VISTAR: India's shift towards a real-time, technology-driven statistical system | Explained

For an economy aspiring to become a developed nation by 2047, the statistical blind spots could translate into costly policy mistakes, misdirected investments and ineffective welfare schemes

Updated - November 07, 2026 02:23 pm IST

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India's statistical requirements have outgrown the conventional survey-based architecture, requiring a more scientific and technological architecture to better capture key performance indicators of economy, even as it should avoid the growing risks of synthetic data.

Seeking to move official data collection beyond periodic surveys and administrative records, the VISTAR or Viksit Bharat Initiative for Statistical Transformation, Analytics & Research is a major overhaul of India's official statistical system at the centre and state levels using interoperable datasets, bridging data gaps and generating timely, reliable socioeconomic indicators for evidence-based policymaking.

Essential upgrades: On upgrade to India's statistical databases

An economy as large and diverse as India needs timely, comparable and sufficiently granular data and it is a challenge for the policymakers, who view that the success of a statistical system will depend as much on data quality, institutional coordination and statistical independence as on artificial intelligence (AI).

For an economy aspiring to become a developed nation by 2047, the statistical blind spots could translate into costly policy mistakes, misdirected investments and ineffective welfare schemes.

Approved by the Union Cabinet for 2026-27 to 2030-31, VISTAR, with an outlay of ₹4,370 crore, is designed to create a dynamic, real-time and future-ready statistical system that seeks to ensure greater data granularity, interoperability and AI readiness.

How is VISTAR different?

India's statistical system has traditionally relied more on periodic sample surveys, census and other records. The National Statistical Office, the Central Statistical Organisation and the National Sample Survey Organisation have played roles in generating national accounts, employment, consumption, industrial production and other economic indicators.

Although these entities provided a substantial foundation, limitations were in capturing the rapid structural changes in the economy.

India's National Statistical Commission itself had identified credibility, timeliness, data gaps and coordination as systemic weaknesses.

Information asymmetry within periodic survey rounds and fragmentation of conventional administrative databases across the ministries and states stymied their efficacy. The increasing importance of services, digital businesses and the informal economy has further complicated measurement.

Displaying a tectonic shift, VISTAR combines conventional surveys with alternative data sources, including mobile-phone, scanner and e-commerce data. AI and machine learning will increasingly support data processing, validation and analysis.

Highlighting the scale of expansion, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation or MoSPI proposes conducting 59 surveys during the 16th Finance Commission cycle, against 43 major surveys in the previous cycle.

Transformation pillars

Alternative dataset will supplement conventional surveys, potentially reducing respondent burden and improving the frequency of information. It is proposed to be done through expanded surveys, end-to-end digitalisation, methodological research and the integration of AI and machine learning.

Addressing the uneven statistical capabilities across states and Union Territories, VISTAR mandates financial and technical assistance to be linked to measurable outcomes, which in turn, is aimed at improving district-level estimates of employment, household consumption and unincorporated enterprises through surveys such as PLFS, HCES and ASUSE.

It will also support State and district GDP (gross domestic product) estimates and the state-level industrial production indices.

The proposed eighth Economic Census will cover non-farm establishments and their workers down to the Gram Panchayat and municipal ward levels.

It will provide the foundation for a National Statistical Business Register (SBR), enabling better identification of enterprises, particularly in the unorganised sector, potentially improving the estimates of contribution of informal economy to GDP.

Under the support for statistical strengthening (SSS) component, the Centre will provide funds to help transform the statistical capabilities of States and Union Territories via a redesigned, deliverable-linked framework.

Value addition

VISTAR's major contribution will be a radical transformation of measuring the economy through a more continuous and interconnected statistical architecture to give an evidence based understanding of India's economic realities.

District-level employment and consumption data help identify the regional statistcal disparities that the national averages conceal.

Comprehensive enterprise data helps in making robust credit policies, infrastructure planning and welfare targeting.

Capturing the contribution of services and the informal businesses, which the conventional industrial indicators often miss, gives the policymakers a broader canvass while drawing the sketch of economic policies.

Interoperability will greatly help be investors, researchers and businesses, benefiting from harmonised definitions, data cataloguing, machine-readable formats and common sharing protocols, which largely avoid duplication and inconsistency among sovereign databases.

VISTAR builds on earlier digital reforms than replacing them and it consolidates the computer-assisted surveys, e-SIGMA platform and existing databases, which have already improved data quality and collection, into a broader institutional framework.

Implementation challenges

Mobile-phone records, e-commerce transactions and scanner data may asymmetrically capture digitally connected consumers and formal businesses.

Selection bias and distortion in estimates could creep in as alternative data need not necessarily be representative, thus requiring appropriate statistical adjustments.

Integrating databases across Ministries and States requires common definitions, consistent classifications and reliable data-sharing models. Variance in state-level infrastructure, manpower and technical capabilities could undermine the comparability.

Apprehensions are on privacy, confidentiality and cybersecurity due to greater dependence on digital information; hence statistical agencies must ensure identity protection for individuals and enterprises.

Independent validation becomes crucial due to the possible AI-generated errors, algorithmic bias and inadequate transparency in automated processing.

Statistical algorithms, mathematical models or AI/ML techniques -- which generate synthetic data -- may reproduce the patterns, relationships and distributions in actual datasets without necessarily reproducing original observations.

The Centre's funding must translate into trained statisticians, robust field infrastructure and institutional accountability, even as preserving the professional independence of statistical agencies is also important.

Testing ground

VISTAR's efficiency will be tested against how accurately it reflects the economic and social realities, implying that the outcomes produced can be trusted and employed with confidence so that it becomes the bedrock of Viksit Bharat's ambitions.

Technological sophistication should not mask statistical authenticity. VISTAR should bring official estimates closer to reality, than making reality appear closer to the estimates.

Published - November 06, 2026 11:06 am IST

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