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THE MIDDLE EAST WAR AND WHAT IT IS COSTING INDIAN BUSINESSES



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Rooms: The Journey of Uttar
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From The Editor

In an increasingly interconnected world, global conflicts are no longer distant geopolitical events—they are immediate economic realities for India's MSMEs. As highlighted in our earlier editorial, even disruptions thousands of miles away can ripple through supply chains, inflate input costs, and stall export cycles. The ongoing tensions in West Asia and other global flashpoints have once again exposed the vulnerability of small businesses to external shocks.

For India's MSME sector contributing over 30% to GDP and nearly half of exports the impact has been tangible and, in many cases, severe. Rising energy prices, particularly for gas and fuel-dependent industries such as ceramics, chemicals, and engineering goods, have eroded already thin margins. Freight costs and insurance premiums have surged due to disrupted shipping routes, especially through critical corridors like the Red Sea.

At the same time, supply chain disruptions have led to volatility in raw material availability. MSMEs dependent on imported inputs—from metals to petrochemicals—face both cost escalation and procurement uncertainty. For many smaller enterprises, this has translated into reduced production cycles, delayed wage payments, and, in extreme cases, temporary shutdowns.

Yet, as history has shown, the MSME sector's defining strength lies in its resilience. Global buyers, seeking to de-risk supply chains away from conflict-prone regions, are increasingly looking at India as a stable alternative.

However, the path ahead is not without challenges. Persistent issues such as delayed payments, constrained access to affordable finance, and rising compliance requirements—especially around sustainability and carbon border taxes—continue to weigh heavily on MSMEs. In a time of global uncertainty, these structural bottlenecks become even more pronounced.

For MSMEs themselves, this is a moment not just to endure, but to evolve.

The current crisis, while disruptive, is also catalytic. It is accelerating a shift already underway—from fragmented local enterprises to globally competitive, tech-enabled businesses. Those who can adapt quickly, leverage emerging opportunities, and align with global trends will not just survive this phase they will define the next chapter of India's economic growth story.

Across India, women entrepreneurs are emerging as one of the most resilient and transformative forces within the MSME ecosystem.

Women-led MSMEs have demonstrated a unique strength during times of crisis diversifying income streams, adopting digital tools faster, and building community-based supply chains that are inherently more resilient. In sectors such as handicrafts, food processing, textiles, beauty and wellness, and increasingly in technology-enabled services, women entrepreneurs are not only sustaining livelihoods but also creating new market opportunities & redefining the future of enterprise in India.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sushma'.

Sushma Morthania



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India's Green Dream vs. The Micro Reality



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AI Pe Nazar, Business Pe Control: The New Age MSME Toolkit

ESG Self-Assessment Platforms Gain Momentum

ESG self-assessment platforms are becoming an essential tool for MSMEs to evaluate their environmental, social, and governance performance in a structured yet accessible way. These digital platforms offer simplified frameworks that help small businesses assess critical areas such as energy consumption, waste management, labour practices, workplace safety, and regulatory compliance. Designed with ease of use in mind, they enable enterprises with limited technical and financial capacity to generate a clear picture of their sustainability performance without relying on complex reporting systems or external consultants. Their importance is growing as ESG considerations increasingly influence access to finance and market opportunities. Financial institutions are integrating ESG metrics into lending decisions, particularly for green and sustainability-linked financing, while global buyers are prioritising ESG-compliant suppliers. By adopting these self-assessment tools early, MSMEs can identify gaps, improve efficiency, strengthen compliance, and build credibility, ultimately enhancing their ability to secure funding, enter global supply chains, and remain competitive in a sustainability-driven economy.



Sustainability Standards Gain Importance for Export-Oriented MSMEs

Export-focused MSMEs are increasingly preparing for stricter sustainability and environmental disclosure requirements as global markets place greater emphasis on responsible production practices. Buyers in regions such as Europe and other developed economies are now seeking detailed information on carbon emissions, sustainable sourcing, and supply chain traceability from their suppliers.



This shift is being driven by evolving regulatory frameworks and consumer expectations, making environmental transparency a key factor in international trade.

To support this transition, industry associations and trade bodies are actively organising capacity-building initiatives, workshops, and advisory programmes to help MSMEs understand emerging reporting formats and documentation requirements. While adapting to these standards may pose short-term challenges, particularly in terms of cost, awareness, and technical capacity, it also presents a significant opportunity. MSMEs that proactively align with sustainability expectations can enhance their credibility, secure preferred supplier status, and strengthen their position within global value chains.



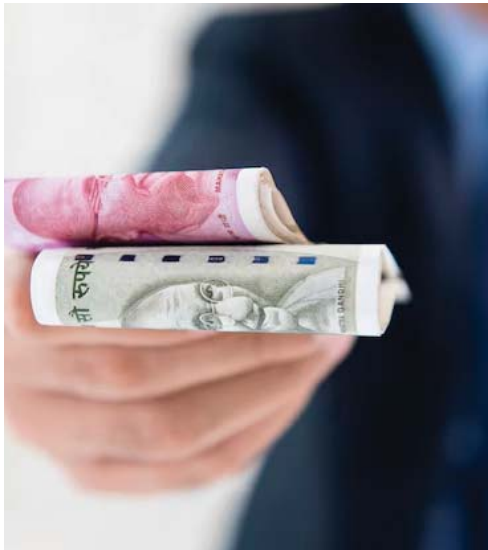
European Union – New Industry Policy for SMEs

The European Union's Industrial Accelerator Act, launched in March 2026, is aimed at strengthening the region's clean-technology manufacturing ecosystem while enhancing the competitiveness of its domestic industries, including SMEs. The policy focuses on accelerating the production and adoption of technologies such as renewable energy equipment, energy-efficient systems, battery storage, and other low-carbon solutions. By providing targeted incentives, faster approvals, and financial support, the EU seeks to reduce dependence on imports and build a more resilient, self-sustaining industrial base.

At the same time, the Act is designed to stimulate demand for EU-manufactured clean technologies by encouraging public procurement, private sector adoption, and investments in sustainable infrastructure. For SMEs, this creates new opportunities to participate in emerging green value chains, access funding, and scale innovation. Overall, the initiative is expected to generate employment, drive industrial growth, and position Europe as a global leader in the clean energy transition.

Late-Filing Amnesty: 90% Fee Waiver on Overdue MCA Filings (CCFS-2026)

The Ministry of Corporate Affairs notified the Companies Compliance Facilitation Scheme, 2026 (CCFS-2026), offering a waiver of up to 90% on accumulated MCA late-filing fees for certain annual returns and financial statements. The scheme window opens on 15 April 2026 and closes on 15 July 2026, making it a rare and time-bound clean-slate opportunity for businesses with lapsed filings. MSME-registered private companies and One Person Companies (OPCs) with overdue forms such as AOC-4, MGT-7 and ADT-1 stand to save significantly on penalty costs. However, the window will not wait. Use February 2026 as your internal audit month, map every pending MCA filing, calculate accumulated fees and build a structured filing schedule. Companies that plan ahead will benefit fully; those who rush in July may still miss forms or make costly errors under deadline pressure.



Get Paid on Time or Get Paid Interest The 45-Day Rule Tightens

February 2026 marks a decisive tightening in the enforcement of the 45-day MSME payment rule under Section 43B(h) of the Income Tax Act. Large buyers and corporates who delay payments beyond 45 days to MSME suppliers now face disallowance of that outstanding amount as a business expense in their own tax filings, a powerful financial deterrent that is finally shifting negotiating power in favour of small businesses. For MSMEs, this is the critical month to act. Conduct a thorough reconciliation of all outstanding invoices, identify those ageing beyond 45 days and document each transaction with supporting delivery challans, purchase orders and communication records. Where buyers remain non-compliant, promptly file a complaint on the MSME Samadhaan portal. This documentation also feeds directly into the buyer's mandatory MSME-1 return filing due in April 2026. Your paper trail is your most valuable compliance asset and maintains it with precision.

GSTR-1 & GSTR-3B Deadlines: One Miss Can Cost You Your ITC

For February 2026, the non-negotiable GST compliance calendar reads: GSTR-1 by 11 February and GSTR-3B by 20 February. These are not administrative formalities; the GSTN system is now actively auto-flagging frequent late filers for higher-risk scrutiny, potential audit notices and enhanced monitoring in future return cycles. MSMEs must reconcile sales registers, purchase invoices and e-way bill data well before these cut-off dates to avoid cash-flow-draining penalties and interest charges. Critically, a filing mismatch does not just attract fines, it can block or delay your Input Tax Credit (ITC) claims for the entire month, directly impacting working capital. QRMP-scheme filers have an additional deadline to note: the Invoice Furnishing Facility (IFF) window for January 2026 closes on 13 February. Skipping it pushes all January B2B invoice data into a March pile-up, dramatically increasing the risk of reconciliation errors and ITC loss.



Udyam–GST Data Mismatch? Fix It to Avoid Losing Scheme Benefits

An active data-matching exercise is underway to cross-verify Udyam registration records with GSTIN details for MSMEs across India. Any mismatch in key parameters such as turnover, investment in plant and machinery, NIC activity codes, PAN, or registered address, can lead to



silent disqualification from a range of government benefits. These include interest-subsidy schemes, priority sector lending eligibility, advantages in public procurement, and access to the Samadhaan portal for delayed payment recovery. Data alignment is now being treated as a critical pre-condition for availing MSME-specific support, making this far more than a routine administrative task.

MSMEs are therefore advised to proactively log in to both the Udyam and GST portals, carefully cross-check all key details, and update any discrepancies. This is a quick yet high-impact exercise, taking a few minutes to verify records today can help prevent prolonged loss of benefits, funding opportunities, and institutional support in the future.

Government pushes banks to create low-interest MSME loans

The government has urged banks to design dedicated low-interest loan schemes for micro and small enterprises to improve access to affordable finance. This initiative aims to address long-standing challenges such as high borrowing costs, complex application procedures, and limited credit availability for smaller businesses. Banks have been encouraged to introduce simplified and standardised loan processes, making it easier for MSMEs to apply, get approvals, and access funds without excessive documentation or delays.

The move is expected to strengthen financial inclusion by expanding the flow of institutional credit to the MSME sector. With better access to low-cost financing, small



businesses can invest in expansion, upgrade technology, manage working capital more efficiently, and explore new market opportunities. If implemented effectively, this initiative could significantly enhance MSME growth, competitiveness, and their overall contribution to employment and economic development.

LPG supply disruption threatens MSME manufacturing clusters



A shortage of industrial LPG is emerging as a serious concern for MSME manufacturing clusters in Pune and surrounding industrial areas, disrupting production cycles and operational continuity. Small units engaged in processes such as surface coating, die casting, and metal fabrication are particularly affected, as they rely heavily on LPG for heating and processing activities. With limited fuel reserves, often just a few days' stock, many enterprises are being forced to scale

down operations or temporarily halt production, leading to delays in order fulfilment and potential financial losses.

The disruption has prompted industry associations to raise concerns with authorities, urging stricter enforcement of supply allocation guidelines and prioritisation of industrial demand. Prolonged shortages could not only impact cluster-level productivity but also affect supply chains linked to larger industries. For MSMEs operating on tight margins, such interruptions can strain working capital, disrupt client relationships, and reduce competitiveness. Ensuring a stable and predictable fuel supply is therefore critical to maintaining the resilience and output of these manufacturing ecosystems.

Malaysia exits US reciprocal trade deal after Supreme Court ruling

Malaysia has withdrawn from a trade agreement with the United States, becoming the first country to abandon a pact negotiated under Washington's reciprocal tariff strategy after a court ruling removed the legal basis for the policy. On March 15, Malaysia's Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry Johari Abdul Ghani announced that the Agreement on Reciprocal Trade (ART) between the two countries was now "null and void". The decision follows a February 20 ruling by the Supreme Court of the United States that struck



down reciprocal tariffs imposed by the administration of Donald Trump under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act.

West Asia Crisis Disrupting India's Trade & Energy Imports

Ongoing geopolitical tensions in West Asia, particularly around the strategically critical Strait of Hormuz, are creating significant disruptions in India's external trade and energy supply chains. A substantial share of India's LPG and crude oil imports passes through this corridor, making the country highly vulnerable to supply shocks. The situation has already resulted in shipment delays, higher freight and insurance costs, and increased price volatility. These disruptions are not limited to



the energy sector alone, they are cascading into industries such as fertilisers, petrochemicals, and even agriculture, where rising input costs and logistical uncertainties are affecting exports like rice and other commodities.

In response, the government is taking a calibrated approach to safeguard domestic stability by prioritising fuel availability within the country and moderating exports where necessary. At the same time, efforts are underway to diversify energy sourcing and reduce overdependence on the region, with increased imports from alternative suppliers such as the United States, Russia, and Norway. This strategic shift aims to build resilience in India's energy basket while ensuring continuity in industrial and trade activities. However, if disruptions persist, the pressure on MSMEs and export-oriented sectors could intensify, underscoring the need for adaptive trade strategies and supply chain diversification.

Relief Package Under Consideration for Exporters Amid Global Disruptions

In response to mounting pressure from exporters affected by the ongoing West Asia crisis, the government and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) are considering a targeted relief package to ease financial stress, particularly for MSME exporters. A key proposal under discussion is the introduction of a temporary loan repayment moratorium, which would allow exporters to defer principal and interest payments for a limited period. This is aimed at providing immediate liquidity support to businesses facing delayed payments, order cancellations, and rising logistics costs due to geopolitical uncertainties.

In addition, the proposed package may include enhanced working capital limits, extension of loan tenures, and flexibility in restructuring existing credit facilities. There is also likely to be a focus on easing export credit norms, faster disbursement of pending incentives, and possible interest subvention support to reduce borrowing costs. Collectively, these measures are intended to stabilize exporter cash flows, protect MSME viability, and ensure continuity in India's export momentum during a period of global disruption.



Small Pharma MSMEs Seek Input Price Caps Amid Rising Cost Pressures

Small pharmaceutical MSMEs are facing mounting financial stress due to a sharp increase in input costs, particularly for active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), solvents, and packaging materials. These cost pressures are largely driven by global supply disruptions, import dependencies, and volatility in raw material markets. Since a significant portion of essential medicines falls under price regulation, manufacturers have limited flexibility to pass on rising costs to consumers, resulting in severe margin compression. For smaller firms operating on tight working capital cycles, this imbalance between input costs and controlled output prices is making day-to-day operations increasingly unsustainable.



Industry bodies have raised concerns that if the situation persists, it could lead to reduced production, delayed supplies, or even temporary shutdowns of smaller units, ultimately affecting the availability of essential medicines in the domestic market. To mitigate the impact, stakeholders are urging the government to consider interventions such as price caps on critical inputs, targeted subsidies, or financial relief measures for MSME manufacturers. Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for the survival of small pharmaceutical enterprises but also for ensuring the stability and resilience of India's healthcare supply chain.

PM Vishwakarma Scheme Gains Ground

The PM Vishwakarma Scheme is steadily gaining momentum as it moves from policy intent to active on-ground implementation, with a strong focus on supporting traditional artisans and craftspeople across India. Designed to uplift micro and informal enterprises rooted in heritage skills, the scheme provides a comprehensive support framework that includes skill upgradation, access to modern tools, financial assistance, and formalisation pathways. Across multiple states, MSME fairs and exhibitions have begun showcasing beneficiaries and their products, offering greater visibility and direct market access while highlighting the diversity and potential of India's traditional sectors.

A key strength of the scheme lies in its integrated approach such as combining training, credit support, digital inclusion, and market linkages to build sustainable livelihoods. Beneficiaries are



not only being equipped with improved technical skills but are also being introduced to digital platforms, branding strategies, and e-commerce opportunities, enabling them to reach wider markets. As implementation deepens, the scheme is beginning to demonstrate tangible impact by enhancing productivity, increasing incomes, and strengthening the position of artisans within both domestic and global value chains.

India Launches Anti-Dumping Probe into Chinese Imports

India has initiated an anti-dumping investigation into imports of ethyl chloroformate from China, signaling a stronger trade defence stance against low-cost imports. If dumping is established, this could lead to higher import duties, making such imports more expensive. The move is expected to provide relief to domestic manufacturers, particularly those producing pharma intermediates, by ensuring fair competition and reducing the pricing pressure caused by cheaper Chinese supplies.



Electronics & Smartphone Exports Becoming India's Top Driver

Electronics and smartphone exports are rapidly emerging as a key driver of India's export growth, supported by the government's push through export-linked incentives for mobile manufacturing. With smartphone exports reaching approximately \$21.7 billion, the sector has now become one of India's top export contributors, reflecting the country's growing strength in global electronics value chains and its shift toward high-value manufacturing.



Women-Led MSMEs Cross 3.07 Crore Mark on Udyam

More than 3.07 crore women-led enterprises have been registered on the government's Udyam portals, marking a significant milestone in the formal participation of women in the MSME sector. This reflects the growing role of women entrepreneurs in driving enterprise creation, employment generation, and grassroots economic development across the country.

To support this momentum, the Credit Guarantee Scheme for MSMEs provides women-led units with enhanced coverage of up to 90%, along with lower guarantee fees and access to collateral-free financing. Additionally, initiatives such as PM Vishwakarma and SFURTI are strengthening women entrepreneurs and artisans through skill development, financial and digital literacy, and access to modern tools. These programmes also facilitate e-commerce integration, branding, and cluster-based marketing support, enabling women-led MSMEs to scale and compete more effectively across value chains.

Punjab Boosts Women-Led Enterprises Under PSRLM

Punjab is accelerating women-led entrepreneurship through the Punjab State Rural Livelihoods Mission, with Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann honouring 100 top-performing women entrepreneurs from 23 districts, including Mohali. Each received ₹25,000, alongside a certificate and memento, adding to 11,700 women already recognized statewide. The government reported over 2,000 startups under the Pahal Startup Project, generating 7,560 jobs, while Sakhi Shakti fairs across 19 districts enabled earnings exceeding ₹1 crore. Additionally, ₹147 crore has been disbursed to strengthen 58,303 women-led SHGs, alongside the expansion of dairy cooperatives and new rural enterprise networks.



Parliament Flags Quality & Competitiveness Gaps in MSME Schemes

The Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Industry (Rajya Sabha), chaired by Shri Tiruchi Siva, presented its 333rd Report on the Demands for Grants (2026-27) of the Ministry of MSME to Parliament on March 11, 2026. The report spotlighted schemes like ZED (Zero Defect Zero Effect), MSME-Competitive LEAN, and MSME-Innovative (Incubation, Design and IPR) as key tools for driving quality and competitiveness. Strikingly, of eight Budget 2025-26 announcements directly relevant to the MSME sector, only two had been fully operationalised by the time of the report; both were schemes where the Ministry of MSME was itself the lead agency. MSME manufacturers should track implementation progress on quality-linked schemes and engage their facilitation offices for updated compliance support.



Export Promotion Mission: Government Now Reimburses MSMEs for International Certifications



Under the newly launched Trade Regulations, Accreditation & Compliance Enablement (TRACE) intervention of the Export Promotion Mission, the Department of Commerce now provides partial reimbursement of 60% for eligible testing, inspection and certification expenses under the Positive List, and 75% under the Priority Positive List, with an annual ceiling of ₹25 lakh per IEC (Importer-Exporter Code). This comes as part of seven new interventions launched on February 20, 2026, under the ₹25,060-crore Export Promotion Mission, a five-year programme spanning 2025–26 to 2030–31. MSME exporters, this means the recurring cost burden of meeting international quality and compliance requirements, often a barrier to entering EU, US, or Japanese markets can now be significantly offset through a government-backed digital reimbursement mechanism.

New Aluminium QCO: What MSME Manufacturers Must Know

India issued a new Quality Control Order (QCO) for aluminium and aluminium alloy products on March 13, 2026, replacing the earlier 2025 order. Issued by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), it mandates Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) compliance for a wide range of products used across engineering, packaging, construction and electrical applications. The order covers 17 diverse aluminium product categories and introduces a phased rollout based on enterprise size under the MSME framework, giving micro and small enterprises more time to comply. MSME manufacturers should begin BIS licence applications immediately and monitor BIS notifications for updates to applicable Indian Standards.



iDEX Emerges as Backbone of India's Defence Innovation Push

As of March 2026, the Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) initiative has emerged as a key pillar of India's defence indigenisation efforts. Since its launch in 2018, iDEX has supported 676 startups and MSMEs, with 548 contracts awarded to develop advanced military technologies in areas such as AI, drones, and robotics. The initiative has already cleared 58 prototypes for procurement, with a total value of ₹3,853 crore, highlighting its growing role in strengthening domestic innovation and reducing dependence on imports in the defence sector.

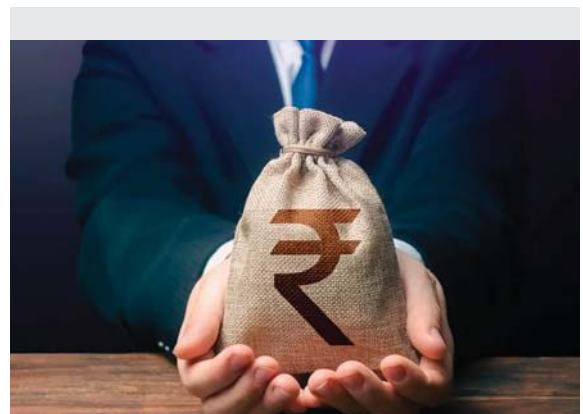


RBI Cancels 36 NBFC Licenses, West Bengal Hit

RBI cancelled Certificates of Registration (CoRs) for 36 NBFCs in February 2026, with a majority from West Bengal, and accepted surrenders from 9 others, including local firms like Mechno Sales Agencies Pvt Ltd. Actions dated February 16-18 bar these entities from NBFC operations, continuing RBI's cleanup drive. This safeguards MSME borrowers from high-risk lenders amid persistent regional challenges in informal finance. The move underscores stricter oversight, following prior West Bengal cancellations, to ensure credit quality and protect small businesses reliant on NBFC funding.

MSME Credit Steady, No New RBI Moves

No major new RBI MSME-specific announcements occurred from February 20 to March 19, 2026. Focus remained on implementing February's collateral reforms, with analyses emphasizing April 1 rollout. MSME credit growth holds at 13-15% YoY, fueled by policy boosts, TReDS integration, and guarantee expansions. These sustain momentum for 7.47 crore enterprises employing 32 crores, enhancing liquidity via platforms like ULI pilots. Ongoing stability supports Viksit Bharat goals amid 6.4% GDP projections.





The Middle East War and What It Is Costing Indian Businesses

When a distant war chokes a narrow strait, it's not just oil that stops flowing - it's the fragile lifeline of India's MSMEs, its workers and the rhythm of everyday survival.

The Strait is only 33 kilometers wide. But for India's economy, it might as well be a lifeline stretched across continents.

Every day, tankers carrying crude oil and LPG pass through this narrow corridor, quietly powering dyeing units in Surat, auto-component workshops in Pune, small engineering clusters in Rajkot, and kitchens in millions of Indian homes. For years, this dependence felt distant, almost invisible, managed by global markets, cushioned by diplomacy, and absorbed

into the rhythm of everyday business. That distance has now collapsed.

What began as coordinated strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities quickly spiralled into a wider conflict. Retaliation followed. A brief pause gave way to escalation as diplomacy broke down. The killing of Iran's Supreme Leader marked a turning point, triggering missile strikes across multiple countries and intensifying regional instability. As tensions peaked, Iran threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz and soon after, the corridor was effectively closed to most commercial shipping.

Analysts now expect routine transit to remain disrupted for the rest of the year. The International Energy Agency has described this as the most significant supply shock in the history of the oil market.

For India, the consequences were immediate. Fuel prices surged, shipping costs multiplied, and the cost of petrochemical inputs began rising sharply. But the real damage unfolded inside India's industrial clusters, where MSMEs operate on thin margins and depend heavily on predictable energy costs.

As transport and production costs rose, many MSMEs were forced to cut shifts, delay payments, and reduce output. This triggered a second crisis: labour instability. Migrant workers, already vulnerable due to insecure housing and limited savings, began leaving industrial clusters as the cost of living rose and wages became uncertain.

This is how a war abroad translated into disruption at home. The fuel shock weakened MSMEs, MSME stress pushed workers out, and worker migration further weakened factory operations. The result is a cycle in which industrial slowdown and reverse migration reinforce each other. As always, the first and hardest hit are India's migrant workers.

Four Channels of Pain for Indian Business

The first hit was energy prices. Brent crude surged sharply after the conflict escalated. The Reserve Bank of India flagged that higher input costs linked to energy prices, international freight and insurance, along with supply chain disruptions, could constrain availability of key inputs for downstream sectors, impairing growth.

The second hit was the rupee. As oil import costs surged, India's currency came under pressure. For MSMEs importing raw materials or components, even a modest fall in the rupee translates to paying significantly more for the exact same goods overnight.

The third hit was freight and logistics. Airlines increased charges sharply as Gulf airspace closed. Shipping lines followed. For exporters relying on Gulf routes, goods were either stuck, rerouted at far greater cost, or simply unviable to ship given soaring war-risk insurance premiums.

The fourth hit was remittances. Nearly 90 lakh Indians work in Gulf countries. If Gulf economies slow, construction stops and employers cut workers, the money flowing back to families across Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu slows with it. For the



A 33-kilometre chokepoint in West Asia has triggered a shockwave across Indian factories. As the Strait of Hormuz shuts down, MSMEs are facing soaring fuel costs, collapsing margins, and production cuts.

millions of MSMEs that depend on these families as customers, the effect is indirect but very real.

Then Came the LPG Crisis

Just as businesses were absorbing the shock of higher costs and stalled exports, a second crisis arrived through the same pipeline. India began facing a serious shortage of LPG cylinders. Cities including Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi and Hyderabad reported shortages, with waiting times for deliveries rising sharply. The government invoked the Essential Commodities Act, prioritising household supply and capping commercial LPG allocation at 70 percent of pre-crisis levels.

For MSMEs that depend on gas for manufacturing, processing and industrial operations, this was a direct production constraint. Industrial hubs reported that commercial gas supplies had dried up entirely in some areas. Existing production contracts became unviable for many

smaller manufacturers as input costs outpaced the prices at which they were contracted to supply.

Domestic LPG production was ramped up by around 20 percent and emergency procurement was initiated from alternative sources. But sourcing gas from alternatives like the US or Australia involves longer transit times, which does not solve the immediate availability crunch.

This is the chain the crisis sets in motion, and it is already playing out across India's MSME sector:

Energy prices rise. MSME costs increase. Production reduces. Worker income falls. Migration rises. Labour shortages grow. Output is disrupted. Exports suffer.

■ Industrial Clusters at the Centre of the Storm

Indian MSMEs employ nearly 34 crore people. The sector forms the backbone of manufacturing and exports. The

Cluster	Sector	Energy Dependence	Migrant Labour Dependence	Stress Level	Key Problem
Morbi, Gujarat	Ceramics and Tiles	Very High (Gas)	High	Severe	Gas cost surge, production cuts, worker exits
Firozabad, UP	Glass	Very High (Gas)	High	Severe	Furnace slowdown, artisan migration
Ludhiana, Punjab	Forging, Textiles	High	High	High	Reduced shifts, wage pressure
Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu	Textile Exports	Moderate to High	High	High	Export slowdown, labour attrition
Surat, Gujarat	Textile Processing	High	Very High	High	Informal labour, cost pressure

* These numbers are indicative or estimates



current crisis does not hit one sector. It hits the foundation of the entire industrial employment system.

The clusters feeling the sharpest pain are those where production is both gas-intensive and dependent on interstate migrant labour.

These are not small pockets of the economy. They are some of the largest employment ecosystems in the country. And early warning signs are already visible: worker attendance falling by 5 to 15 percent, rising absenteeism, declining overtime acceptance, and fewer new workers arriving from source states.

■ **How Many Workers Are Actually at Risk?**

Estimates for the most exposed clusters alone suggest that between 3.5 and 8 lakh workers could be at immediate risk if energy and livelihood pressures continue. This is an early estimate based on priority

Cluster	Total Employment	Share Vulnerable	Workers at Immediate Risk
Morbi	3 to 5 lakh	25 to 40%	0.75 to 2 lakh
Surat	3 to 4 lakh	20 to 35%	0.6 to 1.4 lakh
Firozabad	1.5 to 2.5 lakh	25 to 40%	0.4 to 1 lakh
Ludhiana	2.5 to 4 lakhs	20 to 30%	0.5 to 1.2 lakh
Tiruppur	3 to 5 lakhs	15 to 25%	0.45 to 1.25 lakh

* These numbers are indicative or estimates

clusters only. The number could rise significantly if disruptions deepen.

■ **Why Workers Are Already Leaving**

For migrant workers living in industrial clusters, LPG is not a convenience. It is a daily survival necessity. Workers in shared rooms and informal settlements were already stretched thin between rent, food, transport and money sent home. When cooking gas becomes scarce and expensive on top of reduced factory shifts, the math changes very quickly.

Workers are not leaving because there is no work. They are leaving because the cost of staying has become greater than what staying is worth. If overtime disappears, monthly earnings fall sharply. If food costs rise alongside cooking fuel, the only way to cope is to eat less. At that point, the calculation a migrant worker makes is simple: if I cannot save anything in the city, why should I stay?

This time, unlike during the pandemic, the migration is not sudden. It is gradual and quiet. A slow exit that does not attract attention until 20



percent of a factory's workforce is already gone and the supply chain is already broken. By then, it is too late.

Workers in these clusters are also not easily replaced. Glass clusters depend on trained artisans. Ceramics depend on furnace operators. Textile clusters depend on skilled machine operators built up over years. When they leave, production does not restart quickly. Recruiting costs money. Retraining takes time. The trust between employer and worker, once broken, is hard to rebuild.

This Is Also an Export Crisis

Many of the most stressed clusters are export-driven. Tiruppur is a

The RBI has projected GDP growth for this financial year at 6.9 percent but flagged that further escalation of the conflict and uncertainty over damage to energy infrastructure pose significant downside risks.

Government Response So Far and What Still Needs to Be Done

The government has moved on several fronts. Refineries are operating at full or above capacity. Emergency procurement has been initiated. A temporary customs duty exemption on key petrochemical inputs including polypropylene, polycarbonate and PVC has been announced to provide direct relief to MSME manufacturers.

But the intervention most urgently needed in industrial clusters goes beyond fuel policy. The government is considering subsidised community kitchens and assured cooking gas supply in key MSME clusters to prevent worker return migration. This model already exists at the state level. Tamil Nadu runs Amma Unavagam, Karnataka has Indira Canteens, and Odisha operates Aahar Centres. A scaled-up version targeted at the most stressed industrial clusters would directly reduce the cost pressure on workers and slow the pace of reverse migration. If workers can access affordable meals, they are less likely to leave. If they stay, factories continue. If factories continue, MSMEs survive.

A New World Order, and Where India Stands

It would be a mistake to read this crisis as a temporary disruption that will pass once the Strait of Hormuz reopens. Something more permanent is underway.

The world is reorganising around geopolitical blocs. Energy is no longer just a commodity. It is a strategic weapon. Supply chains built on the logic of efficiency are being rebuilt around the logic of security. For India, which depends heavily on the Middle East for oil and gas, that reckoning has arrived.

The crisis has two sides. The pain is visible. But there is also an opportunity: as global buyers accelerate their shift away from China, India is one of the most credible alternatives, with genuine MSME strength in textiles, engineering goods, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. The new world order is offering India a seat at the table. Whether it can take that seat depends on whether its industrial clusters are stable enough to absorb new demand. Right now, in Morbi, Tiruppur and Ludhiana, that stability is under serious threat.

A Pattern India Cannot Keep Repeating

There is a painful familiarity to what is happening right now.



major textile export hub. Surat supports textile processing. Ludhiana contributes to industrial goods and textiles. Firozabad's glass products reach international markets.

If labour instability continues, export orders will be delayed. In today's global market, delays mean buyers shift to Vietnam, Bangladesh or China. Once buyers shift, they rarely return. The damage is not just to this quarter's numbers. It is to India's long-term competitiveness in global trade.

This is not just an oil crisis. It is an MSME survival crisis. From Morbi's kilns to Tiruppur's textile units, rising energy prices are forcing industries to slow down, shut shifts, and delay wages.

During the covid pandemic, images of migrant workers walking hundreds of kilometres on highways with their belongings on their heads became the defining visual of that crisis. Industrial clusters that had taken decades to build collapsed within weeks. Factories that had never missed a shift stood empty. And when the lockdowns lifted and production needed to restart, the workers were gone. Rebuilding took months. Some clusters never fully recovered.

That moment should have changed things. It should have triggered a serious national conversation about what it means to build an industrial economy on the shoulders of a workforce that has no safety net when things go wrong. It should have resulted in permanent systems, not temporary relief.

It did not.

And so here we are again. A different crisis, a different trigger, but the same story playing out in the same clusters, affecting the same people. The furnace operators in Firozabad. The tile workers in Morbi. The garment workers in Tiruppur. The textile processing workers in Surat. People who did not cause this crisis, have no power to resolve it, and yet are paying the highest price for it.

What makes this particularly difficult to accept is that these workers are not on the margins of the Indian economy. They are at its centre. India has over 7.89 crore MSMEs employing nearly 34 crore people. Behind every one of those enterprises is a workforce, and a very large share of that workforce is made up of migrants who left their home states to keep India's factories running. They are not a backup labour pool. They are the primary engine.

Yet every time a crisis arrives, whether it is a pandemic, a lockdown, a fuel shock or a war overseas, the first question asked is how to keep factories running. The question of how to keep workers stable, fed and present rarely gets the same urgency. Relief measures



As LPG shortages and living costs rise, migrant workers are quietly leaving industrial clusters. The danger is not sudden collapse, but a slow labour drain that breaks supply chains before anyone notices.

are announced after migration has already begun. Community kitchens are proposed after workers have already started calculating whether staying is worth it. Emergency gas allocation is discussed after industrial output has already fallen.

The pattern is always the same. Prices rise. MSMEs struggle. Workers lose income. Migration begins. Emergency measures are announced. The damage is already done.

What India needs is not a better emergency response. It needs to stop treating every crisis as if it were the first one. A permanent national framework for worker welfare in industrial clusters, covering food security, cooking fuel access, housing support and welfare portability, would cost a fraction of what is lost every time a cluster collapses and has to be rebuilt. The state-level models already exist. Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Odisha have all run subsidised community meal programmes for years. The question is not whether it can be done. The question is why it has not been scaled up and made permanent at the national level.

India's migrant workers are not a temporary workforce that can be sent home when times are hard and called back when production needs to resume. They are skilled, trained, experienced people whose presence is the difference between a functioning industrial cluster and an empty one. When they leave, they do not simply pause. They rebuild their lives elsewhere. They find other work. They stop coming back.

Crises will keep coming. That is the nature of a connected world where a war thousands of kilometres away can empty a gas cylinder in Ludhiana or slow a loom in Surat. India cannot control what happens in the Strait of Hormuz. It cannot insulate itself entirely from global energy shocks. But it can absolutely control whether its most important working class faces each new crisis completely alone, with nothing between them and the road home except the calculation of whether staying is still worth it.

Right now, for too many of them, it is not.

That has to change. Not after the next crisis. Now. [bwise](#)

WOMEN PIONEERS: LEADING INDIA'S MSME REVOLUTION WITH AI



Can AI become the ultimate equaliser: powering India's women entrepreneurs to redefine the MSME landscape?

Women-led enterprises are steadily gaining visibility on the Udyam

Registration Portal, signalling a gradual but important shift towards the formalisation of women entrepreneurship in India. As per recent estimates, over **3.11 crore women-led MSMEs** are registered on the portal, accounting for more than one-fifth of total registered enterprises, with a strong concentration in the micro segment. The platform has played a critical role in bridging long-standing structural gaps by enabling easier access to formal credit, government schemes, and market linkages, areas where women entrepreneurs have historically faced constraints.

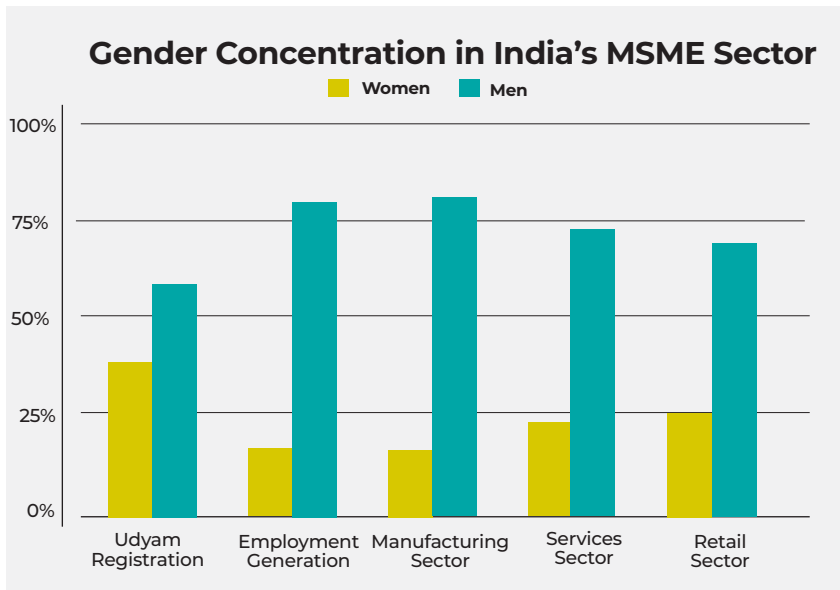
This progress exists alongside a structural paradox. In STEM, women's participation in India remains relatively

low, especially in core engineering and technology roles. While enrollment in STEM education has improved, workforce participation continues to decline due to factors such as societal norms, career interruptions, and the absence of supportive workplace ecosystems. According to the Research and Development Statistics Report 2023 published by the Department of Science and Technology, women constitute only **18.6%** of India's R&D workforce, meaning men continue to dominate the field. Of the women employed in R&D, **45.87%** work in government institutions, while **26.51%** work in industry.

Yet a distinct shift is emerging in frontier technologies, particularly in Artificial Intelligence. Unlike traditional STEM pathways, AI is witnessing a growing presence of women as founders, innovators, and decision-makers. Its interdisciplinary and evolving nature has lowered

conventional entry barriers, enabling women to engage not just as participants but as leaders. Across sectors such as healthcare, fintech, and education, women are building AI-driven enterprises, shaping ethical AI discourse, and contributing to the next wave of digital innovation - an evolution that is best illustrated through emerging case studies of women entrepreneurs leading in the AI sector.

The transformation can also be seen in the journeys of women founders who used India's growing digital economy to build technology-based businesses despite facing challenges in funding and credibility. **Ms. Falguni Nayar**, the founder of **Nykaa**, started the company in 2012 after leaving her career in investment banking. In the beginning, she had to work in a startup environment where most founders and investors were men. By using data, digital marketing, and online platforms effectively, Nykaa grew into



customers automatically. Retailers using such AI-driven systems have reported up to 60–70% reduction in manual cataloguing work and improved customer engagement. The platform is used globally by retailers, including Macy's and companies under the Tata Group.



Another entrepreneur transforming digital retail is **Ms. Chandralika Hazarika**, founder of **Bigthinx**. Her company developed an AI-based virtual fitting technology that allows customers to see how clothes will fit them before buying online. For small apparel businesses, product returns caused by incorrect sizing can significantly increase costs. By allowing customers to visualize garments on digital avatars based on body measurements, Bigthinx helps reduce return rates and improve the online shopping experience. Retail brands using similar virtual fitting technologies have reported reductions in returns of 20–30%, helping MSMEs save on logistics and inventory costs.

A new wave of women founders is using AI to overcome structural barriers and drive more inclusive innovation in India's MSME ecosystem.

one of India's most successful beauty and lifestyle companies. Similarly, **Ms. Suchi Mukherjee** founded **LimeRoad** as a social-commerce platform. She also faced doubts from investors about women-led technology startups but continued building the platform using recommendation systems and user-driven shopping ideas. These examples show how women entrepreneurs have entered the digital market and overcome many barriers to build successful technology-driven companies.

Women Transforming Retail with AI

Among them is **Ms. Ashwini Asokan**, co-founder of Mad Street Den. Her company developed **Vue.ai**, an AI platform that helps fashion retailers automate catalogue management and personalize online shopping experiences. For many apparel MSMEs, manually tagging thousands of product images and organizing digital catalogues is time-consuming. **Vue.ai** uses computer vision to categorize products and recommend items to

Similarly, **Ms. Meghna Saraogi** founded **MirrAR** to improve digital shopping experiences. **MirrAR** offers AI-powered virtual try-on tools that allow customers to visualise jewellery, beauty products and eyewear before purchasing them online. For small retail businesses, attracting customers in online marketplaces can be difficult. By creating interactive shopping experiences, **MirrAR** helps increase customer engagement and trust. Brands using such technologies have reported conversion rate improvements of around 20–25%, helping MSMEs boost online sales.

Women Driving AI-Powered Marketing

In the marketing sector, **Ms. Ritwika Chowdhury** has developed innovative solutions through her company **Unscript.AI**. The platform enables businesses to create professional marketing videos using AI-generated avatars and automated scripts. Traditional video production requires studios, actors and editing teams, which many small businesses cannot afford. With Unscript.AI, companies can generate promotional videos in minutes. Businesses adopting AI-based video tools have reported up to 70% savings in production costs, making digital marketing more accessible to MSMEs.

Influencer marketing is also becoming more efficient through the work of **Ms. Krishna Priya Akella**, founder of **Starbuzz.AI**. Her platform uses AI analytics to match brands with the most relevant social media influencers by analyzing audience demographics and engagement patterns. For many small businesses, choosing the right influencer for a campaign is often difficult and risky. Starbuzz.AI provides data-driven recommendations and campaign tracking tools, helping MSMEs run targeted marketing campaigns. Businesses using such AI-based influencer platforms have reported 30–40% higher campaign efficiency.



Women-led AI ventures are enabling MSMEs to reduce costs, improve efficiency, and strengthen their digital capabilities.

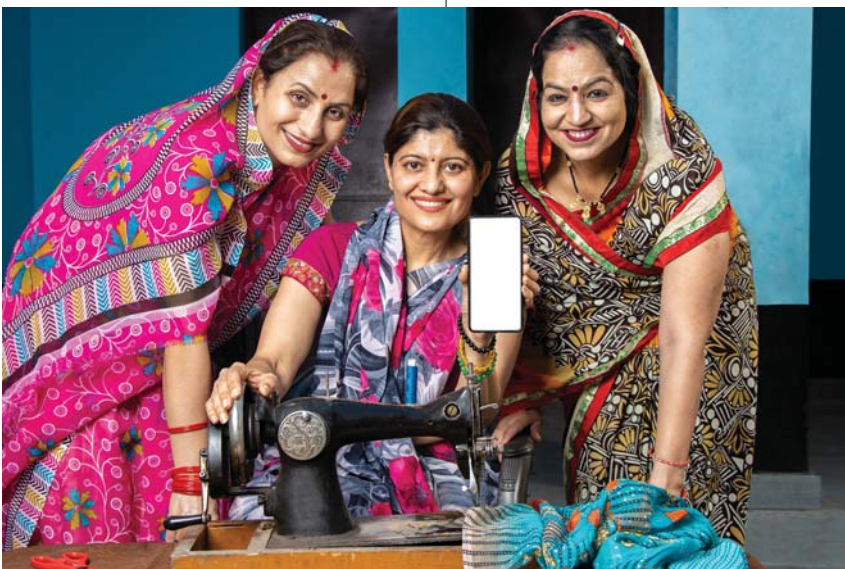
Women Using AI for Data & Operations

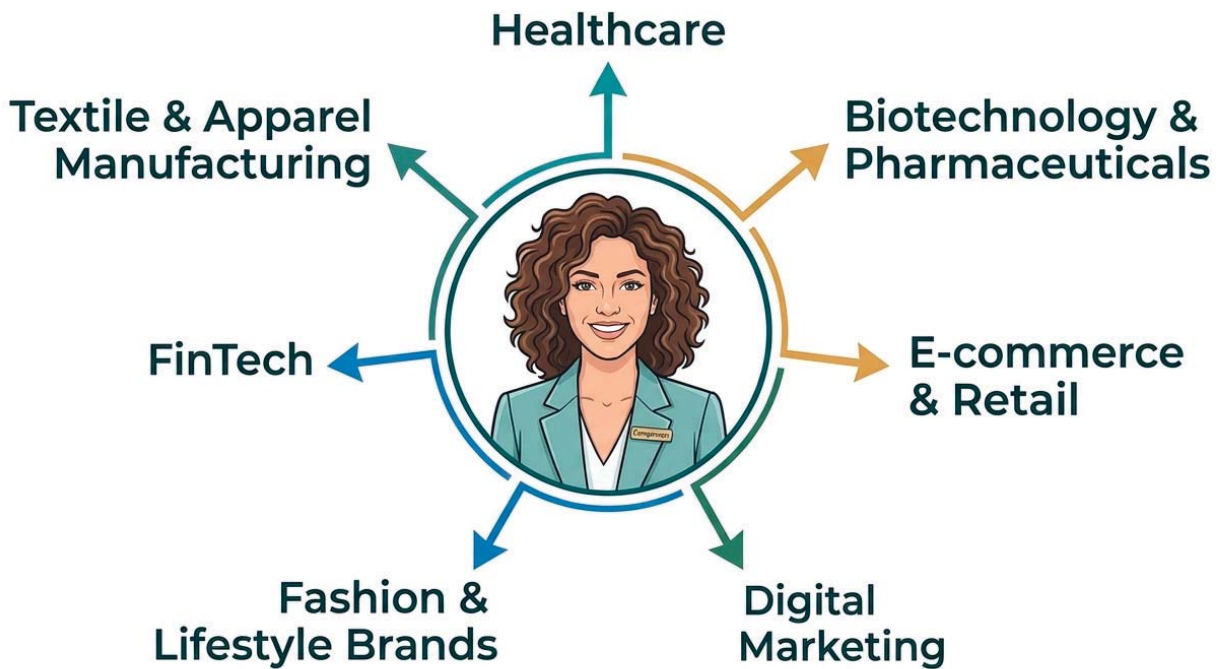
Data management and analytics are another area where women entrepreneurs are enabling small businesses to leverage AI. **Ms. Prukalpa Sankar** co-founded **Atlan**, an AI-powered platform that helps organizations organize and manage large volumes of data. Many MSMEs store information across multiple tools and spreadsheets, making analysis

difficult. Atlan centralizes datasets and makes them searchable through AI-driven catalogues. Companies using such platforms have reported up to 80–90% faster data discovery, enabling faster decision-making. The platform is used globally by organizations including Unilever and Cisco.

Similarly, **Ms. Bindu Reddy** founded **Abacus.AI** to make AI development accessible for businesses. The platform provides automated tools for predictive analytics, recommendation systems and demand forecasting. Small businesses often lack the technical expertise required to build AI models. By simplifying AI development, Abacus.AI allows MSMEs to deploy machine learning solutions more quickly. Companies using automated machine learning platforms can reduce development time by 50–60%, enabling faster adoption of AI technologies.

Operational efficiency is another challenge for small businesses, and entrepreneurs like **Ms. Neha Chandra** are addressing it through platforms such as **Tracker Suite**. The AI-enabled enterprise management system integrates sales, inventory and financial





data into a single dashboard. MSMEs using such AI-driven ERP systems have reported 20–30% improvements in operational efficiency, as real-time analytics helps business owners make faster decisions.

Another entrepreneur helping businesses adopt AI technologies is **Ms. Meenakshi Vashist** through her firm, **TekUncorked**. The company provides AI consulting and automation tools that help MSMEs implement predictive analytics and workflow automation. Businesses adopting such automation technologies often see productivity improvements of 30–40%, as repetitive tasks are streamlined through AI.

Women Advancing AI in Research & Healthcare

In the research and consulting sector, **Ms. Pranjali Awasthi** developed **Delv.AI**, an AI research assistant that analyzes large documents and extracts insights automatically. Consulting firms and analysts often spend hours reviewing research reports and datasets. Delv.AI speeds up this process using natural language processing. AI-powered research tools can reduce

This progress exists alongside a structural gap, yet women entrepreneurs are leveraging AI to build scalable solutions and reshape MSME growth.

manual analysis time by up to 60–70%, enabling small teams to make faster strategic decisions.

Finally, in the healthcare sector, **Ms. Geetha Manjunath** founded **NIRAMAI Health Analytix**, which developed an AI-powered thermal imaging system for early disease detection. Many small hospitals and diagnostic clinics cannot afford expensive imaging equipment. NIRAMAI analyzes thermal patterns

to detect abnormalities without requiring costly machines. The technology has been deployed in hospitals and screening programs across India and internationally, enabling healthcare MSMEs to provide affordable diagnostic services.

Empowering Tomorrow's MSMEs

Together, these women entrepreneurs demonstrate how AI innovation is reshaping the MSME ecosystem. By addressing challenges in retail, marketing, operations and healthcare, their technologies are helping small businesses reduce costs, improve efficiency and expand their digital capabilities. As India's digital economy continues to grow, supporting women-led AI startups will be essential not only for encouraging gender diversity in technology but also for strengthening the overall MSME sector and driving inclusive innovation. These trailblazers are not just building tools, but they're powering a more equitable, efficient future for India's economic backbone. **bwise**

From Looms to Global Rooms: The Journey of Uttar Pradesh's ODOP Crafts

Can tradition be the new engine of growth? Uttar Pradesh's ODOP shows how local crafts are weaving their way into global markets.

Across the districts of Uttar Pradesh, tradition lives not in monuments, but in the hands of its people. Passed down through generations, local crafts and skills continue to shape the identity of towns and communities, quietly sustaining livelihoods and preserving cultural heritage. In Bhadohi, it takes the form of carpets; in Lucknow, the elegance of Chikankari embroidery; and in Varanasi, the timeless beauty of Banarasi Silk Sarees. These traditions, often rooted in history, are more than just occupations - they are stories of resilience, creativity, and pride.

For artisans like Rafiq Ansari, a carpet weaver from Bhadohi, this tradition is more than a source of income - it is a legacy passed down through generations. His family has been weaving carpets for decades, preserving skills that require patience, precision, and years of experience. Yet, like many traditional craftsmen across India, artisans such as Rafiq once worried that their work might slowly lose relevance in a market increasingly dominated by mass-produced goods.

This raises an important question: what if the future of economic growth lies hidden in the traditions of small towns? What if the crafts practiced quietly for generations in India's districts could become engines of development, employment, and global trade?

In recent years, this idea has begun to take shape through the One District One Product (ODOP) initiative launched by the Government of Uttar Pradesh in 2018. Built on the simple principle that every district has a unique product that represents its strength, the initiative seeks to promote local industries, support artisans, and connect traditional crafts with modern markets. Today, the programme covers all **75 districts of the state**, identifying **74 unique products** that showcase the diverse heritage and economic potential of Uttar Pradesh.



By strengthening skills, improving market access, and encouraging entrepreneurship, the initiative is gradually transforming traditional crafts into drivers of local development. In doing so, it is not only preserving heritage but also creating new opportunities for artisans, small businesses, and communities across the state.

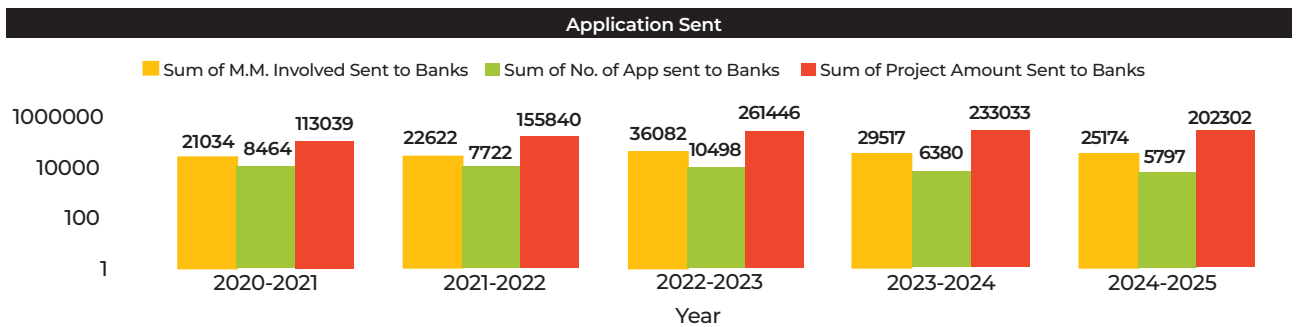
This transformation is also visible in the state's export performance.

Equally significant has been the programme's contribution to exports.

The total exports of Uttar Pradesh have grown from around ₹88,000 crore in 2017 to nearly ₹1.86 lakh crore in 2024. Products associated with ODOP have played a major role in this growth. The export value of these products has increased from about ₹58,000 crore in 2017 to nearly ₹93,000 crore in 2024, meaning that ODOP-related sectors now contribute a substantial share of the state's exports.

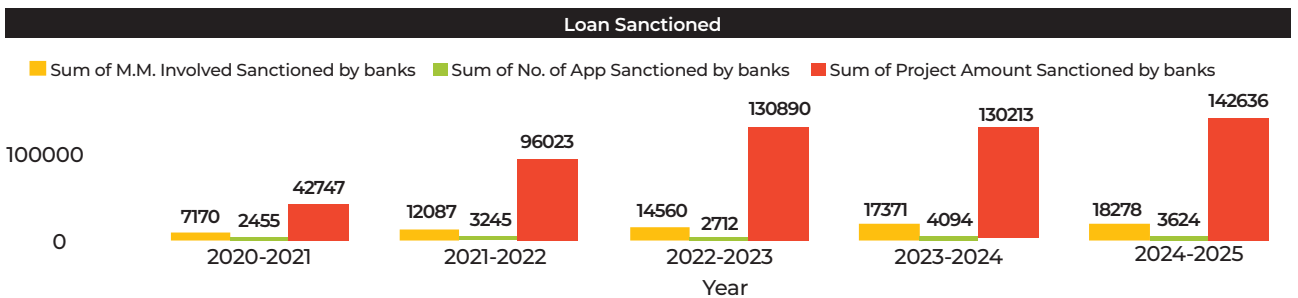
A State of Many Traditions

Uttar Pradesh is one of India's most culturally diverse states. Its districts



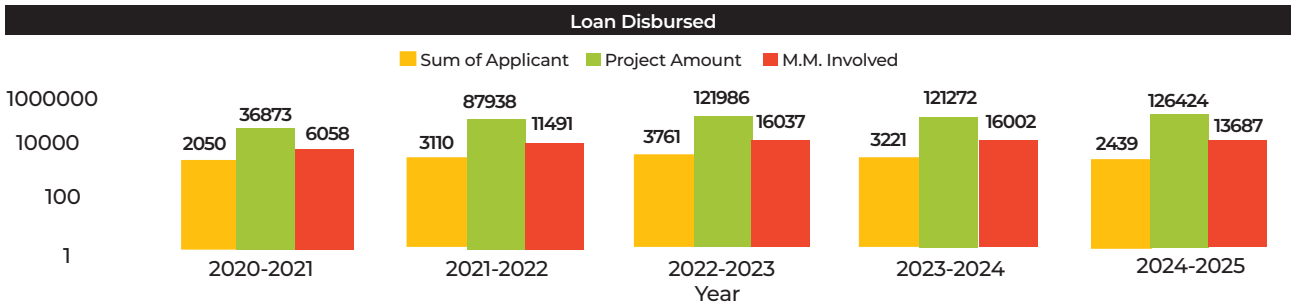
Source: ODOP Dashboard

Applications and project amounts sent to banks increased steadily till 2022-23, indicating rising demand for financial support. After this peak, there is a slight decline, suggesting stabilisation in new applications. Overall, the trend reflects strong initial uptake of the scheme.



Source: ODOP Dashboard

Loan sanctions show a consistent upward trend, with increasing project amounts approved by banks each year. This indicates growing confidence of financial institutions in the applicants. The steady rise highlights improved credit flow under the scheme.



Source: ODOP Dashboard

Loan disbursement values continue to grow over time, even though the number of beneficiaries stabilises slightly after 2022-23. This suggests a shift towards higher-value loans. Overall, it reflects effective implementation and deeper financial support.



are known for distinctive products shaped by history, geography, and community traditions. The ODOP programme recognises these local strengths and gives them a platform.

For instance, **Lucknow** is famous for delicate **Chikankari** embroidery, a centuries-old craft known for its intricate hand stitching on fine fabrics. In **Varanasi**, master weavers create luxurious **Banarasi Silk Sarees**, admired across the world for their rich zari work. Meanwhile, **Moradabad** has earned the title of “Brass City” because of its globally exported brass handicrafts, and **Kannauj** preserves India’s ancient tradition of natural perfume making.

Each of these districts carries a unique identity. ODOP simply amplifies it.

Instead of pushing every region toward the same type of industrial development, the programme focuses on what each district already does best. This approach ensures that local skills are not



The combination of tradition and technology is powerful.

lost but rather turned into engines of economic growth.

Transforming Local Talent into Opportunity

Before the ODOP initiative, many artisans struggled with limited market access, outdated tools, and lack of financial support. Products were often sold through middlemen, leaving artisans with minimal profit despite their skill and hard work.

ODOP aims to address these challenges through a range of measures. These include financial assistance, skill development training, improved packaging and branding, easier access to credit, and participation in national and international trade fairs.

In districts like Bhadohi, carpet makers have received support for modern designs and improved marketing

strategies. Similarly, chikankari artisans in Lucknow are being connected with e-commerce platforms, enabling them to reach customers beyond traditional markets.

The initiative also promotes product branding. When consumers buy a Banarasi saree or Moradabad brassware today, they are not just purchasing a product but they are buying a piece of heritage.

A Boost for Rural Economies

One of the most significant impacts of ODOP lies in its ability to generate employment at the local level. Many of these traditional industries are labour-intensive, meaning they provide livelihoods to thousands of families within a single district.

By strengthening these industries, the programme helps reduce migration



The craft is no longer just about survival. It is about opportunity.

from rural areas to big cities. Young people who once left their villages in search of work are now finding opportunities closer to home.

Take the example of Varanasi’s silk industry. Many young artisans who earlier considered leaving the weaving profession are now returning to their looms as demand for authentic Banarasi sarees rises through government promotion and international exposure.

In this way, ODOP not only preserves heritage but also ensures that traditional knowledge is passed on to future generations.

Connecting Tradition with Modern Markets

Another important dimension of ODOP is its focus on modern marketing tools. In today’s digital economy, visibility is everything. Recognising this, the initiative encourages artisans and entrepreneurs to use online platforms, digital payments, and social media for promotion.

Exhibitions, buyer-seller meets, and export promotion activities have also helped district-level products reach global markets.

This combination of tradition and technology is powerful. It allows centuries-old crafts to remain relevant in a fast-changing world.

More Than an Economic Programme

What makes ODOP unique is that it is not just an economic policy but it is also a cultural movement. Each product represents the identity of a district and the pride of the people who create it.

When someone buys chikankari from Lucknow or a brass lamp from Moradabad, they are supporting a network of artisans, craftsmen, designers, and small entrepreneurs. They are helping sustain livelihoods while preserving India’s rich cultural heritage.

The initiative also strengthens the broader vision of inclusive development by ensuring that growth reaches smaller towns and rural communities.



A Future Woven with Possibilities

Back in Bhadohi, as Rafiq Ansari finishes the final knots on his carpet, he reflects on how far things have come. His son, who once wanted to pursue a different career, has recently started learning the craft. But this time, he approaches it with a different mindset—combining traditional weaving with modern design ideas.

For families like Rafiq’s, the craft is no longer just about survival. It is about opportunity.

The story of ODOP in Uttar Pradesh shows how powerful local identities can be when given the right support. By recognising the unique strengths of each district, the initiative transforms tradition into a driver of development.

In a world where uniformity often replaces individuality, the One District One Product programme reminds us that sometimes the best path forward lies in celebrating what makes each place special.

And in the colourful threads of a Bhadohi carpet, the delicate stitches of a Lucknow kurta, or the shimmer of a Banarasi saree, the future of Uttar Pradesh is quietly being woven—one district, one product, and one story at a time. **bwise**

India's Green Dream vs. The Micro Reality

India's green policy revolution is printing certificates, building portals and publishing index reports. But at the factory floor, the workshop, and the roadside stall, the revolution hasn't arrived. Here is the story nobody in policy circles wants to tell.

Picture this: A typical micro manufacturing unit operating in a small industrial cluster somewhere in India. The owner employs fewer than ten workers and runs a handful of machines that operate six days a week. He has never heard of ISO 14001. He has never read a Quality Control Order. The term ESG means little to him. Yet he pays his taxes, manages production schedules, and tries to keep the business afloat in a highly competitive environment. Waste from cutting oils and other processes is often discharged into nearby drains not out of malice, but because alternatives are unclear, unaffordable, or simply outside the realm of everyday business awareness. In many cases, such practices become habitual over time, reinforced by the absence of guidance, incentives, or practical support.

Multiply this reality across millions of similar micro units, and the true gap begins to emerge not in policy design, but in the ability of those policies to reach the very enterprises they are meant to transform.

This situation is not the exception; it is the norm. It represents the beating, overworked, carbon-emitting core of the Indian economy: the micro enterprise. And it explains why India's much-celebrated green policy architecture can often resemble an impressive structure standing in the distance, but with no clear road leading small businesses toward it.

This Should Keep Us Awake

According to a report by the NITI Aayog titled - Roadmap for Green Transition of MSMEs January 2026, which talks about the green transition

“The aspiration is to make BIS standards India's quality passport to the world. But for that passport to mean something, every business from a metal workshop in Rajkot to a textile unit in Tirupur must know it exists.”

- **Shri Pramod Kumar Tiwar**,
Director General, Bureau of
Indian Standards

of MSMEs, India's small business sector generated **around 135 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent emissions in 2022**, largely driven by energy-intensive industries such as textiles, steel rerolling, paper, and foundries.

Coal and electricity together account for **about 54% of the energy used by MSMEs**, contributing to **nearly 90% of their total emissions**. Overall, MSMEs are estimated to contribute **10-15% of India's industrial emissions**, highlighting their critical role in the country's decarbonisation journey. These numbers underline why the government is increasingly focusing on cleaner energy, efficiency upgrades, and green technologies for enterprise clusters.

Now place these two realities side by side, and the disconnect becomes impossible to ignore, the backbone of the economy operates almost entirely outside the very standards designed to guide and regulate it.

India has over **23,600 published Indian Standards (IS) by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS)**. Of these, thousands are directly relevant to manufacturing quality, environmental safety, and product compliance. Yet a 2023 study by the Quality Council of India found that voluntary BIS adoption among micro enterprises is below 3%. Three percent. That is not a policy gap. That is a policy canyon.

BIS Standards seems World-Class on Paper but Invisible on the Floor

Here is a question rarely asked in policy seminars: Are Indian BIS standards actually at par with global benchmarks like ISO, IEC, or ASTM? The honest answer is **increasingly yes, but with**



a dangerous lag, but then again this means that it's a no. BIS has been actively harmonising its standards with ISO and IEC norms. ISO standards are designed so that similar systems follow similar structures. For example, ISO 14001 helps businesses manage their environmental impact, while ISO 50001 helps them manage energy use. Both follow a similar approach, making them easier to understand and implement together. But harmonisation on paper is meaningless if adoption on the ground is near-zero.

The government knows this. Which is why it introduced **Quality Control Orders (QCOs)** which are mandatory compliance notifications that make specific BIS standards compulsory for certain products and sectors. As of early 2026, over 700 product categories are under QCOs, covering everything from steel pipes to solar panels to toys and helmets. QCOs, in theory, are the teeth that voluntary compliance lacks.

But here is the bitter truth from the factory floor that most **MSMEs treated QCO compliance as a one-time paperwork exercise**. A manufacturer in Agra making footwear says it bluntly: "We got the BIS licence because we had to. We display the ISI mark. But our process hasn't changed by a single step." This is box-ticking dressed as compliance and it is endemic.

The Mirror Nobody sees as The MSME Readiness Index

In 2025, a quiet but important development occurred: India's **Green Pulse Report** published the **Sustainability Perception Index** gesturing a framework mapping in terms of how Indian businesses perceive, understand, and act on sustainability. The finding was uncomfortably clear that awareness of sustainability tools among micro enterprises is not just low, it is effectively non-existent, **which means that the mirror is there but the door is closed for that mirror room or the person standing in the room cannot see the mirror, which means that most micro enterprise owners do not know that there exists an MSME**



This is the paradox of India's green MSME story in 2026 that the tools exist. The indices are built. The portals are live. The standards are published.

Readiness Index which act as a diagnostic tool that tells a business owner exactly where they stand on sustainability preparedness indicating energy consumption benchmarks, waste management gaps, water usage efficiency, and ESG self-certification eligibility. Platforms like **Udyam+**, **SIDBI's sustainability portal**, and emerging private platforms now host readiness assessments that a business owner can complete in under 20 minutes on a mobile phone for free. Yet the average micro enterprise owner has never heard of them.

This is the paradox of India's green MSME story in 2026 that the tools exist. The indices are built. The portals are live. The standards are published. And yet, in Ramesh Gupta's workshop in Ludhiana, none of it has arrived.

Only Fines Work? Or Is There Another Way?

The uncomfortable policy question is this: do Indian MSMEs adopt sustainability practices only when faced with a fine, a cancelled licence, or a blocked export shipment? The evidence, regrettably, suggests yes for most. But the more interesting question is whether there is a pull model that works without the stick.

The answer, from the ground, is yes but it requires reframing the

conversation entirely. Consider Vikram Textiles in Surat, a small weaving unit with 18 workers. They began tracking their electricity consumption not because of any regulation, but because their buyer caters to a mid-sized European fashion brand which included an energy audit checklist in their supplier onboarding form. Within eight months, Vikram Textiles had reduced their per-metre energy cost by 14%, saving ₹2.3 lakh annually.

The green practice paid for itself. No fine needed.

This is the **ripple effect** model, and it is India's most underused green tool. When large anchor companies mandate sustainability disclosures from their MSME supply chains, when banks like SIDBI and SBI link better interest rates to a higher MSME Readiness Index score, when government procurement favours ISI-certified and ESG self-certified suppliers then the incentive architecture changes without a single penalty being issued.

What Must Actually Change: The Micro-First Manifesto

The missing conversation in India's MSME sustainability debate is that quantity and quality are not opposites rather they are **co-dependent**. If around 78.8 million micro enterprises each reduce their energy waste by even 5%, the aggregate environmental impact dwarfs any single large company ESG initiative. This is not a small business problem. This is India's largest climate lever, and it is sitting unused.

Five things need to happen simultaneously and none of them involve writing another policy document. First, **BIS must create a Micro Enterprise Standards Pathway** which must be simplified, illustrated, vernacular-language compliance guides for the top 50 product categories, distributed through Common Service Centres and industry associations and not government websites. Second, **the MSME Readiness Index must be**

“MSMEs don't resist sustainability. They resist complexity and cost. Show them a rupee saved, not a rule followed and watch the culture change overnight.”

- Dr. Saurabh Garg,
CEO, Udyam Registration Portal,
Ministry of MSME



bundled into Udyam registration renewal, every enterprise that files a renewal answers a ten-question sustainability self-assessment. This alone would generate India's first real database of micro-enterprise environmental performance. Third, **ESG self-certification for MSMEs must carry a financial reward**, not just a badge such as a 0.25% reduction in working capital loan rates, available through SIDBI and scheduled commercial banks, would move millions. Fourth, **large corporations buying from MSME suppliers must disclose their supply chain sustainability score** in their annual BRSR filings thus creating direct market pressure without regulatory enforcement. And fifth perhaps most importantly **India's domestic market must stop tolerating non-compliant goods**. We argue fiercely about export quality, but the Indian consumer buying an uncertified electrical fitting or a substandard helmet is equally at risk. QCOs are meaningless if market surveillance is absent.

The Ripple Effect: From One Workshop to a Movement Echoing the opening scene directly.

The cutting-oil waste still finds its way to the drain behind his shed not out of malice, but out of habit, and habit dies only when something disrupts it.



That disruption won't come from a government circular. It will come from his industry association WhatsApp group, where someone shares that a larger buyer is now asking for a sustainability checklist. It will come the day his neighbour quietly mentions getting a lower interest rate on a machinery loan after filling out some "readiness" form. He does pay attention when a larger supplier tells him that buyers are asking for a sustainability checklist. He does notice when his neighbour's unit gets a lower interest rate on a machinery loan after scoring well on some "readiness" form.

The ripple effect of green culture in Indian MSMEs will not start in New Delhi. It will start in that WhatsApp group. It will spread through the woman running a food processing unit in Nashik who learns that a single energy audit saves her ₹40,000 a year. It will travel through a cluster of hosiery manufacturers in Ludhiana who, together, commission a shared effluent treatment plant because SIDBI will co-finance it. It will reach the embroidery artisan in Lucknow who, for the first time, completes a ten-question digital self-assessment on her mobile phone and discovers she already meets four of the five BIS environment criteria which she just never knew.

India's green MSME revolution will not be legislated into existence. It will be demonstrated into existence, one saved rupee, one scanned QR code, one WhatsApp message, one honest conversation at a time. The infrastructure of standards, indices, and portals already exists. What is missing is not policy. What is missing is the last-mile translator who walks into entrepreneur's workshop and says: "Bhai, let me show you something that will save you money and the planet-both." **bwise**

AI Pe Nazar, Business Pe Control: The New Age MSME Toolkit

From spy tech to smart business, AI is turning MSMEs into data-driven powerhouses.



Intelligence gathering was once a world of secret agents, hidden microphones, and coded messages passed across borders. Today, the theatre of intelligence has moved into the digital realm. Algorithms scan vast streams of data, surveillance software watches in real time, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) analyses patterns that human analysts might never detect. From tracking cyber threats to mapping criminal networks, governments across the world are investing heavily in AI-driven surveillance systems.

Yet this transformation is not limited to intelligence agencies alone. It is also creating an innovation economy where startups, MSMEs, and technology entrepreneurs are adapting AI tools, originally built for surveillance and intelligence- to monitor risks, analyse markets, and manage operations more intelligently. In the age of AI, intelligence is no longer the domain of spies alone; it is increasingly becoming a business capability that entrepreneurs can build through data, algorithms, and smart technology.

When surveillance became intelligent?

Modern societies generate enormous amounts of data, from smartphones and satellites to cameras and digital networks, making manual analysis impossible. AI has changed this reality. Machine learning systems can rapidly process vast datasets, detect hidden patterns & flag suspicious behaviour in real time.

As a result, intelligence operations are increasingly evolving into data-driven systems, where AI transforms raw data into actionable insights for faster and more precise decision-making.

The Israeli Example

One of the most widely discussed examples of modern digital surveillance

In India's innovation rush, intelligence isn't secret; it's your startup's secret sauce.

comes from Israel's cyber-intelligence ecosystem. The spyware Pegasus, developed by the Israeli firm NSO Group, is designed to covertly infiltrate smartphones and access messages, call logs, location data, and other sensitive information. Security researchers report that Pegasus can be deployed through "zero-click" exploits, allowing devices to be compromised without the user opening a link or message. Investigations have found the software used in multiple countries to monitor journalists, political figures, activists, and criminal suspects, sparking global debates on privacy and digital governance.

While governments often justify such technologies as tools to combat terrorism and organised crime, their use has triggered global debates on privacy, digital rights, and cyber governance.

Turning Intelligence into Opportunity

Large corporations often build complex AI systems internally, but smaller businesses have a key advantage: agility. Startups and MSMEs can adapt

ideas from intelligence technologies and convert them into simple tools that solve every day operational problems.

■ AI Shop Security

AI-enabled cameras can detect suspicious behaviour, alert store owners in real time, and analyse customer movement, allowing startups to build affordable security platforms for small retailers.

■ Warehouse Monitoring

AI tools can track inventory movement and flag unusual activity, helping MSME warehouses reduce losses and improve stock management.

■ Factory Safety Intelligence

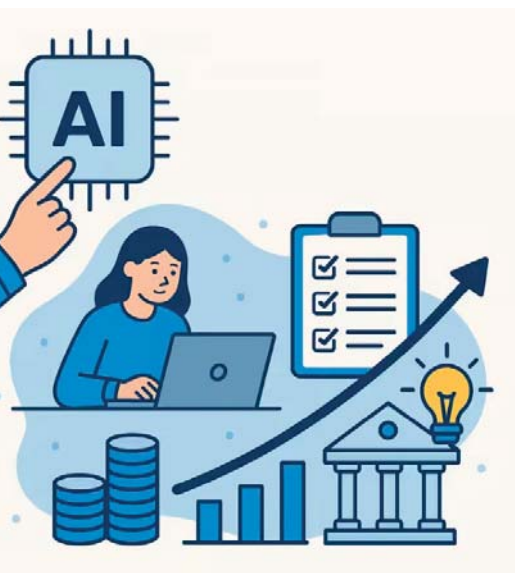
Video analytics systems can detect safety violations such as workers entering restricted zones or missing protective gear, helping small manufacturers improve compliance and reduce accidents.

■ Logistics and Fleet Monitoring

AI platforms can analyse vehicle movement to detect route deviations, unsafe driving, or delivery delays, creating opportunities for startups in the growing logistics sector.

■ Market and Competitor Intelligence

AI systems can analyse public data such as pricing trends, hiring patterns, and product launches to help MSMEs track competitors and identify market opportunities.



As artificial intelligence evolves, a new generation of agentic AI systems is beginning to emerge, tools that can observe information, analyse patterns, and make small decisions automatically.

■ Agricultural Surveillance

AI monitoring systems can detect crop damage, storage theft, or animal intrusion, supporting agri-entrepreneurs and rural supply chains.

Digital Intelligence Platforms

AI surveillance technologies are also expanding into digital environments.

■ Cybersecurity Monitoring

AI-driven tools can continuously monitor networks and detect cyber threats or data breaches, creating opportunities for startups serving banks, fintech firms, and MSMEs.

■ Competitive Intelligence Platforms

AI can scan news, patents, and market data to generate insights about industry trends, enabling MSMEs to make better strategic decisions.

Reports indicate that agentic AI, autonomous software systems capable of analysing data, planning actions, and executing tasks, independently, is rapidly moving from experimentation to mainstream enterprise adoption.

The Indian Story till now

India is rapidly emerging as a major AI innovation hub. The Government of India's IndiaAI Mission, backed by over ₹10,000 crore in investment and large-scale computing infrastructure, aims to support startups and research institutions developing domestic AI technologies. Reports suggest that more than 80% of Indian enterprises are already exploring autonomous "agentic AI" systems, signalling a shift toward intelligent software agents capable of analysing data, monitoring risks, and assisting decision-making across industries.

According to one of the reports titled "State of Generative AI in Enterprises - India" report (2025), over 80% of Indian organisations are actively exploring the development of autonomous AI agents, signalling a major shift from traditional automation to intelligent systems capable of operating with minimal human supervision. The report also notes that around 50% of companies are prioritising multi-agent workflows,

where several AI agents collaborate to perform complex business tasks.

The same study highlights that about 70% of Indian enterprises are already using generative AI tools for automation, and over 71% are running more than ten AI experiments simultaneously, indicating that AI adoption is rapidly moving from pilot projects to operational deployment.

Another industry assessment titled “Aldea of India: Outlook 2026” report shows that enterprise adoption is steadily scaling. The survey of major organisations found that 47% of companies are already running multiple AI use cases, while around 10% have begun deploying AI solutions across entire business functions rather than isolated projects.

Together, these findings indicate that businesses are moving beyond simple AI tools toward autonomous digital agents that can monitor operations, analyse risks, optimise workflows, and support real-time decision-making. For startups and MSMEs, this shift opens new opportunities-not only to adopt these technologies but also to build specialised AI solutions for sectors such as retail monitoring, logistics intelligence, cybersecurity, and market analytics.

The Future of Intelligence

Globally, the trend is accelerating as well. Technology analysts estimate that one-third of enterprise software applications will include agentic AI capabilities by 2028, and the global



For startups and MSMEs, this shift opens new opportunities-not only to adopt these technologies but also to build specialised AI solutions for sectors such as retail monitoring, logistics intelligence, cybersecurity, and market analytics.

agentic AI market could reach more than \$100 billion by the early 2030s.

As artificial intelligence evolves, a new generation of agentic AI systems is beginning to emerge, tools that can observe information, analyse patterns, and make small decisions automatically. For startups and MSMEs, this technology does not have to be limited to government surveillance. The same capabilities can be used to monitor business risks, track market developments, and identify

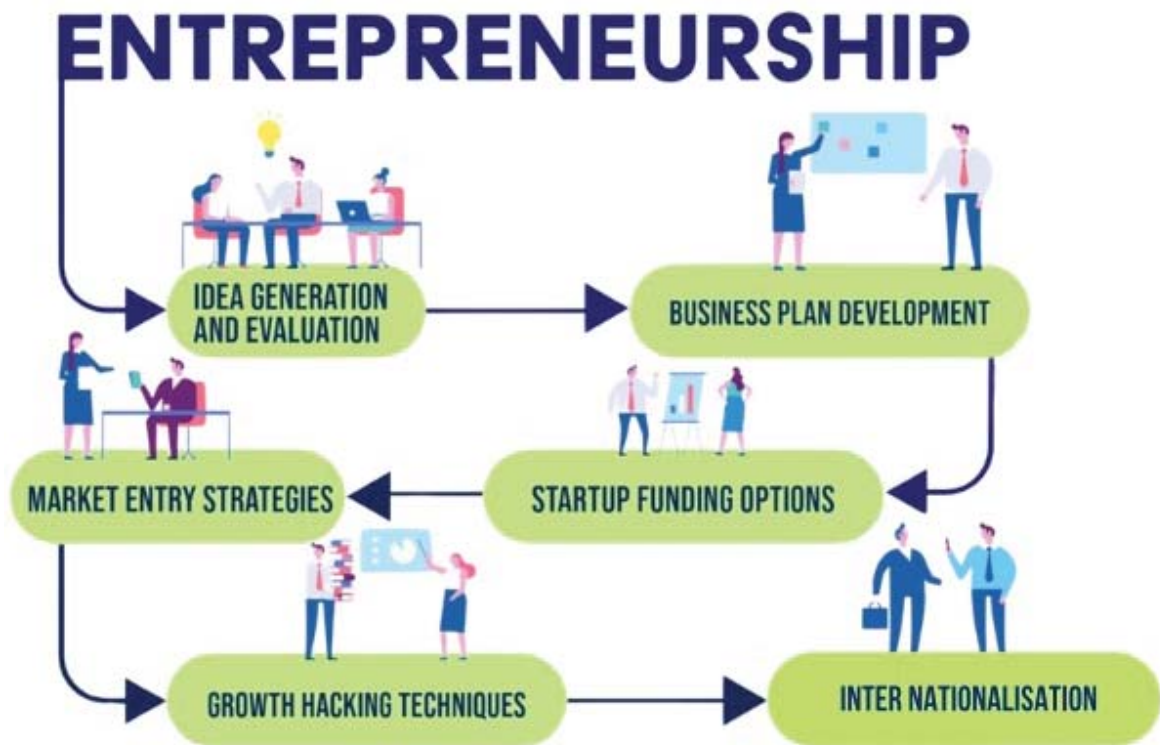
operational inefficiencies. An AI system, for instance, could continuously scan supply chains for disruptions, monitor online marketplaces for counterfeit products, or track sudden shifts in competitor pricing and customer behaviour.

For entrepreneurs, this opens an entirely new category of “business intelligence assistants.” Instead of employing large research or monitoring teams, small firms could rely on AI agents that quietly analyse data in the background and alert owners when something important changes, whether it is a new competitor entering the market, unusual activity in their warehouses, or cyber threats targeting their systems. In this way, technologies originally developed for surveillance and intelligence can evolve into practical tools that help MSMEs make smarter, faster decisions in an increasingly complex digital economy. In India’s innovation rush, intelligence isn’t secret; it’s your startup’s secret sauce. **bwise**



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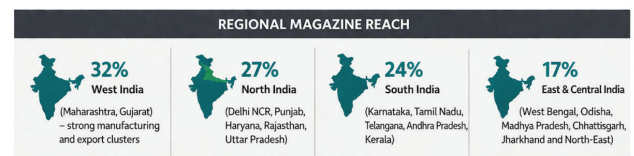
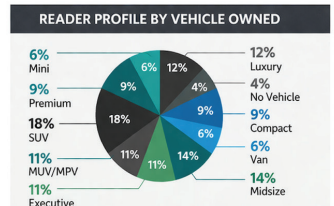
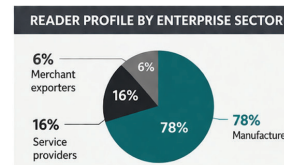
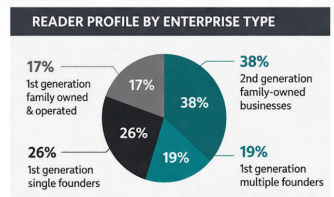
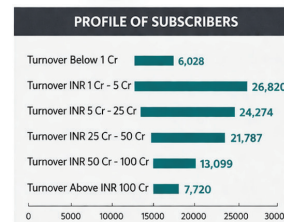


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