

AI as an Enabler, Not a Replacement: SOM Conference at IIM Nagpur Highlights AI Role in Research and Railways

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Artificial Intelligence can significantly improve efficiency and decision-making, but it cannot replace human learning, judgment, ethics, or accountability—this clear and common message emerged from key discussions on research and Indian Railways at the 28th Annual International Conference of the Society of Operations Management (SOM), held at Indian Institute of Management Nagpur between December 19 and 21.

The conference brought together senior academicians, industry leaders, and policymakers to examine how AI should be responsibly integrated into both knowledge creation and public systems.



The Directors' Panel was the central highlight of the conference. Moderated by Dr. Bhimaraya Metri, Director, IIM Nagpur, the panel discussed the impact of AI on research and academic publications. Prof. Manoj Kumar Tiwari, Director, IIM Mumbai, joined the session virtually, while Dr. Varun Nagaraj, Dean, SPJIMR Mumbai; Prof. N. Ravichandran, former Director, IIM Indore; and Prof. T. R. Parasuraman, former President and Whole-time Director, Toyota Industries, participated in person.

Panelists agreed that AI is a useful tool for speeding up tasks such as literature searches, references, and structuring content, but the core process of learning and thinking cannot be bypassed. Dr. Varun Nagaraj observed that research begins with learning and warned that

overdependence on AI could affect judgment abilities, especially among young researchers. Prof. Manoj Kumar Tiwari stressed that while AI can enhance speed and efficiency, human accountability in research remains irreplaceable.

Prof. N. Ravichandran highlighted the importance of deep reading, noting that not everything published qualifies as research and that immersive reading leads to deeper understanding. Prof. T. R. Parasuraman pointed out that AI may influence publications more than research itself, emphasizing the need to uphold academic honesty and ethics. He also noted that industry stands to gain the most from AI and encouraged researchers to use it as a powerful assistant rather than a substitute.

The formal inauguration of the conference was held earlier on Saturday. Prof. Bhimaraya Metri, Prof. Rahul Marathe, President of the Society of Operations Management, and Dr Harsh Nupur Joshi, Chief Operating Officer, ONGC Green, addressed the gathering. Prof. Alok Kumar Singh, Dean – Executive Education Programmes, delivered the introductory remarks, while Prof. Nikunj Kumar Jain, Chairperson, Executive MBA in Energy Management, proposed the vote of thanks. Arunangshu Sarkar, Director (Strategy & Corporate Affairs), ONGC Ltd shared his message through a video address.



A separate panel on Indian Railways reinforced a similar message on AI's role in public systems. Moderated by Prof. Ajinkya Tanksale, the discussion featured Vinayak Garg, Divisional Railway Manager, Central Railway; Dr. Gyanesh Tripathi, General Manager (Industrial Computing), CRIS; and Rahul Pachori, Director, Ministry of Education, Government of India.

Speakers clarified that AI can support areas such as crew management, reservation systems, and operational planning, but it will not replace loco pilots in the foreseeable future.

With technical sessions, paper presentations, and workshops continuing on Sunday, the conference concluded with a strong consensus: AI must be used to strengthen human capabilities—both in research and in essential public services like railways—while keeping people firmly at the centre of decision-making.

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