

From Local Soil to Global Silicon - How India's Agritech AI Models Sarlaben and Mahavistaar are Redefining Scalable Intelligence

Nilkantha Mondal*

*M.Sc. (Ag.) Scholar, Department of Agricultural Economics,
Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology (OUAT), Odisha, India.*

Corresponding Author

Nilkantha Mondal

Email: mediconilu29@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

As the global discourse on Artificial Intelligence (AI) matures beyond Large Language Models (LLMs) confined to digital abstraction, a paradigm shift is emerging from the Global South. This paper examines two pioneering AI deployments in India: "AI Sarlaben" in Gujrat and "Mahavistaar" in Maharashtra. I argue that generative AI inverts the cost structure of farm extension: the marginal cost of one more personalised approach zero, while fixed costs migrate to three scarce assets-verified data, institutional trust and language infrastructure. I distinguish two archetypes: a Library model (Mahavistaar), which retrieves from vetted public knowledge and cites its sources, and a Ledger model (Sarlaben), which reasons over transaction- level records generated by a cooperative market institution. This distinction determines what can be replicated elsewhere: architecture, guardrails and voice interfaces travel well: ledgers and trust do not. This article explores the architectural efficiency, historical data leverage, and socio-economic integration that make these indigenous AI models masterclasses in solving real-world," last-mile" bottlenecks.

INTRODUCTION:

Modern artificial intelligence has largely been characterized by generalized foundation models. However true frontier of AI scaling lies not in broad linguistic capabilities but in localized, high-utility deployment. Mahavistaar-AI, launched by the Government of Maharashtra on 21st May, 2025, offers voice and text advisory on weather, crops, prices and schemes in local languages. Sarlaben, unveiled at Anand on 11th February 2026, offers individual-level guidance to members of the Amul dairy cooperative on cattle health, feeding, breeding and subsidies. Both were built with the EkStep Foundation and technology partners, and both have drawn international attention. The AI4Agri 2026 conference in Mumbai was reported to have positioned Maharashtra as a living laboratory for AI in agriculture, and open Agri Net network behind Mahavistaar reports pilots in Ethiopia and exploratory engagements in Rwanda, Nigeria and Kenya.

This article makes three contributions. First, it gives an economic interpretation of why generative AI changes the structure of advisory costs. Second, it proposes a typology -the library and the ledger -that explains why the two systems succeed for different reasons and would travel differently. Third, it derives testable propositions and an evaluation design, because the present public record consists largely of reach statistics rather than outcomes.

TWO SYSTEMS, ONE STACK:

Mahavistaar-AI: The platform operates as an open network of the Maharashtra Department of Agriculture within the national VISTAAR framework of the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, and was designed on digital public infrastructure (DPI) principles. Farmers ask questions by voice or text; the system translates where needed, searches trusted

sources such as research institutes and the Department of Agriculture, and returns a short answer tailored to the farmer's location with the source identified. Language processing relies on open-source Indic models and a vetted glossary. The state's Maha Agri-AI policy 2025-2029 commits an initial Rs. 500 crores to AI in agriculture, and a second version of the platform was announced ahead of the 2026 kharif season.

Sarlaben: The assistant is integrated with Amul's Automatic Milk Collection System and the Pashudhan livestock platform. Amul's systems reportedly process over two billion milk procurement transactions a year and hold veterinary treatment records for nearly 30 million cattle, about seven million artificial inseminations annually, ISRO-derived fodder data and a five-yearly cattle census. Farmers reach it through the Amul Farmer app, which has passed one million downloads, or by an ordinary phone call, primarily in Gujarati. Its addressable base is 3.6 million milk producers in roughly 18,500 villages.

THE LIBRARY AND THE LEDGER:

The two systems differ in the source of their knowledge, and this difference is central. A library system answers from a curated body of public knowledge conditioned on coarse context: location, crop, season. It's quality depends on curation and on how well it retrieves. A ledger system answers from the individual's own history; this animal's vaccination record, this producer's milk yield, this village's fodder situation. In Bayesian terms, the library supplies a good prior; the ledger supplies a farm-specific posterior (Agarwal *et al.*, 2018).

Hayek (1945) argued that the economic problem is the use of knowledge dispersed among individuals. The ledger captures such

dispersed knowledge, but its origin matters. Amul’s records are not a survey; they are the by-product of a twice-daily market relationship in which the farmer is paid on the recorded quantity and quality. That gives producers a direct incentive for the records to be accurate. I call this data as institutional exhaust: a verified dataset produced as a side-effect of a trusted transaction, at almost no marginal cost to the AI builder. A library must pay explicitly for curation; a ledger inherits it from the market institution. This offers a plausible economic explanation for the reported gap in build time, though a fuller decomposition, including the effect of reused architecture, would require the developers’ cost accounts.

THE US DISCOURSE: WHY SILICON VALLEY IS LOOKING EAST:

The operational success of Sarlaben and Mahavistaar has triggered discourse within US tech circles and policy think tanks. The key attraction is “Scalable Real-World Utility”. Western models are often constrained by the “experiment trap”-high initial capability but low integration into actual blue -collar or agrarian workflows. The Indian models demonstrate how to construct AI that seamlessly fits into the existing workflow of the user, rather than forcing the user to adapt to the technology.

The US aims to replicate this methodology in emerging markets across Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, and potentially within its own rural agricultural belts. The “Agentic AI” approach used by Amul and Maharashtra provides a template for reducing information asymmetry in resource-constrained environments, utilizing a “Data-First, Hybrid-Interface “methodology (Aker, 2010).

SIX TESTABLE PROPOSITIONS:

The framework yields propositions that can be falsified with data that already exists or can be

generated cheaply. They are presented in the following table:

ID	Propositions	Observable implication and test
P1	Cost-curve inversion: At scale, cost per advisory interaction falls by an order of magnitude below conventional extension, and fixed costs dominate.	Activity-based cost accounts for the state and Amul, compare cost per acted-upon recommendation with extension-officer benchmark.
P2	Individuation premium: For comparable decisions, ledger-based advice raises outcomes more per user than library-based advice, conditional on data completeness.	Compare effect sizes across systems; within Sarlaben, heterogeneity by depth of producer record history.
P3	Interface elasticity: Adoption is highly elastic to modality; voice on feature phones raises use among low-literacy and low-connectivity users relative to apps.	Randomised encouragement of voice versus app access; extend the reported jump in daily queries into a controlled design.
P4	Provenance premium: Displaying the source institution raises trust and adoption of recommendations that are costly to verify.	A/B test to citation display; measure uptake of costly practices such as input changes.
P5	Algorithmic cobweb: Synchronised price and crop advisories raise cross-farm correlation in acreage decisions and price volatility in thin markets.	District-level acreage correlation and price variance before and after adoption, against non-adopting districts
P6	Complementarity: Advisory effects are concentrated where complements (credit,	Interaction of adoption with distance to veterinary centres,

inputs, veterinary services, market access) are available.	input shops and mandis.
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WILL IT TRAVEL? A PORTABILITY ANALYSIS:

International interest in this system is well documented. The question for economist is not whether they can be copied but which components can be. The pattern is clear. The library half of the stack is largely software, and travels well. The ledger half is institutional, and does not. Introducing Mahavistaar-style advisory in Ethiopia or Kenya is therefore a realistic project. Reproducing Sarlaben requires a cooperative, professor or public agency that already collects reliable producer-level records-dairy cooperatives, contract-farming schemes and schemes and warehouse-receipt systems are natural candidates.

The same logic tempers expectations for high-income settings. In a country such as the United States, where public extension runs through land-grant universities and many commercial farmers already use proprietary farm-management platforms, the binding constraint is unlikely to be the marginal cost of advice. It is more plausibly data ownership, interoperability and who holds the farm-level ledger (Jones and Tonetti, 2020)). This is conjecture, but it illustrates the general point: the economics of replication depend on where the scarce asset sits in the receiving system.

CONCLUSION:

AI Sarlaben and Mahavistaar are not mere technological novelties; they represent the vanguard of applied AI. For researchers and technologists globally, these models provide a definitive thesis: the next wave of AI

disruption will not come from bridging the gap between sophisticated data architectures and the world's most foundational industries. The global replication of these Indian frameworks will likely redefine international standards of AI scalability, inclusivity, and real-world economic impact.

The discipline's task now is to move from reach to evidence. The systems are new, the data are richer than in most field settings, and the propositions above are falsifiable. If the impacts are large, the case for public investment in agricultural DPI will rest on evidence rather than announcement. If they are small, or if the cobweb effect proves real, we will have learned what advisory design must correct. Either result would serve farmers better than the current state of assertion.

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