

Original Article

Digital Governance and Democratic Accountability in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between digital governance and democratic accountability in contemporary India. It explores the evolution of e-governance initiatives and their role in enhancing transparency, citizen participation, service delivery, and institutional accountability. The study highlights major digital governance programs such as Digital India, e-Governance platforms, and digital welfare schemes that have transformed interactions between citizens and the state. It also analyzes the role of oversight institutions, judicial interventions, audits, and civil society in strengthening accountability within a digital framework. While digital technologies have improved access to information and public services, significant challenges remain, including privacy concerns, cybersecurity risks, digital exclusion, infrastructural disparities, and varying levels of digital literacy. The paper argues that effective democratic accountability requires balancing technological innovation with citizens' rights, transparency, and inclusive participation. It concludes that digital governance has the potential to deepen democracy and improve public trust, provided that governance frameworks remain citizen-centric, transparent, and responsive to India's diverse social realities.

Keywords: Digital Governance; Democratic Accountability; E-Governance; Digital India; Citizen Participation; Transparency; Public Administration; Information and Communication Technology (ICT); Digital Democracy; Digital Inclusion; Accountability Mechanisms; Public Service Delivery.

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INTRODUCTION

Prologue: Signals in a Connected Nation

Whether anticipating the arrival of novelist and social scion Vikram Seth, or on later occasions when tracking the cricket scores of India's performance throughout the Test series against Australia, hundreds of wires could be monitored through a minuscule plastic barrel fitted to a telephone line. The barrel was the beginning of a distributed sensor and intervention network designed to stimulate and monitor telecommunication conversations all around the nation. Such a system offered dense documentation of the telephone calls through which the existential state of the nation was routinely addressed. It also provided an unusual theatre: significantly fewer telephone conversations occurred when India was being observed by the international community, Janata Party journalists in particular, than when the watchful eyes turned

elsewhere. Participation, in other words, was subject to geopolitical conditions of observation.

The monitoring of telecommunications amplified the voices of ordinary citizens seeking to make sense of a nation increasingly unsettled and incapable of sustaining any meaningful kind of public life. The telephone conversations of individuals often spoken of as 'the forgotten citizens' framed the most frequent, heartfelt, and consistent of public sentiments: a yearning for the everyday practice of democratic accountability. Tensions between technical innovation and democratic aspirations continued throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, as both conversations and international attention shifted towards television. At the end of the 1990s, when the telephone had given way to the mobile telephony of the 2G and thereafter 3G waves, the traces of an unfinished conversation around the notion of the 'public' re-emerged through a distributed surveillance design.

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A small group of colleagues, excited by the arrival of the tricycle, installed web-captured photographs of bus-stops and public convenience locations on a website. The traces conveyed a mundane yet significant, infrapolitical concern: the disappearance of a basic urban infrastructure that was essential to live an ordinary life in the city. It was a slow and painful continuing endeavour, with scant public articulation and structural support.

More than two decades later, in 2017, the success of the musical FiFa World Football Cup in a petroleum-rich West African country came as a remarkable surprise. The earlier sum: meaningful football without a single correspondent writing seriously about it was not possible. Technology and politics that day were conducted with a different cadence, yet, human longing for relation and an imagined sociality, desire for political accountability, and an urge to redefine the spirit of community, still manifested. (Udupa et al., 2019)

1. **The Emergence of Digital Governance: Dreams and Early Trials**

In a country with such a vibrant democratic system, it is surprising that access to governance information remained so sparse for a long period. Yet, this access is vital for citizens to understand their rights and redress grievances in an informed manner. E-governance, defined as the “use of information and communication technology to transform government services and encourage citizen participation in the democratic process” (Fraunholz & Unnithan, 2006), seeks to democratize this experience. Promoting citizen empowerment through better access to government information, services, and processes while simultaneously ensuring security and privacy remains a goal for many nations. India is no exception. The seeds of e-governance were sown long ago, yet the momentum gained amid the millennium made an immense impact. As India nears its 60th year of independence, both the citizenry and stakeholders are re-vibrating citizenship and stakes under the “millennial” label. At the heart of the process is a change in governmental access due to information and communications technology (Udupa et al., 2019).

2. **The Infrastructure Constellation: Networks, Platforms, and Access**

In contemporary India, digital engagement is characterized by the emergence of a vast “infrastructure constellation” comprising numerous overlapping, intersecting and competing digital networks, major digital platforms and telecommunication services. One Billion Plus Indians connect to the Internet through myriad devices, from basic feature handsets to advanced smartphones. Under these circumstances, digital initiatives, platforms and applications catalogued as e-Governance, Digital India, MyGov, and the National Digital Communication Policy provide ubiquitous connectivity, fast-access information, real-time communication access, government delivery systems and multilayered dialogues between the State and citizens (Udupa et al., 2019). Digital platforms have opened up myriad conversations about changing roles, responsibilities and rights, with study respondents celebrating the potential for faster communication in an otherwise slow system. Afroditi Pati notes that major Indian “telecom and Internet service providers remain unreliable in fulfilling even basic subscription promises.”

Citizens and the State: Trust, Participation, and Friction

Though digital governance promised the possibility of establishing communication between citizens and state authorities, many citizens remained distrustful of the state and its intentions during the 2010s. Various accounts reinforced popular impressions of corruption and the arbitrariness of authority, and citizens viewed state pressures for participation through the lens of a general desire for control. Alongside the central concern of trust, expectation and understanding of participation varied widely; people were aware of the possibility for engagement, yet many felt this was restricted to certain groups. General friction with the state was compounded by increased salience of state agendas.

E-Governance narratives in particular highlighted opportunities for popular participation, but often resulted in citizen initiatives dwarfed by state management. Initiatives less focused on participation but emphasizing the delivery of information originally attracted greater attention, as they appeared more amenable to technological mediation and offered the attraction of participation without actual engagement. The framing of efforts as e-governance brought fresh visibility, yet often intensified pressure to prioritize participation over outreach. Friction increased when ordinances focused on the delivery of information or outreach were framed as e-governance, as the unequal interest created the appearance of a unilateral state agenda and the potential for a new paternalism surrounding the use of technology and information (Balnaves & Allen, 2009).

Accountability Mechanisms in a Digital Age

Electronic information and communication technologies (ICTs) hold promise for enhancing accountability in various social systems that depend on the flow of data and information. The deskilling of public-sector professionals, the precarity of employment, and the declining credibility of institutions trigger more extensive cycles of responsiveness and deliberation. Remote auditing and real-time monitoring are more feasible in situations that inherently encourage upward accountability, such as the works of drawing office budgets, execution, and payment for executing civil works. E-governance advocates drew on this insight to recommend that the first step in the e-governance system for the state administration target these areas, allowing comprehensive support systems to emerge in both the public and private sectors (Jeet Singh, 2008).

Parliament is empowered to investigate matters of public import, as a proper domain of which accountability questions resolvable in a powerful multi-actor arena are conducive to the emergence of the legalistic layer of accountability envisaged in the integrated-on-multiple-platforms India in a high-teledensity, high-task-relationship-persistence-condition world. In the absence of compulsory portfolio allocation and with only the desirable-formation of government coalitions, empirical observations based on diverse state assemblages indicate that also in the accountability-safeguarding sector Internet-enabled systems tend to flow towards a systemic dualism reflective of the zero-sum/non-zero-sum-continuum aspect of parliamentary-relationship formation explaining the rise of non-commercial-but-sustainably-embedded “public

documentaries” recorded in the word-processing subsidiary language of E-Family-world-indic-EDD/EDC-CT/CGT/(B)F in the generic lower Latin-script-using public-policy-formation under high-parliament-relationship-persistence-formation condition, and that collaboration-encouraging initiative-strategy combinations combined with preserved lower-script subject-matter probability-character-concentration info are likely to play constructively synergy-enhancing roles (Feder Cooper et al., 2022).

1. **Transparency, Data Stewardship, and Open Government**

Democratic governance entails the formation of public policy and the provision of public goods in such a manner that the best interests of society are fully considered. Digital governance refers to the administration of government functions with the assistance of information and communication technology. The two are related in the context of the citizens’ right to information: democratic governance requires the transparency of government procedures and decisions, while digital governance provides channels for that transparency to be facilitated and expedited. The potential for achieving democratic governance through the use of information and communication technology is enormous, but concrete benefits are unequally distributed across India (Halberstam, 2015). Governments in India openly embrace the citizens’ right to information, articulated through social welfare legislation, and have implemented e-governance initiatives for data dissemination over a long period. Digital literacy, computer literacy, and e-literacy vary greatly from one state to another and even from one desi location to another, affecting the extent to which data to which the public is entitled. Certain groups such as women remain reluctant to utilize services made available through the World Wide Web.

Adoption of freely accessible, non-propriety platforms to facilitate the design and development of digital governance applications constitutes an additional challenge. At the state level, various schemes have been put in place and government initiatives implemented to monitor and maintain accessibility for all citizens in order to prevent malfunctioning, hacking, obsolescence, or dismantling. Government schemes continue to digitize manual data for dissemination and computerization of data with a view to furthering implementation, even after funds are withdrawn owing to previous success.

2. **Oversight Bodies, Audits, and the Role of Civil Society**

Strengthening accountability in government systems—broadly encompassing oversight bodies, audits, and civic engagement—has long been essential to promoting the rule of law and establishing trust in democratic institutions in India (Jeet Singh, 2008). With digital governance now greatly impacting service delivery, planning, and resources, assuring that the state is held accountable for its actions is more vital than ever. Transparency, citizen empowerment, and data stewardship remain central to accountability initiatives in this digital age.

Independent institutions such as the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), State Legislatures, and the Election Commission of India continue to play an important role. The CAG uses advanced analytics to assess digital governance applications at various levels. Audits on the Digital India Mission have taken place, and

the Scheme for Financial Assistance for the Development of Digital Infrastructure has also been reviewed. The National Informatics Centre, in partnership with civil society organizations, has developed a web-based platform for public scrutiny of e-Governance initiatives, allowing monitoring of features such as accessibility, payment gateways, compliance with web standards, and citizen feedback.

3. **Judicial and Legislative Interventions in a Digital World**

Digital governance empowers citizens through information and communication technologies (ICTs). Seemingly simple policies, such as supplying citizens with information about their rights and entitlements, can bring revolutionary changes to governance structures. On this view, elections matter less than what happens in-between.

The Indian state must grapple with an astounding plurality of languages, castes, religions, and regions. Therefore, the Indian Constitution seeks to accommodate diversity, often interpreted as demanding a decentralized structure of governance. E-governance fails to provide information where decisions are taken, and consequently, that crucial capacity remains absent in the governance paradigm.

The Indian judiciary—by far the most powerful in the world—has expanded its self-assigned mandate to scrutinize the actions of other branches. In 1996, the Indian Supreme Court ruled that judiciary’s domain encompasses “the governance of the nation” and that governance itself constitutes a fundamental right. Such sweeping definitions of governance opened the doors to a dazzling array of public-interest litigations. The enlarging remit prompted the apex court to formulate eleven criteria, clarifying the areas of governance subject to judicial scrutiny. These criteria, however, failed to quell the flood, further expanding the scope of judicial oversight. The expansion hardly guarantees freedom from arbitrary governance; instead, governance takes place ever further from the people. Government has also established judicial tribunals, which do not invent rights but impose accountability in a different manner altogether, primarily to avert judicial overload and delays. The Indian Parliament, despite being “the most powerful” in the world, established an alternative to command-and-control oversight through the eponymous National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which combined rights with redress. The enactment riveted the attention of the Supreme Court on the forty-five inadequacies contained in the scheme. Even impermissible encroachments on the right to privacy, which emerged as an unexpected theme, captured the interest of several High Courts when the Aadhaar Act was being contemplated. The Indian Parliamentary system founded on the Westminster model establishes the Council of Ministers accountable to the Lok Sabha. Nevertheless, the government appears desensitized to parliamentary feedback. (Mate, 2010)

Case Narratives: Platforms, Portals, and the Everyday Citizen

Amidst digital dreams of development, states across India have explored the use of information communication technology in governance. Two decades into the initiative, e-governance remains a mixed bag of partial success and struggle. Initial aspirations of transformational change have withered as schemes

languish in obscurity and citizen input diminishes. Yet e-governance retains rare symbolic value in its civil service implementation, showcasing the conflict between accessibility and exclusion—an ethical challenge repeated and refracted in multiple approaches across subjects, states, and services.

A second link between state, scheme, and citizen joins the network: delivery of targeted welfare benefits through public accounts payable via the Direct Benefit Transfer scheme. Countries worldwide face similar challenges. Improving targeting reduces leakage but adds complexity. Digitization of existing USAID schemes accelerated policy revision in India, despite early access hurdles. Platforms and portals offer appealing digital governance alternatives. Accessible, self-service systems promise uncomplicated interaction. Explaining the frequent lack of uptake illuminates the contemporary configuration of digital governance (Udapa et al., 2019).

1. E-Governance Initiatives Across States: Successes and Struggles

E-governance initiatives exist across states in India, with varied administrative footprints and outcomes. Government-to-Citizen (G2C) services, such as the Electronic Service Delivery (ESD) framework in Andhra Pradesh, choose to communicate through electronic service kiosks, privatizing the operation of the service. The state-run e-District programme follows poor engagement during the initial phase and emerges in an unthoughtfully thought-out pilot design with nation-wide coverage; it ignores large parts of urban areas within the initial offering, fails to keep track of citizens' engagement once applications are fully online, and utilizes generalised backlog data to replace detailed reason information.

Both performance and user perception in G2C services matter, with significant shifts following an “e-Ready” programme to improve the latter dimension. The state of Gujarat relies mainly on a raft of one-way information bits, fit under a “Just-in-Time” scheme regarded primarily as a publicity campaign rather than a genuine public service initiative. In broad terms, the improved ability to approach state governments at contributing through informal channels, indicating that these, too, are open avenues, converge nevertheless with concerns that such channels may also become captured in the political sense through higher tier entanglements. Once identified, the data-linked component of filing the petitions for grievances remains too coarse and abstract to identify petitions under common-mode conditions rather than categorical approaches.

Performance in G2C services also narrows down to a limited panel of different administrative services across multiple offerings. India-wide, indeed, most states are connected through the core capture elements, as is the e-District programme yet for the foreign enrolment feature, while CEF also stands out as generally connected, at the state level, Gujarat emerges as one of the thickest islands. Performance remains unequal across G2C services long after these have been approached under the e-Readiness initiatives—appeared e-Ready across different states, yet capacities vary down to thick black holes at both the administrative and the strata levels

Educational mark sheets linked to personal identity, usually one of the very first requirements for graduating higher tiers of education. The e-Governance project set up in the second half of the 2007–08 academic year enables uploading of compiled mark sheets on the applicant's e-

Governance web site, available under view menu for applicants inside over half the states, discounts the State in the Second term 2006 as fully e-Ready, one of the earliest states to reach that specific statute level. Outside that prolonged core parameter detected instead the same prior state for coursed based marksheets emergence as in the compact mode.

2. Digital Welfare Schemes: Targeting, Leakage, and Redress

Digital welfare schemes have been a prominent focus of e-governance initiatives in India, with an extensive array of similar applications across cash transfers, subsidies, public distribution systems, and social asset allocations. Redressing complaints and grievances in welfare schemes has emerged as a key concern, as the potential for leakage, targeting errors, and benefit denials translates to a growing angst among social welfare beneficiaries (Jeet Singh, 2008). Although the nature of schemes differs among targeted groups, redressing their complaints through a single application has proven successful in most of the states. Andhra Pradesh offers a prime example with its “M-Governance Service.” Citizens facing grievances regarding money, timber, builder, pension, rice, or widows can lodge complaints via SMS through the numbering system of service-categorised R-T-G-S. Chhattisgarh showcases another successful e-governance efforts through Public Distribution System (PDS). Black marketing of food grains has existed in PDS, and states like Chhattisgarh have already enhanced transparency and accountability using information and communication technology (Chhabra, 2017).

Challenges and Crises: Privacy, Security, and Digital Divide

Democratic principles and institutions are under threat from increasingly intrusive digital technologies. On the one hand, government surveillance has grown in the name of national security and public safety; on the other, the government has promoted a host of private ventures, such as apps and social media platforms, that threaten to undermine the ability of citizens to speak, assemble, and engage in collective action for fear of harassment, discrimination, or violence. Surveillance systems that provide instant access to a citizen's whereabouts, movements, conversations, and transactions can strengthen authoritarian tendencies in governances as well as public and private strategies of censorship (Fraunholz & Unnithan, 2006). Such technologies challenge personal privacy, commercial safety, and security from diverse socially unequal positions, but people are urged to use such platforms to avail of a range of public services that require supporting infrastructures and intimate life, health, and consumption data that enhance welfare. Digital government schemes interact with such tightly meshed technological, service, social development, and welfare systems that are expected to burgeon with or without governance, democracy, state, or public welfare. Nonetheless, they are enmeshed in uneven social systems, prevalent literacy levels, and multi-vocal identities.

1. Balancing Innovation with Rights

The role of the state lies at the core of human rights implementation. The distinction between civil and political rights and economic, social, and cultural rights stems from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural configurations across Asia. Constraints on persons' liberties vary significantly from country to country and

state to state, thus the notion of universalism assumes different guises across Asia and should take into consideration conditions in the South and East of the continent (Goggin et al., 2018).

2. Inclusivity in a Diverse Landscape

Public policies in India increasingly recognize the complicating influences of community and culture—factors said to have been insufficiently appreciated in earlier e-governance schemes. For example, according to the Indian National e-Governance Plan, the delivery of government services through "common service centres" or franchises is now emphasising community engagement, local language, culture, and social contexts in delivering the public services specified (Udupa et al., 2019). Attempts to achieve inclusive participation on a national scale reflect a similar sensitivity to local contexts. India's three national development plans highlight the need to take into account language, culture, and local preferences of individual states while implementing national-level schemes (Fraunholz & Unnithan, 2006). Since India has a large number of digitized land records, there is an even greater effort to establish a national-level information-sharing infrastructure among states so that experiences of citizen-oriented e-Governance projects can be shared more widely. In addition, many of the so-called "milch cow" projects or initiatives considered relatively successful or about which there is more experience tend to have been implemented in regions such as Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, which have relatively more well-informed citizens (Jeet Singh, 2008).

The Future Courtship: Sovereignty, Multiplicity, and Global Influence

Yet, the intertwined promises of sovereignty, multiplicity, and influence absorb attention in the global arena. Motivated by the logic of capital and legitimacy rather than by the imperatives of technology and form, digital design remains dominated by big tech, transnational networks, and the lobby of national aspirations. Digital India does not merely emphasize the putative capacities of digital forms and manipulated promises of transformation; it seeks to illuminate the desirable direction of travel across state boundaries and expose contested improvements.

Digital India reflects a deliberation of change that reverberates over the entire digital globe. Its formative commitments raise consequential questions about the relations between complex adaptive systems and schooling designed to encourage individual intelligibility; and between the generality of hassle that stands in the way of valorising an unmistakable design path and the determination of distinctive styles that cut deeper across a more classical digital agenda of dynamic growth. These commitments moreover point to the very nature and epistemologies of human subjectivity and identity, and to the understandings of transmission and translation that enable distinctive systems to preserve the world as an ever-issue, high-quality proposition. (Udupa et al., 2019)

Epilogue: Reimagining Democratic Accountability in a Data-Driven India

The paradigm shift to data-driven modes of governance epitomizes a transforming society. To appreciate how data create opportunities and novel platforms for the state to engage with its citizens, it helps

to consider the everyday experiences of ordinary individuals within the larger contours of India's diverse and dynamic milieu. Contemporary digital structures and processes seem to yield rich interactions even in highly-classified environments associated with defence, intelligence, and national security—they are apparently generative of high- and intermediary-level exchanges across multiple bureaucracies, remain accessible to users with restricted clearances, and are open to both structured questions and freely-expressed opinions. At the institutional level, the colour and ambit of such engagements vary widely. They can elicit extraordinarily frank and nuanced observations about policy-directed democracy and good governance, national security, protection of personal integrity, contradictory world-views, and the politicization of bureaucrats—reflecting and perhaps intensifying the complexities signalled within the country's evolving digital eco-system. The readiness of participants to summon exemplary figures and take the long view of citizen-state relations indicates a sensitivity, and perhaps hope, that Indian democracy can be substantially transformed through ingenious digital technologies.

Adventurous but manageable initiatives cater to world-wide and extra-territorial organizations, demonstrating India's global outreach alongside domestic efforts. Towards a world order more in harmony with India's inclusive ethos, they unveil practical lines of action that registrants feel confident to share. The deep-seated aspiration to dispose of long-calibrated opinions suggests a complementary expectation for privileged anonymity and safety from adverse consequences on either political or personal levels. At moments, the urgent realization that attracted these colourful platforms energizes immeasurable potential: to lay bare damaging layers and concentrations of unaccountability; to hew out remediable truths from broad flows of processed but unopened data; to infuse trustworthy interrogation itself into collaborative structures with an art, even of its own; and perhaps, to help explore the embedded premises shaping and aligning unwittingly both the destination and navigation of intriguing ideas.

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