INDIA–AUSTRALIA TIES COME OF AGE

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched down in Melbourne on Wednesday evening, fresh from a warm reception in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, he was on an important leg of a three-nation Indo-Pacific tour. This is his third visit to Australia as Prime Minister — a frequency no Indian premier has matched — and it says something about how central Canberra has become to New Delhi's calculus east of Singapore, defined by 'Act East' policy.

At the third Australia-India Annual Summit, Modi and his host Anthony Albanese oversaw what officials describe as eighteen distinct outcomes: a Joint Declaration on Defence and Security Cooperation that upgrades the relationship with an Annual Defence Ministers' Dialogue, a new maritime security roadmap, and — most striking — a commercial uranium supply agreement building on the 2014 Civil Nuclear Agreement, under which Australia has so far shipped uranium to India just once, in 2017, to feed India's ambitious 100-gigawatt nuclear power goal. Talks on the long-pending Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement were formally accelerated, building on the 2022 Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement that was India's first developed-country trade deal in a decade. Education, critical minerals, and cultural repatriation rounded out a genuinely wide canvas.

Trade negotiators have set a target of AUD 100 billion in two-way commerce by 2030, roughly double current levels, and Thursday's acceleration announcement gives that number a fighting chance. For decades, India and Australia were bound loosely by cricket and Commonwealth ties rather than strategic convergence; the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, now six years old, has since matured from rhetoric into structure. A 2021 logistics agreement already lets warships use each other's ports, and the new defence declaration reads less like an aspiration than a maintenance upgrade on an alliance-adjacent partnership.

But it was not smooth sailing for the Indian Prime Minister. Rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, used the visit to press Canberra to raise India's democratic backsliding, a criticism that has trailed Modi's Australian visits since 2023. It was indeed a low point of the visit but was not allowed to overshadow the visit.

Where does this leave the two countries? Well, the trajectory is unmistakably upward, but increasingly instrumental rather than sentimental. Both governments now speak the language of supply-chain security, critical minerals, and an "open, rules-based" Indo-Pacific. The Quad remains the scaffolding; bilateral deals are increasingly the substance built upon it. If the Jakarta leg was about breadth — reviving an old civilisational friendship into hard defence contracts like BrahMos — the Australia leg was about depth, converting decades of trade and strategic dialogue into binding commitments. The test now is delivery: whether CECA is actually concluded, whether uranium shipments follow the ink, and whether the partnership can absorb criticism without either side flinching.

Viksit Bharat demands a techno-bureaucracy

Moni Madaswamy

India's aspiration to become a developed nation by 2047 is not merely an economic objective; it is a civilizational mission. The vision of Viksit Bharat encompasses technological leadership, food, nutrition and health security, climate resilience, digital inclusion, energy security, and global competitiveness. Achieving these ambitions, however, requires more than investments and infrastructure. It demands a fundamental transformation in the way India governs itself.

While India's economy and society have undergone remarkable changes over the past three decades, many aspects of its administrative architecture continue to reflect structures designed for a different era. One of the most significant yet least discussed challenges lies in the composition of senior leadership within the Government of India. Today, strategic policymaking positions at the level of Joint Secretary and above are overwhelmingly occupied by traditional career civil service cadres.

There is no dispute regarding the historic contribution of India's civil services to nation-building. However, the governance challenges of the twenty-first century increasingly require a combination of administrative capability and deep domain expertise. The world is entering an era shaped by artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, cybersecurity, biotechnology, climate adaptation, digital public infrastructure, precision agriculture, and advanced healthcare systems. Public policy in these sectors cannot rely solely on administrative experience. It requires leaders who possess first-hand knowledge of the technologies, scientific principles, and institutional ecosystems involved.

Ironically, India already possesses a vast reservoir of such expertise within its own public S&T institutions. Scientists, Engineers, Technologists, and Research leaders from organisations such as ISRO, DRDO, DAE, CSIR, ICMR, ICAR, IMD, FSI, WII, ICFRE, NIC, C-DAC, STQC, and NCMRWF have played a pivotal role in advancing national development. They have built satellites, secured strategic technologies, strengthened food security, developed digital governance platforms, expanded scientific research, and enhanced public service delivery.

Yet, despite their immense contributions, these experts remain largely excluded from the highest levels of policy leadership. Their career progression follows separate scientific and technical cadres, placing them outside the mainstream empanelment mechanisms used for senior government appointments by the Department of Personnel and Training. As a result, many critical policy decisions affecting technology, health, agriculture, climate change, digital governance, and innovation are formulated without adequate participation from those possessing the deepest domain knowledge. PublicPolicy

This disconnect creates a structural paradox and administrative inertia. The individuals who design and implement many of India's most important national programmes often have limited opportunities to influence the strategic decisions that shape and implement those programmes. The consequences are increasingly visible: Ministries frequently depend on external consultants, advisory bodies, and contractual experts to bridge knowledge gaps. While external expertise certainly has value, it raises a pertinent question: why should India overlook its own institutional scientific talent while seeking expertise from outside?

The challenge is not one of replacing the existing administrative framework but of strengthening it. India needs a governance model that combines the strengths of experienced administrators with the knowledge and analytical capabilities of scientific and technical experts.

A practical solution would be to create a structured techno-bureaucratic framework within government. Just as officers from the IAS, IFS, IPS, IFoS, IRS, IES, ISS, and other organised services are deployed across ministries and departments, senior scientists and technologists should be eligible for empanelment and strategic leadership assignments where their expertise directly supports national priorities.

Such a reform would not diminish the role of civil servants. Instead, it would create a complementary leadership stream that enriches policymaking through evidence-based expertise and long-term institutional memory. To facilitate this transition, selected scientific and technical professionals should undergo structured administrative training under Mission Karmayogi. The curriculum should include constitutional governance, public administration, public finance, legislative drafting, intergovernmental coordination, and policy analysis. By combining technical depth with administrative competence, India can cultivate a new generation of techno-bureaucrats capable of addressing increasingly complex governance challenges.

The benefits would be significant. Policies would become more evidence-driven and future-oriented. Ministries would gain access to leaders who understand both the scientific dimensions and implementation realities of their sectors. Decision-making would become faster, more informed, and better aligned with national priorities. Equally important is the need to strengthen accountability throughout the governance system. Senior officials-whether administrative or technical-should undertake periodic field assignments at district, block, and village levels, and should be encouraged to attend focussed workshops at national levels. Such exposure would ensure that policymaking remains grounded in local realities and citizen needs. Ethics

Performance evaluation systems must also evolve. Career progression should be linked not only to tenure but also to measurable outcomes, including service delivery, transparency, innovation, fiscal efficiency, and citizen satisfaction. Digital governance platforms now provide unprecedented opportunities to measure outcomes and strengthen accountability across all levels of administration, especially below district levels.

A prime example of where this integrated expertise is urgently needed is the rural sector. The 16th Finance Commission's allocation of Rs 8 Lakh Crore to Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) provides a unique opportunity to integrate digital governance, agricultural innovation, local planning, and rural entrepreneurship into a unified development model capable of delivering measurable returns on public investment.

Maximizing this massive fiscal devolution requires a techno-administrative approach that can seamlessly deploy smart irrigation projects, AI-driven climate-resilient farming, and blockchain-based supply chains directly at the village cluster level.

INDIA'S MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGE NEEDS MORE THAN

Praveen Gupta

Mental health is no longer a silent issue. It is now one of the largest public health challenges facing the world, India included. According to an analysis from the "Global Burden of Disease Study" published in The Lancet, anxiety disorder patients in India increased by 123.5% from 1990 to 2023. It also pointed out that there has been a steep rise in the cases of depressive disorder and anxiety after Covid-19. However, they are more than just numbers. Behind every number is a person struggling with stress, fear, loneliness, burnout, sleep problems or emotional pain. Many are students, young professionals, working parents and elderly people trying to cope quietly every day. India-specificnews

The study also points out an important reality -- mental disorders are now one of the leading causes of disability across the world, even more than many major physical illnesses. This should make all of us pause and rethink how we look at mental health in India. To its credit, the government of India has recognised this growing crisis. The Union Budget 2026-27 has placed a stronger focus on expanding mental health and trauma care infrastructure. This is an important and welcome step. However, infrastructure alone will not solve the problem. India certainly needs more hospitals, more counselling centres and more trained mental health professionals. We also need to focus on prevention, early support and community-based care.

Mental health can no longer remain limited to big cities or specialised hospitals. One of the biggest concerns is that mental health problems are increasing most rapidly among teenagers and young adults. This is a very sensitive stage of life where emotional health shapes education, relationships, confidence and future careers. Unfortunately, many young people today are growing up under constant pressure. Academic competition, social media comparison, financial insecurity, loneliness and lack of emotional communication inside families are affecting mental well-being deeply. Many children are connected online all day but emotionally disconnected in real life. Anxiety and depression have also increased among women in the post-pandemic years due to emotional stress, responsibilities at home, work-related pressure, and societal demands.

Chronic anxiety and depression can disturb sleep, concentration, memory and overall quality of life. Long-term stress may also increase the risk of headaches, hypertension, stroke risk factors, and other neurological problems indirectly through lifestyle changes. India, therefore, needs a much broader mental health movement. Mental health education should begin in schools. Every school and college should have access to trained counsellors.

Even at the workplace, conversations around burnout, anxiety and emotional fatigue need to be normalised. Primary healthcare doctors should receive basic mental health training so that early symptoms are recognised before conditions become severe. At the community level, we must reduce stigma. Even today, many families hesitate to seek psychiatric help because of fear, shame or social judgement. Mental illness should be treated like any other health condition -- without embarrassment. Technology can also play a major role. Tele-consultations, digital counselling platforms, and regional-language mental health services can improve access in smaller towns and rural India, where specialists remain limited. More importantly, we need to realise that mental well-being is also connected with issues such as education, job prospects, social welfare, family matters, and the economy. Anxiety& Stress

A country cannot progress without ensuring the mental well-being of its people. India is on the right track by taking the first step in terms of policy and funding. The next step would be implementation on the ground. Mental well-being needs to become affordable, available, and acceptable for all Indians. This way, India will emerge as a better nation.

Indian higher education: A decade of transformation

Rama Shanker Dubey

Ten years ago, an Indian university breaking into the world's top rankings was a rare event worth celebrating. Today, it is closer to routine. When the QS World University Rankings 2027 were released on 18 June 2026, ten Indian institutions had made it into the world's top 500 - the clearest sign yet of a higher education system that has spent a decade quietly reinventing itself. But rankings are only the visible tip of a much larger transformation, one that spans research, innovation, entrepreneurship, access, and, perhaps most tellingly, a renewed argument about what education is actually for. Together, these threads tell the story of a system that has grown not just larger, but more serious about what it owes the students passing through it.

Climbing the Global Ladder

IIT Delhi now stands at 118th globally, India's highest-ranked institution this year, with IIT Bombay, IISc Bengaluru, IIT Madras and other IITs posting sustained gains of their own. What has changed is the breadth of the story. The University of Delhi and Anna University have joined the world's top 500, while the University of Hyderabad, Jamia Millia Islamia, Banaras Hindu University, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Aligarh Muslim University all sit within the top 800 - proof that India's rise is no longer an engineering-and-technology story alone. The numbers underline the shift: just 14 Indian institutions featured in the QS rankings in 2015; 52 do today, making India the fourth most-represented higher education system in the world. Collectively, these gains reflect not one institution's success story but a system-wide rise in quality, research depth and international recognition.

The Research and Innovation Engine

This climb rests on genuine substance. India now ranks third globally in science and engineering publications and sixth in patent filings, with research increasingly steered toward national priorities - clean energy, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, robotics, semiconductors, quantum technologies and space among them. The Global Innovation Index tells a parallel story: India rose from 81st in 2015 to 38th in 2025 among 133 economies, and now hosts two of the world's top 30 innovation clusters - Bengaluru (21st) and Delhi (26th), per WIPO's 2025 data. Publication volume, though, is not the finish line. Research must still convert into translational outcomes - solutions that solve industry problems, inform public policy, and improve lives - which is exactly why deeper industry-academia collaboration remains the next frontier for Indian HEIs to cross.

From Campuses to Companies

That industry linkage is most visible in the entrepreneurial boom reshaping Indian campuses. Of the country's 1,100-plus incubators, nearly two-thirds sit within HEIs - IITs, IIMs, NITs, and central, state and private universities alike. Government initiatives such as Startup India (2016), the Atal Innovation Mission, and the Ministry of Education's Institution Innovation Council programme, launched in 2018, have pushed entrepreneurship into the academic mainstream, while NEP 2020 has embedded entrepreneurial skills directly into degree curricula. The results speak for themselves: from roughly 450 startups in 2016, India counted more than 2.23 lakh recognised startups by 31 March 2026, generating over 23.36 lakh direct jobs and making the country the world's third-largest startup ecosystem.

Widening the Gate

Quality gains have come alongside a genuine widening of access. Between 2015-16 and 2021-22, the number of HEIs grew by nearly 15.8%, according to AISHE data, while the Gross Enrolment Ratio climbed from 23.7% to 28.4% - millions more young Indians in classrooms than a decade ago. New colleges and universities, digital and open-distance learning platforms, rising participation by women, and NEP 2020's flexible, multidisciplinary programmes have all driven this expansion. That same multidisciplinary turn - letting students range freely across sciences, humanities, arts and vocational tracks - is reshaping how graduates think, building the versatility and problem-solving ability that twenty-first-century challenges demand. NEP 2020 has also, for the first time, brought Indian Knowledge Systems into mainstream curricula, introducing students to the country's scientific, philosophical, linguistic and artistic heritage - yoga, Ayurveda, classical languages and Indian philosophy among them - taught alongside contemporary science rather than instead of it.

Building a Future-Ready Workforce

Skilling has kept pace with all of this. The Skill India Mission has trained more than 60 million people since 2015, while the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana has certified over 16 million youth in industry-relevant trades. NEP 2020 has folded Skill Enhancement Courses in AI, data science, cybersecurity, robotics and smart agriculture directly into degree programmes, alongside apprenticeship schemes that pair classroom learning with workplace exposure. The payoff already shows: in the QS World Future Skills Index 2027, India ranked 13th among 89 economies and was named a leading AI-ready economy.

The Gap That Remains

Scale, though, brings its own challenge. India's higher education system now spans over 1,338 universities and 53,354 colleges, serving more than 4.33 crore students - a demographic dividend the country cannot afford to waste. For decades, most academic programmes stayed disconnected from real skill-building, leaving a persistent gap between what graduates know and what industry actually needs. Closing that gap means HEIs must move faster to revamp curricula around societal priorities, industrial demand, and the economy's shifting requirements. Only then can the system deliver the future-ready workforce that the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047 depends on.

Character Before Curriculum

There is an older, simpler idea running underneath all of this: that the true worth of a person is reflected in character and conduct, not credentials alone. Skills, however useful, were never meant to be the whole point of education. Reformers from Swami Vivekananda to Sri Aurobindo to Mahamana Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya insisted that education's first task is building character - cultivating self-discipline, integrity and social responsibility alongside knowledge. When Malaviya founded Banaras Hindu University in 1916, he made character formation, grounded in Dharma and ethics, a stated objective of the institution itself. That tradition draws on scripture - the Vedas, the Manusmriti, the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayana - which hold truth, non-violence, self-control, compassion and service among Dharma's essential virtues, and which educators carry a responsibility to instil in their students.