycle

India's technology sector is not running out of opportunity. It is changing where opportunity sits. Growth is moving from labour-intensive IT services toward AI-enabled delivery, ER&D, product platforms, and GCCs. The constraint is no longer the number of graduates India produces. It is how quickly those graduates, along with the existing workforce, can become capable of doing the work the new model demands.

This makes the talent shortage more than a skilling problem. It is a pipeline problem. The old model converted fresh graduates into experienced technology professionals through years of entry-level work. If AI removes too much of that first rung, India must deliberately create a new one. The response cannot wait for the education system to change on its own. Industry must create apprenticeships and transition pathways. Universities must align programmes to demonstrated employer demand. Government must make these connections easier to measure, finance, and scale.

India's advantage has always been its ability to build talent at scale. The next test is whether it can build AI capability at the speed at which the market is changing.



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02

Creating Real Spaces of Safety

Beyond Process, Infrastructure, and
Segregation



Why India's Women's Safety Agenda Needs Infrastructure, Gender Budgeting, Early Accountability, Positive Masculinity and Proactive Urban Tech Over Pink Segregation

For decades, women's safety has been a staple item on every institutional agenda in India, being discussed in corporate boardrooms, written into central schemes, and endlessly debated across public forums. Yet behind the policy announcements, mobile apps, and police helplines lies a persistent, uncomfortable truth, our public and private spaces remain fundamentally unsafe for women. While structural violence touches many lives, including men in certain domestic or workplace settings, the everyday anxiety and physical vulnerability that women navigate remains an unyielding crisis.

The question we ought to ask ourselves isn't whether we care about safety, but whether we are building safer environments or simply layering on bureaucratic processes, compliance committees, and surface-level solutions that do little to protect anyone in real time.

Stranger is danger Myth: Safety Ends Where the Front Door Opens

Home is culturally framed as a sanctuary, yet for millions of women, however, the home is where abuse is most severe and least visible. Domestic violence cuts across every economic bracket in India, showing up in lower-income households, middle-class neighbourhoods, and wealthy estates alike. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) estimates indicate that nearly 29.3% of women in India experience domestic violence in their lifetimes. As per NCRB "Crime in India" 2024 data, cruelty by Husband or Relatives" represents the single largest category of registered crimes (>25% of all cases) against women (accounting for more than 1 in 4 cases), proving the home remains a primary site of violence. Whether in joint family setups where suppression was historically normalized, or in nuclear families where isolation hides the damage, abuse persists because silence is enforced. We rarely socialized young boys to understand boundaries, consent, and emotional accountability. When young girls experience harassment or assault by relatives, fear keeps them quiet. Mothers, often financially dependent and lacking social backup, stay silent too. The result is a system that demands proof and paperwork from victims rather than making it safe and simple to report wrongdoings early.

What the Data Tells Us? The Reality on Paper vs. Lived Experience

When we look at official metrics, the gap between institutional claims and lived realities becomes starkly apparent:

Index / Source	Score / Rank	Key Data & Structural Insights
WPS Index (GIWPS & PRIO)	131st / 181 (Score: 0.607)	Evaluates Inclusion, Justice, and Security. Highlights significant lags in female labour force participation, access to justice, and community-level security.
Global Gender Gap Index (WEF)	131st / 148 (Score: 0.644)	Reflects deep disparities across Economic Participation (40.7%) and Health & Survival (ranking 143rd globally).
NARI Index (NCW)	National Score: 65%	Safest Cities: Kohima, Visakhapatnam, Bhubaneswar. Lowest Ranked: Delhi, Kolkata, Patna, Srinagar. Identifies that 38% of public harassment occurs in immediate neighbourhoods.
NCRB 'Crime in India'	~445,000+ Cases Annually	Over 25% of registered cases fall under 'Cruelty by Husband or Relatives,' proving that the domestic sphere remains high-risk.
Workplace (POSH Audits)	~50% Policy Unawareness	Despite legal mandates, nearly half of surveyed female employees remain unaware of their company's Internal Complaints Committee (ICC).

Government Initiatives and Enforcement Gaps:

Central and State governments have introduced multi-thousand-crore structural measures, but operational silos hinder their real-world impact.

Central Frameworks: The Nirbhaya Fund was set up to expand Emergency Response Support Systems (112), build One Stop Crisis Centres, and maintain offender registries. However, severe underutilization of allocated capital at state levels limits ground impact. Similarly, on the digital front, platforms like SHe-Box (Sexual Harassment Electronic Box) streamline POSH compliance, though corporate usage frequently devolves into checkbox compliance.

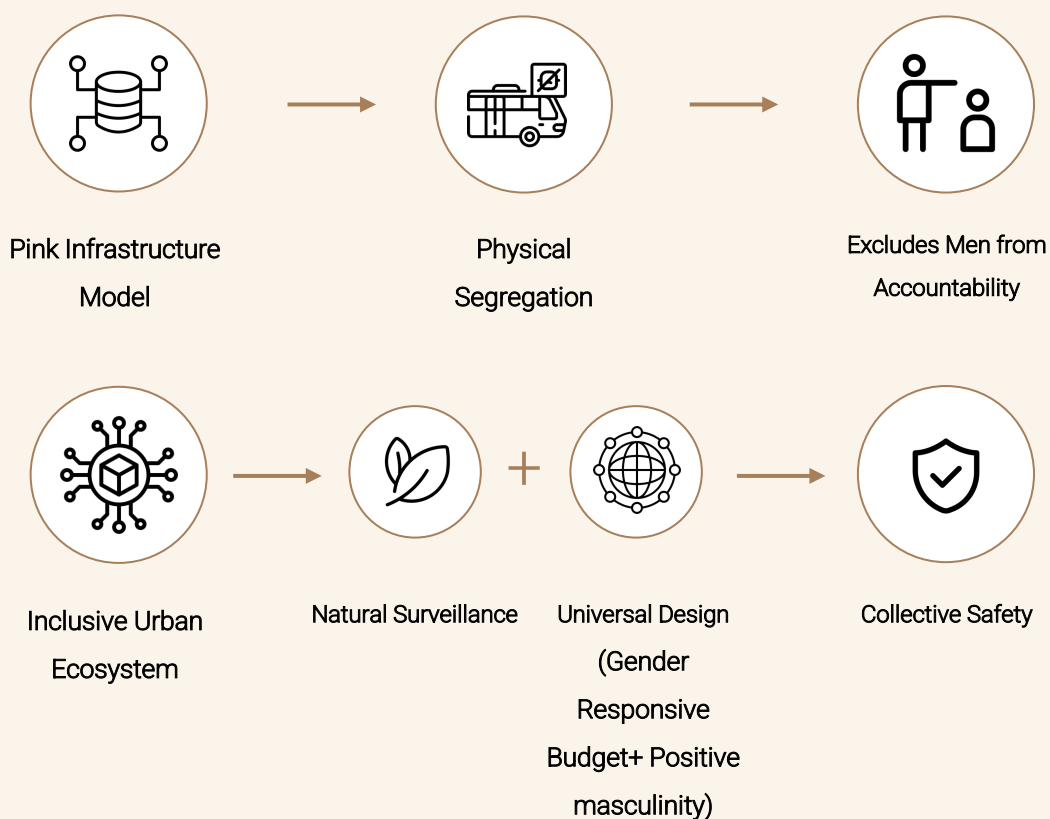
States have launched their own efforts: UP, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu introduced Pink Patrols, Andhra Pradesh rolled out the Abhaya app, and cities created specialized women's helpdesks. Yet much of this remains reactive. Panic apps require a woman to pull out a phone during an active assault; police helplines respond after the damage is done; and corporate POSH policies often turn into box-ticking exercises where the influential hold the upper hand. Recently, the Tamil Nadu government has launched Singapen which is a women focused policing initiative aimed at enhancing women's safety through technology-enabled support and quicker police response.



The Segregation Paradox: Pink Infrastructure vs. True Inclusivity

When faced with street harassment, our urban planners often resort to segregation: pink buses, pink autos, pink parks, and dedicated ladies' coaches on metros. While these offer immediate relief, they reveal a major flaw in how we think about safety.

Structural Comparison:



Segregation splits real life. Families traveling together are forced apart, friends split up at transport hubs; and most importantly, men are subtly excused from having to share responsibility for keeping public spaces respectful. You do not build an inclusive society by building walls inside it. Real safety comes from universal urban design well-lit streets, active street corners, transit stops with clear lines of sight, and reliable public transport where everyone can travel safely side by side.

What can we learn from Global & Local Cities

Urban safety is not an unsolved mystery; working models exist both internationally and within India:

- **Strict, Rapid Legal Enforcement:** Cities in the Middle East (like Dubai or Doha) maintain high safety ratings because law enforcement is visible, penalties for public harassment are swift, and justice is delivered without years of delay.
- **Designing Out Crime (CPTED):** Cities like Seoul and Barcelona use Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, “Eyes on the Street” Urban Planning, ensuring streets have active storefronts, no pitch-black corridors, and natural surveillance from local vendors and foot traffic.
- **Strong Civic Trust:** Within India, cities like Kohima, Aizawl, and Visakhapatnam consistently record better safety perceptions because of strong community ties, active civic presence, and equal participation of women in daily public life.



Fostering Positive Masculinity: Men as Active Allies, Not Passive Bystanders

For decades, safety frameworks have implicitly framed men either as potential perpetrators or passive observers who need to be segregated away from women. True safety cannot be achieved through exclusion; it requires a cultural transformation rooted in positive masculinity. Men must be actively engaged as allies, partners, and co-creators of safe spaces.

Positive masculinity reframes male identity away from dominance, entitlement, and aggressive posturing toward emotional maturity, active consent, and shared accountability. This means training men and boys to recognize everyday harassment such as catcalling, intrusive staring, or casual workplace sexism and equipping them with the confidence to intervene as active bystanders. When men call out inappropriate behavior among peers, the societal cost of harassment rises dramatically. Shifting men from silent onlookers to proactive allies is essential for dismantling patriarchal entitlement at its source.



Actionable Shift: Leveraging Tech for Proactive Ecosystem Building, To Prevent Harm and not just record

Current mechanisms rely heavily on 'post-event' responses, pushing an SOS button, dialing 112, or filing a police complaint after an assault. Transforming smart city infrastructure into a proactive safety shield requires integrating non-intrusive, zero-device technological interventions that detect threats automatically:

- **Predictive Monitoring in Command Centers:** Connecting AI video analytics with Smart City Integrated Command and Control Centers (ICCCs) to automatically flag poorly lit areas, sudden crowds, or erratic behavior in quiet zones before violence occurs.
- **Automated Infrastructure Upgrades:** Installing motion-activated smart streetlighting that brightens when pedestrians approach, along with dynamic bus route adjustments that keep public transit moving through safe, well-lit corridors.
- **Behavioral Anomaly Alerts:** Moving away from manual mobile apps toward automated, sensor-based alerts across public transport networks that trigger police patrol alerts without needing the victim to intervene.



Are we trapped in Process or Building an Ecosystem?

India does not need more procedural paperwork, administrative committees, and/or isolated pink vehicles. What we need is a coordinated effort across three clear priorities:

- **Institutionalizing Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB):** Move gender budgeting beyond standalone 'women's welfare' allocations by embedding a gender lens into mainstream municipal, infrastructure, and urban transport budgets. Mandate Gender Impact Assessments (GIAs) for all public infrastructure projects, ensuring public funds prioritize universal street lighting, last-mile transit connectivity, well-maintained public sanitation, and walkable sidewalks that benefit women's daily mobility.
- **From Reactive Post-Incident Response to Proactive Governance:** Deploying real-time AI and predictive urban analytics that neutralize threats before escalation, paired with swift judicial delivery.
- **Early Childhood Education and Mindset Shift:** Introduce mandatory modules on boundaries, consent, and respect in primary and secondary schools. Safety training cannot start in corporate HR orientation. It must start in childhood. Introduce mandatory primary and secondary school modules for young boys focusing on emotional intelligence, active consent, non-violent conflict resolution, and healthy relationship dynamics
- **Grassroots Sensitizers:** Expanding training programs beyond corporate offices to include public transit workers, conductors, bus and auto drivers, and municipal staff and local officers, making them aware of the judicial system as well.

Real safety will not be delivered by pink paint or procedural paperwork; it will come when we allocate public capital intentionally through gender budgeting and appropriate utilisation, shifting societal mindsets, harnessing predictive technology, and building inclusive, shared environments, champion positive masculinity where safety is guaranteed by default, enforce laws without delay, and build a culture where women can live, work, and travel without fear.



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03

From Infrastructure to Public Services: How PPPs Are Shaping India's Next Growth Phase



For many years, Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in India were mainly associated with large infrastructure projects such as roads, airports, ports and power plants. The idea was fairly simple. The government provided the required policy support, land and approvals, while the private sector brought in investment and expertise to develop and operate the project.

This approach has helped India build some of its most important infrastructure. However, how PPPs are viewed is now changing. The question is no longer only “Who will build the infrastructure?” It is also becoming “Who can deliver the required public service better?”

This has opened up the use of PPPs in areas such as public transport, wastewater treatment, healthcare and digital connectivity. At the same time, the way these projects are structured is also changing.

Are we trapped in Process or Building an Ecosystem?

Electric buses are a good example.

Traditionally, public transport authorities purchased buses and were responsible for operating and maintaining them. This meant that the government had to spend a large amount upfront to purchase the buses and then continue spending on their operation and maintenance.

Under the Gross Cost Contract (GCC) model being used for electric buses, the private operator procures, operates and maintains the buses. The public transport authority pays the operator based on the services provided.

The PM e-Bus Sewa Payment Security Mechanism also addresses an important concern for private operators: delays in payments from public transport authorities. A payment security fund has been created to provide support in case payments are delayed. The scheme aims to support more than 38,000 electric buses across the country. In simple terms, instead of spending money only on buying buses, the government is paying for a public transport service.



From Building Treatment Plants to Treating Sewage

A similar approach is used in wastewater treatment.

Under the Hybrid Annuity Model used for sewage treatment plants under the Namami Gange programme, the government pays 40% of the project cost during construction. The remaining 60% is paid to the private developer over a period of 15 years along with payments for operating and maintaining the plant.

More importantly, these payments are linked to the performance of the treatment plant. This means that the private developer's responsibility does not end after constructing the plant. It has to ensure that the plant continues to operate and treat sewage as required.

This is an important change. The government is not just paying for the construction of a sewage treatment plant, but also for long-term sewage treatment.



Bringing PPPs into Healthcare

PPPs are also gradually being used in areas such as healthcare.

In 2025, four projects in Dhanbad, Khunti, Jamtara, and Giridih in Jharkhand received in-principle approval to develop existing district hospitals into medical colleges through the PPP route. Together, these projects involve investments of more than ₹1,200 crore and have also been considered for Viability Gap Funding (VGF) support.

Healthcare is different from a highway or an airport because the private partner cannot simply charge users whatever is required to recover its investment. Healthcare services must also remain affordable and accessible. This is where government support such as VGF becomes important. It can help make a project workable for the private partner while ensuring the project's broader public purpose is not lost.

The government can therefore focus on setting requirements related to affordability, quality and access, while the private partner brings investment and experience in developing and operating the facility.



Digital Infrastructure: More Than Laying Fibre

The PPP model proposed for BharatNet shows how private participation can be used not just to create digital infrastructure, but also to keep it operational and make better use of it.

In 2021, the Union Cabinet approved a PPP model for BharatNet across 16 States, with government support of up to ₹19,041 crore as Viability Gap Funding (VGF). Under the proposed model, the government would provide financial support to make the project viable, while the private partner would be responsible for developing, upgrading, operating and maintaining the fibre network.

The private partner would then have the opportunity to earn revenue by providing broadband connectivity, leasing fibre to telecom service providers and through other permitted commercial uses of the network. This gives the private partner an incentive not only to build the infrastructure, but also to ensure that it remains operational and is actually used.

In simple terms, the government provides support to expand the network, while the private partner brings investment and operational expertise and earns revenue by increasing its use. The objective is therefore not just to lay optical fibre, but to ensure that the network continues to provide reliable connectivity over the long term.



From Assets to Outcomes

These examples show that PPPs do not necessarily have to follow one standard model.

For electric buses, the government pays the private operator for providing the transport service. For sewage treatment plants, payments are linked to the continued performance of the plant. Healthcare projects may require government support such as VGF to keep services affordable, while digital infrastructure can combine government support with revenue earned from users. What is common across these models is that the private partner's role increasingly continues beyond construction. This also means that governments have to think carefully about how these partnerships are designed. Construction, financing, demand, payments and long-term maintenance cannot simply be passed on to the private sector. Each risk has to be handled by the party that is better placed to manage it.

PPPs should therefore not be seen only as a way for governments to raise private money. When structured properly, they can bring together the government's public objective with private investment, technology and experience. India's first generation of PPPs helped build roads, airports, ports and other infrastructure required by a growing economy. The next generation could help ensure that infrastructure also delivers better and more reliable public services. The success of this next phase may therefore depend not only on how much infrastructure India builds, but on how well that infrastructure actually works for the people who use it.

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04

An Examination System the Next Generation Can Trust :

Beyond the Paper Leak



Why This Matters: Scale and Stakes

India runs the world's largest examination system. Every year it handles more than 10 crore candidate applications across school boards, civil services, and entrance exams. The stakes are high. In NEET-UG alone, 23 lakh students compete for roughly one lakh medical seats, and families often spend ₹2–7 lakh on coaching. For millions, these exams are the main route to a better life. So, when a paper leaks, the damage runs deep: it breaks public trust and undermines the fairness of the whole system.

The Pattern of Failure

This is not new, and NEET 2026 was not a one-off. India's exam security still rests on a strict, step-by-step chain, and every step depends on people handling sensitive material. That creates many points where things can go wrong.

Over the past decade, breaches have appeared at three distinct stages of this chain:

Question setting and logistics. The risk is greatest wherever someone gets early access. Question setters, press staff, and transport personnel are the main weak points. The NEET-UG 2026 leak happened here: a scanned copy of the printed paper, traced to a press in Nashik, was circulated on messaging apps nearly 45 hours before test day.

Test delivery and centre oversight. Exam centres stay open to local collusion, proxy candidates, and digital tampering. Even computer-based testing is not immune. The JEE Main 2021 breach involved tampered exam software that let outside solvers log in remotely, and the older Vyapam scam ran on organised impersonation at local venues for years.

Post-exam processing and evaluation. Even honest results can be spoiled by careless data handling. In 2026, flaws in CBSE's on-screen marking meant some candidates received evaluation copies in a different handwriting — an error the Board finally admitted.

Fixing any one stage on its own simply pushes the threat to the next link. Changing the medium only changes where the attack happens; by itself, it does not make the system secure or win back trust.

What Has Been Done, and How the Law Has Changed

The government's response to this has been serious, and it shows it grasps how grave the problem is. It began with the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024. The law made organised malpractices like paper leaks, impersonation, electronic cheating as a specific crime, with penalties up to ten years in prison and a fine of one crore rupees.

It filled a real gap, since such fraud was earlier prosecuted under general criminal law. Alongside it, the Radhakrishnan Committee set the reform agenda.

Most of the reforms by the Radhakrishnan committee were carried out. In June 2024, the government's seven-member committee under K. Radhakrishnan made recommendations across the exam process, data security, and the structure of the NTA. Two years on, it is worth mapping what was done against what was left undone.

On administration and security, the action worked. The panel's calls for dedicated government-run exam centres, tighter candidate authentication, and more permanent staff were largely met. More than 99.5% of NEET-UG 2026 centres were government institutions, Aadhaar-based biometric verification was introduced, and new state and district committees now coordinate with the NTA, with CCTV and jammers at centres. On these points, the system genuinely moved forward.

Because leaks continued, ending in the NEET-UG 2026 cancellation, the government has now pushed on two fronts—
a) The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Act, 2026 strengthens and widens the original law
b) A High-Powered Task Force under Nandan Nilekani (announced 26 July 2026) has been asked to recommend technology and structural fixes.

The decision to move NEET to computer-based testing (CBT) from 2027 is welcome and necessary, because CBT removes the physical paper in transit. But it is not enough on its own. The 2026 breach was a content leak, not a transport failure: the questions circulated before test day, almost certainly from inside the question-setting process, and no screen could have stopped that. CBT shuts the paper-transport door but leaves the question-setting and centre-integrity doors open and opens new ones in the centre operator, network, software, and servers.

The lesson is simple: no single lever is enough. Law creates the deterrent, technology creates the defence, and institutional design creates the resilience. A lasting fix needs all three working together.

Key Recommendations

These questions, and the need for all three levers to work together, point to four priorities. They must move as one package: a closed loop across the whole chain, not quick fixes at separate points.

1. **Technology and detection.** CBT from 2027 removes printed paper, but the bigger gain lies in how questions are built and released. Experts fill a large, calibrated question bank; on test day the system assembles a unique, randomized set for each candidate against a fixed blueprint, and the controller unlocks it with a cryptographic key minutes before the test. Because no two candidates see the same full paper, one or two leaked questions can no longer sink the whole exam. Around this core, five safeguards matter:

Encryption and digital signatures. All exam material and related communication, from paper-setting to release, should be encrypted both in transit and at rest, with digital signatures to confirm it is genuine and untampered.

Traceability. Forensic watermarking so a leaked question can be traced to its source, blockchain logs for every handover, and maker–checker separation so no single person controls a step.

Real-time monitoring. AI can scan centre CCTV footage live for suspicious activity and alert authorities at once and run in-test biometric liveness checks to stop impersonation.

Early warning and audit. A risk-intelligence unit should scan social media and dark-web traffic before results are declared, and every cycle should face an independent audit published on a public dashboard. NTA has already moved toward zero-trust access and AI-assisted translation; these steps build on that base.

2. **Governance first.** A named Examination Controller must carry statutory liability for every cycle. Question-setters should work in closed, monitored environments. Security cannot stay split across lowest-bid vendors; it needs one entity, one performance-bonded contract which is liable end to end.



3. **Centre–State compact.** It is important to cater for a structural fault line where the Centre sets the paper, but the states run the machinery to conduct the exam. The model of common infrastructure can be adopted with a standardized network of government-grade CBT centers in Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navodayas, and State institutions, so every district has trusted testing capacity. State and district coordination committees already sit alongside the NTA making it easier to implement.
4. **Multi-session testing.** When 23 lakh candidates stake everything on one paper on one day, that paper becomes worth a fortune. JEE Main already runs two sessions open to all candidates, with best-of-two scoring. NEET could do the same.

Conclusion

The deeper test is not technical but human. Behind every leaked paper are lakhs of students who prepared honestly and families who staked years and savings on a fair chance. Restoring their confidence is the real measure of success. If India can build a system whose results can be trusted without question, it will have done more than stop the next leak it will have kept faith with the generation that depends on these exams to change their lives.



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05

Pricing the UPI Rail:

The Incidence of Cost Before and After the
Amendment to Section 10A



The Taxation and Other Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026 was introduced in the Lok Sabha on 4 August and passed on 6 August amends Section 10A of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007. Section 10 had prohibited any bank or payment system provider from charging for payment through the electronic modes prescribed under Section 269SU of the Income-tax Act, that prohibition being the operative machinery of the zero merchant discount rate regime. In its place is substituted a power vested in the Executive to remove that restriction by notification. No change has taken effect as of date; the prior position continues until notification.

What has been altered is the locus of the decision. A matter that previously required Parliament to amend can now be simply done through an executive notification. The question is not about whether a merchant discount rate should exist or not, but rather who will bear the cost, how the cost will be determined, and who has the authority over this entire framework.

Who carried the cost earlier, and who will carry the cost now?

The zero merchant discount rate regime was not a costless arrangement. The question for consideration is upon whom the incidence of that cost has fallen hitherto, and upon whom it is to be placed hereafter. Under the regime obtaining since 1 January 2020, the incidence has fallen upon three constituencies, none of them the merchant or the consumer in any visible manner. The first is the exchequer, whose annually approved incentive schemes reimburse acquirers to an extent the Department of Financial Services has recorded at no more than 11 percent of industry costs.



The second, and considerably larger, is the acquiring industry: merchant onboarding, fraud monitoring, dispute handling, grievance redressal, and the deployment of quick-response codes and soundboxes attached almost wholly to it. Part of this cost is reimbursed through merchant subscriptions. The third is the body of users, a rail loss-making on its merchant side and capable of operating at scale only through participants able to cross-subsidize it from adjacent lending, advertising or commerce. The Standing Committee on Finance accepted, on 12 March 2026, the Department's submission that the ecosystem is financially unsustainable without a merchant discount rate.

Upon issuance of a notification, the incidence will be redistributed, and it is submitted that it will be shared between the merchant and the consumer rather than confined to the former. The assurance that a merchant discount rate is, by construction, a merchant-side charge is legally accurate, and incomplete as a description of what may be expected at the counter. In the first instance, the charge falls upon the merchant, for whom it is an operating cost upon an instrument specified businesses are statutorily obliged to accept under Section 269SU, and which, being computed upon turnover rather than margin, will weigh disproportionately upon high-volume, low-margin trade.

In the second instance, a portion of the charge may be expected to devolve upon the consumer. The clarification of 8 August is emphatic that no charge shall be levied upon consumers, and silent upon whether a merchant may recover it from them, which silence is the gap in the design. Pass-through in thin-margin retail is not speculative, with instances on record of merchants declining RuPay credit card payments to avoid the charge presently applicable. Recovery may be effected through a surcharge, an unannounced revision of price, or refusal at the counter, of which only the first is observable.

A key point is that the zero MDR did not eliminate the cost of the rail; it concealed and redistributed it. The comparison is accordingly not between a cost and no cost, but between a disclosed charge capable of regulation and review and an undisclosed one presently recovered from the taxpayer and, indirectly, from the same merchants and consumers.



What the notification must settle:

The following must be resolved before the charge takes effect.

- First, eligibility should be linked to merchants based on a certain turnover rather than the value under transaction. The charge may apply to merchants above a turnover threshold anchored to the GST registration bands, not to transactions above a ticket size; the reported figure of Rs 2,000 is an imprecise proxy for merchant size.
- Second, the rules on surcharging must be clearly stated. If consumers cannot be charged directly for digital payments, the rules should clearly say when and how merchants can recover these costs through prices or surcharges, with proper enforcement.
- Third, rates should be backed by evidence. The merchant discount rate should be determined based on actual costs of running the payment ecosystems, backed by a published methodology and reviewed on a fixed cycle.
- Fourth, revenue sharing should follow cost causation. The rules should prevent any one participant from taking an unfairly large share of the payment charge. A cap on issuer earnings may work better than fixing the acquirer's share.
- Fifth, the incentive scheme should be assigned to a stated purpose and a sunset; a transaction-based mechanism and a permanent budgetary line are not fit to coexist.

The amendment is overdue, and should be effected in the open rather than by administrative drift. Whether it proves sound will depend upon a notification not yet drafted and a sharing matrix to be settled by a committee chaired by the operator and composed of the recipients. A rail placed upon a self-financing basis further ceases to be a subsidized domestic utility, and the homegrown digital public infrastructure stack thereby becomes an economically sustainable export product, capable of being offered to jurisdictions seeking to move away from cash without a permanent budgetary line to sustain it.

As the Indian digital ecosystem has expanded, the amendment attempts to revisit the framework that has been under review for some time. If approached methodically rather than in haste, this alteration can significantly benefit the Indian digital payments system. It can help make the system financially sustainable while remaining accessible to all. The notification must clearly set out **who pays, how much, what costs are being recovered, and how these costs will be reviewed.**

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06

Primus Outreach

Strengthening Food Security for a
Growing India



Tetra Pak, in collaboration with **Primus Partners** and the International Council for Circular Economy (ICCE), convened a leadership workshop on August 19, 2026, at The Ashok, New Delhi, to explore pathways towards stronger, more resilient, efficient, and sustainable food systems in India.

As knowledge partners, **Primus Partners** played a key role in shaping the workshop's intellectual and stakeholder engagement agenda. Primus developed thematic concept notes, synthesized evidence and perspectives across key dimensions of food systems, and brought together stakeholders from government, industry, academia, and research and development institutions to enable meaningful dialogue on building more sustainable and resilient food systems in India.

The workshop brought together senior policymakers, industry leaders, academicians, research institutions, and development partners, including NIFTEM, ICAR, TERI, UNIDO, Nestlé, PepsiCo, BASF, IFPRI, and the Good Food Institute.

From Food Production to Resilient Food Systems

The event opened with a keynote address by **Shri Siraj Hussain, Former Secretary, Ministry of Food Processing Industries and Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare**. He noted that India's food security challenge extends beyond increasing agricultural production. Greater attention must also be paid to preserving what is produced and reducing losses through stronger processing, storage and supply-chain systems. He emphasized the role of technology and innovation in making food systems more resilient, efficient and sustainable.

Dr. Rajbir Singh, Deputy Director General (Agricultural Extension), ICAR, highlighted the resilience of India's agricultural system and the significant progress made in food production. Looking ahead, he underscored the need to reduce post-harvest losses from the estimated 15–20% today to around 5% by 2047, alongside improvements in nutrient-use efficiency, mechanization and water-use efficiency. The discussions reinforced that India's food security agenda must now look beyond production to the entire food value chain. A key focus was the '**critical middle**'—the infrastructure and systems that connect farms with consumers through aggregation, processing, packaging, storage, logistics and distribution.



Key Priorities from the Workshop

- Reducing post-harvest losses: Strengthening post-harvest management, processing and supply-chain systems to move towards a 5% loss target by 2047.
- Investing in the critical middle: Expanding capacity and investment across food processing, packaging, cold chains, storage, logistics and distribution.
- Accelerating technology and innovation: Applying digital solutions, mechanization and advanced processing and packaging technologies to improve efficiency, resilience and shelf life.
- Building climate resilience: Bringing food security, food loss and waste reduction, resource efficiency and climate action together within a more integrated approach.
- Strengthening the evidence base: Developing granular, ground-level data on food loss and waste to identify hotspots, target interventions and track progress.
- Driving measurable action: Exploring stronger policy mechanisms and targets for reducing food loss and waste, including opportunities to align these with India's climate commitments.

New Evidence on the Climate Impact of Loss and Waste

A key highlight of the workshop was the launch of the [NIFTEM–Tetra Pak Research Report on GHG Emissions from Food Loss and Waste](#), which examines the environmental implications of food loss and waste in India.

The research highlights the opportunity to address multiple challenges through a common intervention: reducing food loss and waste can help improve food availability, conserve resources, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, while supporting India's broader climate objectives.

From Dialogue to Action

The workshop was designed not only as a forum for discussion, but as a platform to bring together diverse perspectives and translate evidence into actionable pathways for India's food systems.

Through its role as a knowledge partner, Primus Partners contributed to this dialogue by developing thematic concept notes, bringing together relevant stakeholders and facilitating cross-sector conversations around sustainable food systems, food loss and waste, resilience and the enabling ecosystem required for transformation. The engagement sought to bridge perspectives across policymakers, industry, academia, research institutions and development partners, with a focus on identifying practical and scalable opportunities for action.

The workshop highlighted the importance of moving from individual interventions to coordinated, evidence-led action across the food value chain. Collaboration among government, industry, research institutions and development partners will be critical to identifying scalable solutions, strengthening the enabling ecosystem and mobilizing investment, technology and innovation.

India has an opportunity to build a food system that not only produces more, but also preserves more, wastes less and delivers greater value from every unit of land, water, energy and food produced.

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for providing solutions to help clients achieve their goals

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for all and alternate viewpoints

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of thoughts and actions

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representing the Primus collective, where each individual matters

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for building a better tomorrow



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Primus Partners has been set up to partner with clients in 'navigating' India, by experts with decades of experience in doing so for large global firms. Set up on the principle of 'Idea Realization', it brings to bear 'experience in action'. 'Idea Realization'— a unique approach to examine futuristic ideas required for the growth of an organization or a sector or geography, from the perspective of assured on ground implementability.

Our core strength comes from our founding partners, who are goal-oriented, with extensive hands-on experience and subject-matter expertise, which is well recognized in the industry. Established by seasoned industry leaders with extensive experience in global organizations, Primus Partners boasts a team of over 250 consultants and additional advisors, showcasing some of the finest talent in the nation.

The firm has a presence across multiple cities in India, as well as Dubai, UAE. In addition, the firm has successfully executed projects across Africa, Asia Pacific and the Americas.

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