INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ARTS SCIENCE HUMANITIES RESEARCH STUDIES (IJASHRS)
(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)
ISSN Online:
EDUSCHOOL ACADEMIC RESEARCH & PUBLISHERS

Gravitational Wave Detection: Indian Contributions and the LIGO-India Initiative

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Article information

Received : 4th May 2026
Received in revised form: 13th June 2026
Accepted: 15th July 2026
Available online: 10th August 2026

Volume: 2
Issue: 3
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21835778

Abstract

The first direct detection of gravitational waves by the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) in September 2015 inaugurated a new era of multi-messenger astronomy. The subsequent decade has witnessed rapid expansion of the field, with hundreds of detections of binary black hole mergers, binary neutron star coalescences, and other compact object events documented by LIGO, Virgo, and KAGRA. Indian scientists and institutions have contributed substantially to this scientific revolution, both through participation in LIGO Scientific Collaboration analyses and through the development of theoretical, computational, and instrumentation expertise within India. The LIGO-India initiative, formally approved by the Government of India in 2016 with Cabinet approval and reaffirmed with construction approval in 2023, represents a major bilateral scientific project that will host the third-generation Advanced LIGO-class detector at a site in Hingoli district, Maharashtra. This article examines Indian contributions to gravitational wave detection and the broader trajectory of the LIGO-India initiative through an astrophysics and science policy perspective. Drawing on a critical literature review methodology, the study analyses peer-reviewed scholarship and policy documents published between 2015 and 2025. The analysis identifies four dimensions of Indian engagement: theoretical and data analysis contributions; instrumentation and engineering capabilities; the LIGO-India infrastructure project; and the implications for Indian astrophysics, education, and international scientific cooperation. Findings indicate that India is positioned as a significant contributor to the global gravitational wave science enterprise. The article concludes with implications for astrophysics research, instrumentation policy, and Indian science education.

Keywords: Gravitational Waves, LIGO-India, Astrophysics, Indian Science, Multi-Messenger Astronomy, Advanced LIGO, Compact Binary Mergers, Scientific Cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

On 14 September 2015, the Advanced LIGO detectors at Hanford, Washington and Livingston, Louisiana recorded a brief but unmistakable signal from the merger of two stellar-mass black holes approximately 1.3 billion light years from Earth.[1] The announcement of this first direct detection of gravitational waves, designated GW150914 and reported in February 2016, marked the realization of a prediction that Albert Einstein had made in 1916 within the framework of general relativity.[2] The subsequent decade has witnessed the rapid maturation of gravitational wave astronomy. Hundreds of compact binary coalescence events have been detected by the LIGO-Virgo-KAGRA network, including binary black hole mergers, binary neutron star coalescences, and neutron star black hole mergers.[3] The

2017 detection of GW170817, a binary neutron star coalescence accompanied by electromagnetic counterparts across the electromagnetic spectrum, inaugurated multi-messenger astronomy in its full sense.[4] The 2017 Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded to Rainer Weiss, Barry Barish, and Kip Thorne for decisive contributions to the LIGO detector and the observation of gravitational waves.[5]

Indian astrophysicists have been substantively engaged with gravitational wave science for decades, both through theoretical work and through participation in international observational efforts.[6] Indian institutions including the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA), the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), the Raja Ramanna Centre for Advanced Technology (RRCAT), the Institute of Plasma Research, the Indian Institute of Technology system, and several universities have contributed to data analysis, theoretical modelling of gravitational wave sources, and instrumentation development. The LIGO Scientific Collaboration includes Indian members from multiple institutions, and the IndIGO consortium serves as the formal organizational vehicle for Indian gravitational wave science.[7]

The LIGO-India initiative represents a major Indian commitment to gravitational wave astronomy. The project, originally proposed in collaboration with the LIGO Laboratory at the California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, will establish a third Advanced LIGO-class detector in India, complementing the existing Hanford and Livingston instruments.[8] The Government of India approved the project in principle in 2016, and final construction approval was granted in 2023, with siting at Hingoli district in Maharashtra.[9] When operational, LIGO-India will substantially enhance the global gravitational wave detection network's sky localization capability, contributing to the identification of electromagnetic counterparts and supporting the broader multi-messenger astronomy programme.

Against this backdrop, the present article asks: what have been the major dimensions of Indian engagement with gravitational wave detection, and what are the implications of the LIGO-India initiative for Indian astrophysics and international scientific cooperation? Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry:

- First, what theoretical, computational, and data analysis contributions have Indian scientists made to gravitational wave science?
- Second, what is the scientific and engineering scope of the LIGO-India project?
- Third, what are the broader implications for Indian astrophysics, education, instrumentation policy, and international scientific cooperation?

The article makes three contributions: it synthesizes scholarship and policy documentation on Indian gravitational wave engagement; it identifies four dimensions of Indian contribution; and it articulates implications for research and policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Gravitational Wave Astronomy

The theoretical foundations of gravitational wave astronomy rest on Einstein's 1916 prediction, within general relativity, that accelerating massive bodies produce ripples in the fabric of spacetime that propagate at the speed of light.[10] The development of post-Newtonian and post-Minkowskian approximation schemes, together with numerical relativity simulations of compact binary mergers, has produced detailed waveform predictions that enable matched-filter detection of weak signals embedded in detector noise.[11] Foundational theoretical contributions span seven decades, with notable Indian contributions including the work of Bala Iyer, Sanjeev Dhurandhar, and others on post-Newtonian waveform models, data analysis techniques, and the theoretical framework for binary inspiral signals.[12]

Detector Development and the Advanced LIGO Era

The development of LIGO into the Advanced LIGO detectors operational from 2015 onwards represents one of the most ambitious experimental physics enterprises of recent decades.[13] The detectors employ kilometre-scale Michelson interferometers with Fabry-Perot arm cavities, supported by sophisticated seismic isolation, vacuum, optics, and quantum noise reduction technologies. The achieved strain sensitivity is sufficient to detect spacetime perturbations on the order of one part in 10 to the 21st in the relevant frequency band. The Virgo detector in Italy and the KAGRA detector in Japan complement the LIGO instruments, with continued upgrades planned through future observation runs.[14] The technical complexity of these detectors has produced extensive contributions to instrumentation science, control engineering, and precision measurement that extend beyond gravitational wave astronomy itself.

Multi-Messenger Astronomy and the GW170817 Era

The detection of GW170817 on 17 August 2017, accompanied by the gamma-ray burst GRB 170817A and subsequent electromagnetic emission across radio, infrared, optical, ultraviolet, X-ray, and gamma-ray wavelengths, inaugurated multi-messenger astronomy in its mature form.[15] The event, identified as a binary neutron star coalescence, produced a kilonova whose ejecta supported the production of heavy elements through r-process nucleosynthesis.[16] The combined gravitational wave and electromagnetic observations provided constraints on the speed of gravitational waves relative to light, the equation of state of dense nuclear matter, and the cosmological Hubble constant through standard siren methodology.[17] The Indian Astrosat mission contributed observations of GRB 170817A through its CZTI X-ray detector.[18] The era inaugurated by GW170817 has reshaped expectations for what gravitational wave astronomy can deliver and underscored the value of expanding the global detector network.

Indian Astrophysics and Science Policy Context

Indian astrophysics has developed substantial capability across multiple wavelengths and methodologies.[19] Indian institutions have contributed to ground-based optical observatories, including the recent Aditya-L1 solar mission and the long-running Indian Astronomical Observatory, to space-based instruments including Chandrayaan and Astrosat,[20] to theoretical and numerical astrophysics, and to participation in international collaborations including the Square Kilometre Array, the Thirty Meter Telescope, and various other projects. The Indian science policy framework provided by the Department of Atomic Energy, the Department of Science and Technology, the Department of Space, and the Indian Space Research Organisation supports astrophysical research through both institutional grants and dedicated mission programmes. The LIGO-India initiative is a prominent recent addition to this landscape, representing one of the largest Indian investments in basic science infrastructure.[21]

Research Gap

Despite the rapid expansion of gravitational wave astronomy and the substantial Indian engagement, integrative analyses synthesizing Indian contributions across theoretical, computational, instrumentation, and policy dimensions remain comparatively rare. Most existing literature focuses on technical results from specific detection events, on detector technology, or on policy commentary, with limited integration of these strands. The implications of LIGO-India for the broader Indian astrophysics ecosystem and for international scientific cooperation merit sustained scholarly engagement. The present article seeks to contribute to addressing these gaps.

METHODS

This study employs a critical literature review methodology with thematic synthesis, suitable for engaging an interdisciplinary scientific topic spanning theoretical physics, instrumentation, astronomy, and science policy. The review proceeded through four stages. In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in the SAO/NASA Astrophysics Data System, INSPIRE-HEP, arXiv, Web of Science, Scopus, the Indian Citation Index, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined gravitational waves, LIGO, LIGO-India, IndIGO, advanced LIGO, multi-messenger astronomy, neutron star, black hole merger, and Indian astrophysics. The window covered January 2015 to August 2025, with selected earlier theoretical and instrumentation works retained for grounding.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed scientific papers and authoritative review articles in gravitational wave astronomy and instrumentation, supplemented by science policy documentation relevant to the LIGO-India project and Indian astrophysics. Reports from the Department of Atomic Energy, the Department of Science and Technology, IUCAA, TIFR, RRCAT, the LIGO Scientific Collaboration, and the LIGO-India project documentation were also reviewed. Exclusion criteria filtered out non-peer-reviewed materials except for authoritative project documentation, and works without direct relevance to Indian engagement or LIGO-India. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, sixty-two publications were retained.

In the third stage, supplementary materials were drawn from publicly available project documentation, including the LIGO-India project website, technical design reports, and Government of India press releases concerning Cabinet approvals. In the fourth stage, thematic synthesis generated four interlocking dimensions of Indian engagement with gravitational wave detection. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, and balanced engagement with technical and policy literatures were maintained throughout.

RESULTS

Indian Theoretical and Data Analysis Contributions

The first dimension concerns theoretical and data analysis contributions by Indian scientists to gravitational wave astronomy. Indian theoretical contributions span post-Newtonian and post-Minkowskian waveform modelling, the development of effective-one-body and phenomenological waveform models, statistical methodology for source parameter estimation, the modelling of binary spin precession, and the theoretical analysis of tests of general relativity using gravitational wave data. Foundational Indian contributors including Bala Iyer at the Raman Research Institute, Sanjeev Dhurandhar at IUCAA, and successive generations of theoretical and data analysis researchers have produced influential work that is cited extensively in international gravitational wave literature.[22]

Indian data analysis groups participate in LIGO Scientific Collaboration analyses through the Indian Initiative in Gravitational-wave Observations (IndIGO) framework.[23] Indian researchers contribute to the analysis pipelines that detect compact binary coalescence signals, characterize their parameters, and test general relativity using gravitational wave observations.[24] Cosmological parameter estimation through standard siren methodology, tests of the no-hair theorem, and constraints on alternative theories of gravity are among the analyses to which Indian researchers contribute.[25] Indian computational infrastructure, including national-scale computing resources, supports both theoretical waveform development and observational data analysis.

Indian Instrumentation and Engineering Capabilities

The second dimension concerns Indian instrumentation and engineering capabilities relevant to gravitational wave detection. The LIGO-India project requires the construction and integration of an Advanced LIGO-class detector.[26] The instrumentation involved includes ultra-high-vacuum systems with kilometre-scale tubes, seismic isolation systems, ultra-stable laser sources, suspended optics with extremely demanding optical and mechanical specifications, control electronics, and computational infrastructure. Indian institutions have developed capabilities in several of these areas, drawing on prior experience in synchrotron radiation facilities, accelerator technology, fusion plasma research, and precision optical instrumentation.[27]

The Raja Ramanna Centre for Advanced Technology in Indore, the Institute of Plasma Research in Gandhinagar, and several Indian Institutes of Technology have been involved in the engineering preparation for LIGO-India. International collaboration with the LIGO Laboratory provides essential transfer of design knowledge and supports the training of Indian scientists and engineers in advanced detector technology. The infrastructure and human capital being developed for LIGO-India will provide spillover benefits for other Indian high-precision experimental physics, instrumentation industries, and engineering education.

The LIGO-India Infrastructure Project

The third dimension concerns the LIGO-India infrastructure project itself. The project is a collaboration between the Department of Atomic Energy and the Department of Science and Technology of the Government of India, with the LIGO Laboratory in the United States. The project will host an Advanced LIGO-class detector at a site in Hingoli district, Maharashtra, comprising kilometre-scale ultra-high-vacuum arm tubes, central station optical and laser facilities, and supporting infrastructure. The instrument hardware is largely supplied through the LIGO Laboratory partnership, while the site preparation, vacuum system construction, civil engineering, and operational infrastructure are led by Indian institutions.

The Cabinet of the Government of India granted in-principle approval to LIGO-India in 2016 and final construction approval in February 2023, formalizing the financial and institutional commitment necessary for full project execution.[28] Site preparation, civil construction, and instrumentation integration are proceeding through the project timeline, with operational commissioning anticipated in the late 2020s or early 2030s pending technical and project schedule developments. The host institutions include IUCAA, TIFR, RRCAT, and the Institute for Plasma Research, with broader Indian institutional involvement through the IndIGO consortium.[29]

Implications for Indian Astrophysics, Education, and Cooperation

The fourth dimension concerns the broader implications of Indian gravitational wave engagement for Indian astrophysics, education, and international scientific cooperation. LIGO-India is positioned as a transformative project for the Indian basic science ecosystem, with implications across several axes. For Indian astrophysics, the project anchors a long-term commitment to gravitational wave science with associated theoretical, observational, and instrumentation capabilities. The combination of LIGO-India with Indian space-based astronomy missions including Astrosat and the planned XPoSat and other instruments creates a robust multi-wavelength capability complementing the gravitational wave channel.

For education, the project supports the development of advanced training programmes in gravitational wave physics, precision instrumentation, and computational astrophysics, with implications for graduate and post-graduate education across Indian institutions. The project provides career pathways for Indian-trained scientists in cutting-edge experimental and theoretical physics, supporting the broader retention of scientific talent within India. For international scientific cooperation, LIGO-India embeds India in a major multilateral basic science enterprise, with parallel commitments through the LIGO Scientific Collaboration, the Virgo Collaboration,[30] and the KAGRA Collaboration.[31] Future generations of detector technology, including the proposed Cosmic Explorer[32] and Einstein Telescope,[33] may build on the institutional and human capital developed through LIGO-India.

DISCUSSION

The findings carry several important implications. Scientifically, they support a perspective on Indian gravitational wave engagement that integrates theoretical, computational, instrumentation, and policy dimensions rather than treating them as separate strands. The four dimensions identified, theoretical and data analysis contributions, instrumentation and engineering capabilities, the LIGO-India infrastructure project, and broader implications, are mutually reinforcing. Theoretical and data analysis expertise enables productive contribution to international collaborations. Instrumentation capabilities support both LIGO-India construction and broader experimental physics. The LIGO-India project anchors long-term commitment and creates a platform for sustained engagement.

For astrophysics research, the findings suggest several priorities. Continued investment in theoretical waveform modelling, particularly for sources at the edges of current detector sensitivity, will support upcoming observation runs. Investment in computational infrastructure for gravitational wave data analysis, including high-performance computing resources and machine learning capabilities for signal identification, will support participation in increasingly large collaborative analyses. Multi-messenger follow-up capabilities, including coordination with Indian space-based and ground-based electromagnetic facilities, will enhance Indian engagement with the most scientifically productive multi-messenger events. Theoretical work on tests of general relativity, on dense matter physics through neutron star observations, and on cosmology through standard siren methodology will all benefit from continued Indian engagement.

For instrumentation policy, the findings emphasize the value of LIGO-India as a platform for the development of Indian advanced instrumentation capability. Spillovers to Indian instrumentation industries, including precision optics, vacuum technology, control electronics, and laser technology, support the broader Indian science and industrial ecosystem. The training of engineers and scientists through LIGO-India construction and operation contributes to deep technical capability that can be redeployed across multiple research and industrial applications. Continued investment in basic science infrastructure, of which LIGO-India is a flagship example, supports the long-term competitive position of Indian science.

For science education, the findings underscore the importance of integrating gravitational wave physics into Indian undergraduate and graduate curricula. Sustained outreach engagement with student communities, including dedicated summer schools, training programmes, and visit opportunities at LIGO-India and partner facilities, will support the broader development of scientific culture. Public engagement with gravitational wave science, including media coverage, popular books, museum exhibits, and digital content, will support the visibility of basic science in Indian public life and the recruitment of new generations to scientific careers.

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, the analysis depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship and policy documentation, which is necessarily uneven across the rapidly evolving project landscape. Project status, technical specifications, and timeline details may change as construction proceeds. The voices of practitioners, students, and host community members, while reflected in some literature, are not fully represented through secondary sources alone.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined Indian contributions to gravitational wave detection and the broader trajectory of the LIGO-India initiative. Drawing on theoretical physics, observational astronomy, instrumentation science, and science policy literature, the analysis identified four interlocking dimensions: Indian theoretical and data analysis contributions; Indian instrumentation and engineering capabilities; the LIGO-India infrastructure project; and the broader implications for Indian astrophysics, education, and international scientific cooperation. Together these dimensions describe a substantive Indian engagement with one of the most exciting frontiers of contemporary basic science.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, India's engagement with gravitational wave science represents a multi-decade scientific commitment that now stands at a particularly important inflection point with the construction phase of LIGO-India. Second, the project carries implications well beyond gravitational wave science itself, anchoring developments in instrumentation, education, scientific culture, and international cooperation. Third, sustained investment, careful execution, and continued integration of theoretical, observational, and instrumentation strands will be essential to realizing the full potential of Indian gravitational wave science.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Theoretical and computational research on the next generation of gravitational wave sources, including intermediate-mass black holes, primordial black holes, and continuous wave sources from rotating neutron stars, deserves continued Indian engagement. Multi-messenger astronomy capability, building on the GW170817 paradigm, will benefit from coordinated investment in Indian electromagnetic facilities and follow-up infrastructure. Studies on the science policy and educational impacts of LIGO-India would inform institutional learning. Detailed historical and sociological studies of the LIGO-India project, including the long pathway from initial proposal to operational facility, would contribute to broader understanding of large basic science projects in India. Public engagement and science communication research focused on gravitational wave science and basic physics more generally would support the broader scientific culture. By advancing such an agenda, Indian astrophysics can continue its productive contribution to one of the most exciting scientific frontiers of our time.

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