How India is carving out a niche for itself in the field of Artificial Intelligence

When 62-year-old computer scientist P Anandan started last September as CEO at the Wadhwani Institute of Artificial Intelligence (WIAI), he might have been apprehensive. He was signing up to work on AI in India after three decades at major global corporations and academia in the US and at home, including top teaching and research roles at Yale University, Adobe and Microsoft.

India isn’t exactly a hub for cutting-edge research in Artificial Intelligence (AI). Misconceptions abound about big data, machine learning, automation and other AI-related technologies in the context of job losses for humans. And unlike other major economies, India hadn’t yet spelled out its vision for a future with AI.

But when Anandan set out to work, he found support all around. In February, the Prime Minister inaugurated the institute. Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis and NITI Aayog CEO Amitabh Kant were in attendance. Modi also invited Anandan to Delhi and met with him there.

“Right from the top, the government support has been fabulous. They have almost been like our working partner,” Anandan told ET Magazine. Anandan’s institute, funded by the entrepreneurs Romesh and Sunil Wadhwani is among a string of emerging private, non-profit and government efforts to harness the power of AI to solve societal problems in India.

The focus is on areas such as agriculture, healthcare, education and infrastructure. There are also moves to channel global AI talent and resources to develop solutions that can benefit millions at the grassroot. And this month, India made its first steps in articulating what it wants to be in an AI-centric future.

A National Strategy

“Globally, no one is doing AI innovation for the social sector. India can lead here,” Anandan says. That’s indeed the overarching vision in the first major blueprint on AI that was released this month—a discussion paper from government think-tank NITI Aayog, titled National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence. It pitches India as the AI “garage for the emerging and developing economies”. The focus will be on five key sectors— healthcare, agriculture, education, smart cities & infrastructure and smart mobility & transportation. The priorities are hard to argue with. India’s agriculture is notoriously inefficient, employing just under 50% of the population but contributing under 18% of the country’s gross domestic product.

In the US, for instance, less than 2% of the workforce is dependent on agriculture. Access to healthcare is poor—India’s life expectancy (68 in 2015) is among the lowest for BRICS nations, and so is its hospital beds per thousand people (0.9), a KPMG report said last year.

“AI is like the new electricity. The new factor of production. Like the industrial revolution, it will transform every sector. We want to exploit it to solve big socio-economic challenges that India faces,” said Amit Kant, CEO, NITI Aayog. This view of AI as a transformative force underpins the report as well. Read more