

Indian Democracy in the Digital Age: How Cuttack is Navigating the Digital Wave

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Abstract

Picture this: a farmer in rural Cuttack checking land records on his smartphone, or a college student in the city rallying her friends on WhatsApp to vote in the local elections. India's democracy is going digital, and it's changing how people connect with their government. In Cuttack, Odisha, tools like the Odisha One Portal and social media are opening new doors for participation and transparency. But it's not all smooth sailing—poor internet in villages, fake news, and cyber threats are real hurdles. This article dives into how Cuttack's residents are embracing digital democracy, the challenges they face, and what can be done to make it work for everyone.

Keywords: Digital Democracy, Cuttack, E-Governance, Citizen Participation, Digital Divide, Odisha, Misinformation, Cybersecurity

1. Introduction

India's democracy is a marvel—the largest in the world, with over a billion voices. Now, it's getting a digital makeover. Smartphones, social media, and e-governance platforms are changing how people talk to their leaders, file complaints, or even vote. The government's Digital India push is behind much of this, aiming to make services faster and governance more open.

In Cuttack, Odisha's historic heart, this digital shift is a big deal. The city buzzes with activity—think bustling markets, ancient temples, and a mix of urban and rural life. From the crowded streets of Cuttack city to the quiet villages of Salepur, people are starting to use apps like Bhulekh Odisha to check land records or file grievances online. But while the city's youth are glued to Instagram and X, many rural folks struggle with spotty internet or don't know how to use these tools.

This article tells the story of Cuttack's journey into digital democracy. It's about the exciting possibilities—like how a WhatsApp group helped flood victims in 2024—and the tough challenges, like fake news stirring trouble during elections. By looking at Cuttack, we see a snapshot of India's bigger quest to make democracy digital without leaving anyone behind.

To set the stage, let's rewind. India's democracy kicked off in 1950 with the Constitution, giving everyone a vote. In Odisha, local governance took shape in the 1950s, with Cuttack as a key hub. The digital age started in the 1990s with computerization, and by 2015, Digital India brought broadband and apps to the forefront. In Cuttack, the National Informatics Centre (NIC) has been digitizing records since the '90s, but the real game-changer came with tools like Bhulekh and Odisha One. Yet, old inequalities—like poor rural connectivity—still linger.

2. Historical Context: Cuttack's Democratic and Digital Roots

Odisha's democratic story began in 1936 when it became a province, and after 1947, it wove princely states into a unified state. Cuttack, once Odisha's capital, was at the heart of this. By the 1950s, village panchayats gave locals a say in governance, though it was mostly paper-based and slow.

The digital shift started in the late '90s when the NIC set up shop in Cuttack, digitizing land records and court files. Imagine a clerk in 1999 typing land deeds into a clunky computer—that was the start! The 2006 National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) brought bigger changes, like Odisha's network to connect offices. By 2010, Cuttack's e-District project made birth certificates and other documents just a click away. Digital India in 2015 supercharged this. Bhulekh Odisha digitized millions of land records, helping farmers like Ramesh from Nischintakoili check his plot details without bribing a clerk. The Odisha One Portal, launched in 2020, became a one-stop shop for 500+ services, from paying water bills to filing complaints. In Cuttack, thousands use it monthly.

But it wasn't all rosy. Rural areas lagged—only 40% had decent internet by 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic forced panchayats to go online, but spotty networks meant many missed out. Cuttack's digital story shows progress, but also how history's gaps—urban vs. rural, rich vs. poor—still shape today's challenges.

3. Literature Review: What the World and India Say

International

Scholars worldwide have studied how tech changes democracy. Pippa Norris (2001) talks about the "digital divide"—how not everyone gets equal access to tech, much like Cuttack's rural villagers struggling with no signal. Andrew Chadwick (2006) shows how the internet reshapes campaigns, like candidates in Cuttack using Facebook Live. Others, like Shelley Boulianne (2015), prove social media boosts voter turnout, though it depends on who's online—urban youth or rural elders?

Christian Fuchs (2021) warns about misinformation, a problem we'll see in Cuttack's elections. Karen Mossberger (2008) links internet access to better civic participation, while Jan Van Dijk (2020) digs into why skills and access gaps matter. These ideas help us understand Cuttack's mix of progress and hurdles.

National

In India, the Digital India programme (MeitY) sets the stage for e-governance, like Odisha's Bhulekh. The NeGP (2006) laid early groundwork, while NITI Aayog's reports push for inclusive tech. Nandan Nilekani's *Imagining India* highlights how Aadhaar and apps streamline services, which Cuttack residents use for subsidies.

Think-tanks like the Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) point out language barriers—Odia-only apps don't always reach tribal dialects. The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) flags privacy risks in e-governance, a concern when Cuttack's portals collect data. Reports from IAMAI show India's internet boom, but also how rural areas like Cuttack's villages lag behind. Indian scholars in journals like EPW study how digital tools affect local elections, offering lessons for Cuttack's context.

Methodology

This study is mostly theoretical and analytical in nature. The resources for this study have been collected from secondary resources, official data, and news reports and also from NGO report.

4. Findings and Analysis

Digital Opportunities: How Cuttack is Cashing In

Digital tools are giving Cuttack's people new ways to engage with democracy.

4.1 Getting Heard Loud and Clear

Take Priya, a college student in Cuttack city. She used the Odisha One Portal to report a broken streetlight in her neighborhood, and it was fixed in a week. Platforms like MyGov and e-Panchayat let locals share ideas or complaints directly with officials. During the 2024 floods, WhatsApp groups in Cuttack's Badambadi area helped residents coordinate aid, showing how tech amplifies community power.

4.2 Cleaner, Faster Governance

Ever tried sorting out a land dispute? In Cuttack, Bhulekh Odisha has been a game-changer. Farmers like Ramesh no longer trek to the tehsil office—over 100,000 land queries are handled online yearly. Online RTI filing cuts through red tape, letting people like schoolteacher Anita demand answers about delayed funds without endless paperwork.

4.3 Rallying the Vote

In the 2024 Odisha elections, candidates in Cuttack went digital. Young leaders used Instagram Reels and WhatsApp broadcasts to reach voters, hitting 70% of urban folks. NGOs ran voter awareness drives on Facebook, urging people to join gram sabhas in rural blocks like Mahanga.

4.4 Smarter Citizens

Urban schools in Cuttack use platforms like DIKSHA to teach kids about elections and rights. Over 5,000 teachers have been trained, helping students like Rohan understand how policies affect their lives. It's building a generation that's politically savvy and ready to engage.

These stories show how digital tools are making democracy more accessible in Cuttack—especially for those with a smartphone and a signal.

5. Challenges: The Roadblocks in Cuttack's Digital Path

Not everyone in Cuttack is riding the digital wave.

5.1 The Digital Divide

Cuttack city's buzzing with 4G, but in villages like Nischintakoili, internet is a luxury. Only 40% of rural Odisha has decent connectivity. Farmers like Suresh want to use Bhulekh but can't because their village has no signal. Many can't afford smartphones, and digital literacy is low—especially among older folks.

5.2 Fake News Fiasco

Social media is a double-edged sword. During the 2022 panchayat elections, fake WhatsApp messages about a candidate's background spread like wildfire in Cuttack, confusing voters. Misinformation can sway opinions, and locals often don't know how to spot fakes.

5.3 Cyber Threats

Cyberattacks are real. In 2023, Odisha saw 1,200 cyber incidents, some hitting Cuttack's e-governance portals. Imagine someone hacking your Aadhaar details from the Odisha One Portal—that's a worry for users like Anita, who files RTIs online.

5.4 Language and Access Gaps

Most apps are in English or standard Odia, leaving out tribal communities in Cuttack's outskirts who speak local dialects. If you're a farmer in Mahanga who doesn't read Odia well, good luck navigating the portal. These hurdles show that digital democracy isn't reaching everyone in Cuttack—yet.

6. Case Studies: Real Stories from Cuttack

6.1 City Smarts: Cuttack Municipal Corporation

The Cuttack Municipal Corporation (CMC) has gone digital in a big way. Residents like Priya pay property taxes or report garbage issues via the CMC app, cutting wait times by 60%. It's a win for busy urbanites who don't want to queue at government offices.

6.2 Rural Efforts: e-Panchayat in Salepur

In Salepur and Nischintakoili, e-Panchayat systems let villagers check meeting agendas online. Attendance at gram sabhas jumped 25%, but spotty internet means many still miss out. Suresh, a farmer, tried joining a virtual meeting but gave up when the signal dropped.

6.3 Digital Campaigns: 2022 Elections

During the 2022 panchayat polls, candidates in Cuttack used Facebook Live to chat with voters. One candidate's video reached 10,000 people, boosting turnout in urban wards. It showed how tech can bring politics closer to home.

Suggestions: Making Digital Democracy Work for All

Here's how Cuttack can bridge the gaps:

Close the Divide: Roll out affordable broadband in rural areas and subsidize smartphones. Imagine every farmer in Mahanga accessing Bhulekh easily.

Teach Tech: Run workshops to teach digital skills, especially for rural women and elders. A few hours could turn Suresh into a confident app user.

Speak Local: Make apps available in Odia dialects to include tribal communities.

Fight Fakes: Support local fact-checkers to stop election-time rumors on WhatsApp.

Stay Safe: Train officials and citizens on cybersecurity to protect data on portals like Odisha One.

Conclusion

Cuttack's journey into digital democracy is like a bustling marketplace—full of energy, promise, and a few hiccups. From Priya in the city fixing a streetlight with a tap on her phone to Ramesh in Nischintakoili finally checking his land records without a long trip to the tehsil office, digital tools are bringing government closer to the people. Apps like Bhulekh Odisha and the Odisha One Portal are making life easier, faster, and fairer, while social media lets young voters like Rohan rally for change in ways their parents never could. In Cuttack, democracy is no longer just about casting a vote—it's about having a voice, online and off.

But not everyone's invited to this digital party yet. For every Priya, there's a Suresh stuck without internet in a rural hamlet, or an Anita worried her data might end up in the wrong hands. The digital divide, fake news, and cyber risks are real hurdles, especially in Cuttack's villages where spotty networks and low tech know-how keep people on the sidelines. Tribal communities speaking local dialects often find apps unusable, and election-time rumors on WhatsApp can muddy the waters for voters.

The good news? These challenges aren't insurmountable. With smarter investments—like better broadband for Mahanga's farmers, workshops to teach Suresh how to use apps, or Odia-language interfaces for tribal folks—Cuttack can make digital democracy work for everyone. Local fact-checkers and cybersecurity training can keep trust intact, ensuring Anita's RTI filings stay safe. It's about building a system where every voice, from the city's crowded lanes to the quietest panchayat, counts equally.

Cuttack's story is India's story in miniature. It shows what's possible when tech meets democracy, but also what's at stake if we don't bridge the gaps. By working together—government, communities, and tech experts—Cuttack can lead the way, proving that digital democracy isn't just for the tech-savvy but for every citizen with a stake in India's future. Let's make it a democracy where no one's left offline.

Suggestions

1. Strengthen Rural Digital Infrastructure – Expand broadband and mobile network coverage to every gram panchayat in Cuttack.
2. Promote Digital Literacy – Organize community training programs focusing on women, elderly citizens, and marginalized groups.
3. Local Language Accessibility – Provide all e-governance services and apps in simple Odia and local dialects.
4. Combat Misinformation – Launch awareness drives, fact-checking portals, and school-level digital media literacy campaigns.
5. Enhance Cybersecurity – Train citizens to protect personal data and avoid online scams.
6. Inclusive Participation – Introduce online public consultations and village-level e-kiosks for democratic engagement.
7. Capacity Building for Officials – Train local government staff to guide citizens in using digital services.
8. Public–Private Partnerships – Collaborate with telecom companies, NGOs, and tech firms for faster implementation.
9. Regular Monitoring – Track progress of e-governance projects and make timely improvements.
10. Trust-Building Measures – Ensure quick responses to online grievances to boost public confidence.

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