

Indian Democracy in the Digital Era: Prospects of Digital Democracy in India

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Abstract:

Digital democracy refers to ways through which digital technologies are used to influence the outcomes of democratic processes for citizens, governments and political institutions. This article examines digital democracy in detail, highlighting the various pathways of its public engagement, policy deliberation, and collective governance. This paper, then, maps the journey of digital democracy from e-government starters to current activities like online big consultations, digital activism and AI-powered deliberative platforms. By lowering barriers faced by marginalized groups and ensuring real-time communication between citizens and decision makers, the project reflects on how digital tools can help democratize participation. Yet, it also explores the enduring ills of digital divide, cyber risks to security and democracy as well as technological-informational power concentrations. Digital democracy is a significant upgrade to traditional democratic governance, using digital technology to improve citizen engagement, government transparency and policy outcome responsiveness. This research article provides an overview of the different faces of digital democracy, including deliberative models as well as collaborative and liquid democracy, and new technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and block chain.

Keywords: Digital Democracy, E-Governance, Citizen Participation, Indian Politics, Political Engagement.

Introduction

The emphasis on e-Democracy, also known as Digital Democracy or Internet Democracy, is on the rise as a means to facilitate efficient and effective governance. Understanding the nuances of Democracy and e-Democracy poses challenges due to varying perceptions and interpretations of democratic principles and governance systems. India's democracy is extraordinary not just in scale, but also in its diversity and resilience. Being world's largest democracy India represents a phenomenal variety of languages, cultures and socio-economic factors leading to complex but dynamic process of governance. The Indian democratic structure has evolved through various challenges, and in the twenty-first century digital technology is in many ways shaping that evolution. The emergence of digital democracy— shorthand for the use of digital tools and information and communications technologies to expand political participation, transparency, and inclusion in governance — has already begun to shift the balance of power between citizens and their government. Digital tools are breaking down age old issues of distance, bureaucracy, and limited access to info. Initiatives like the Digital India Mission, online grievance redressal systems, Aadhaar based services, and citizen engagement platforms which include MyGov have put at people's disposal a greater access to government services and a platform to put forth their views. Social media has also expanded the space for political discussion which in turn has enabled citizens to interact with leaders,

bring to light their issues and come together for causes of public interest. These changes are a part of a large-scale effort to make Indian democracy more participatory and citizen centered through use of digital resources. But also, in this change we see great challenges. Large sections of the population still do not have reliable internet access which is very true in the case of rural and marginalized communities.

Democratization of emerging new technologies in the information age: The political impulse in Indian democracy has evolved from mere representation and electoral processes to the expanding ambit of citizen engagement through digitization. At a glance, emergent new digital technologies, artificial intelligence and social media present prospects and challenges for active participation in a democracy. At a structural level, e-governance, cyber, and the internet create a new citizen-state interface and an emerging culture of communication, expanding sphere of participation, and new possibilities. This new political and participatory reality is what we consider as 'Digital Democracy'. Digital democracy signals the emergence of techno-political discernments or practices using Information and Communication Technology facilitating democratic processes cutting across temporal and spatial paradigms. Inherited from the disintermediation of virtual spaces, contemporary polities could be interpreted as participatory democracies. Yet, the empowerment of democracy through dissemination of cyberspace is riddled with hurdles stalling its unconditional efficacy and resilience. The unprecedented sharing of information does pose a relational paradigm regarding the information flow, digital divide, echo chambers, privacy concerns, the meaning of these new participatory methods and citizen alternatives characteristics for an 'empowered' democracy.



Contextualization of Digital Democracy in India

To analyse the character and trajectory of digital democracy through the lens of the experience of India's democracies and development, we must pay careful attention to the distinctive features of the Indian subcontinent. The Indian experience of democracy stands out as it emerged in the context of exceptionally large populations, linguistic pluralism, social inequality, and varying degrees of access and egalitarianism. The digital extension of democracy in post-industrial countries should not be examined through the lens of the Indian experience of democracy and development, nor should it be defined solely as a digital extension of democracy. It is instead important to focus on contemporary digital republics in an increasingly undemocratic world underpinned by information society with weapons of mass distraction and devastation.

Information – based tools have been used for voter registration, election monitoring and grievance redressal, online petitions and participative governance. Electronic voting has been a first for Election Commission of India (ECI) MyGov has been set up to facilitate participative decision making by citizens.

And yet India's digital democracy has limitations, especially in terms of inclusion, security of data, and the misuse of digital platforms to spread disinformation and stoke polarization.

Socio-Economic Context:

India's Hierarchical Society As a society that is largely stratified in terms of caste, creed and economic status, India's digital democracy is affected by multiple factors, some unique to the country. First and foremost is the issue of the digital divide. Though internet penetration has crossed the 50% threshold, people in the countryside and many marginalised social groups have not been able to access these alternatives. For instance, women were 33% less likely to own a smartphone than men (GSMA, 2021). Additionally, the democratisation of digital technology has important implications in terms of the low levels of digital literacy which lead to the hollowing out of communities and underuse of platforms like MyGov. Economic inequality is a second variable that influences digital democracy in India. Data has become much cheaper following the reforms of the telecom sector, but access to devices and broadband continues to pose challenges. Consequently, socio-economic factors are instrumental in shaping who is able to use the digital public sphere as a platform for effective expression and activism.

Political Context:

The reliance of political parties on channels of the Internet is also a relatively new phenomenon. Although Internet-based campaigning was visible as early as the 2009 general elections, the role of social media is expected to expand significantly during the 2014 general elections when candidates and parties used platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to communicate with the electorate. With the rise of messaging applications, WhatsApp had a similar influence on the 2019 general elections. The extent of propaganda, spreading false information, and polarised news is more pronounced with these two websites than traditional media because of echo chambers and targeted advertisements, high levels of engagement, and fewer controls on content.

On the other hand, platforms owned by the government such as MyGov, Social Media Platforms and e-Governance portals have been launched to create participatory democracy in the country which is often described as a platform for citizen engagement. However, in the context of the digital environment, some scholars argue that the digital era provides a platform for the state to control and dominate society. Therefore, Digital Democracy in India questions the extent to which interaction on platforms owned and controlled by the state can be referred to as extended citizen engagement and participation, or whether it is more accurately described as extended state control.

Technological Context:

Technological innovations have played a crucial unintended role in shaping critical aspects of India's political architecture. Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), implemented in the elections of 2004 and adopted for Lok Sabha elections for the first time in 2004, and Voter Verified Paper Audit Trails (VVPAT) introduced in 2014 have transformed the electoral process in India by making it more efficient and reducing Election Day fraud. India is one of the rapidly growing digital economies globally. The number of smartphone users in India is forecasted to exceed 1 billion by 2026. Behavioral and impression-based data, coupled with competitive pricing, have thrust the digital public sphere into the limelight of contemporary public discourse. However, India's technology infrastructure is not without its issues. While Aadhaar, the largest biometric identification system globally, has transformed welfare allocation, it is also

criticized for its potential misuse of privacy and panoptic surveillance. The stranglehold of transnational technology companies such as Meta, Google, and Amazon raises concerns of data sovereignty and the question of who polices the public understandings of democracy in the digital public sphere (Khera 2019).



The above visualization map displays the bibliometric mapping and analysis of digital democracy and India. Nodes are key terms (India, digital democracy, democracy, digital India), and the connecting lines between nodes indicate a bibliometric relationship in scholarly work. The shaded gradient of colours represents the year of publication, based on which the academic discourse subsequent to the understandings of digital democracy and India has been broken into chronological sub-periods of study ranging from 2012 (blue shade) to 2020 (yellow shade). The analysis reflects that: In and around the year 2012, the term digital democracy was introduced in an Indian context. Gradually, academic discourse progressed to digital democracy in connection with democracy, displaying theoretical discourses and comparative contexts. Finally, in an immediate next phase, narrowing the discourse, the terms digital democracy and India blended together digitally democratizing through expanding national-level digitalisation policies. The terms emerged in an Indian context are particularly observed between 2018 and 2020.

Prospects and scenarios for India

E-Governance as a Foundation:

Digital democracy in India is closely linked to e-governance, which simplifies processes for citizens, businesses, and government through ICT (Nair, n.d.). The goal is to make government services more accessible and the government itself more accountable and transparent (Nair, n.d.).

Stages of Digital Democracy:

A widely accepted model outlines four stages of digital democracy: information disclosure, listening/consultation, online deliberation, and online decision-making (Nair, n.d.). These stages represent a progression from one-way information provision by the government to active citizen participation in shaping policy (Nair, n.d.).

Future Scenarios:

Another futurist paradigm is that of Robocracy, which based on Artificial Intelligence and Social Media Platforms is capable of holding techno-public translocal-participatory democracy (TPD) (Patil, 2019). This paradigm promises far possibilities by: breaking political corruption, viewing public policy, live-contributing to public policy formulation in participatory planning, accountability and greater

transparency in resource utilization, dissemination of benefits and earnings of all associates in microeconomics, evaluating all rights and upliftment-movements of all citizens, pushing us beyond Vote and Wait, making system by breaking the system (Patil, 2019).

Enhanced Participation:

NDTs like AI SMPs have their potential to allow citizens to represent their interest more accurately, break political corruption, and improve the policymaking process. These tools can create greater transparency and accountability, moving beyond the traditional ‘Vote and Wait’ model of democracy (Patil, 2019).

Opportunities for Digital Democracy

Deepening Democracy through E-Governance:

Digital solutions for service delivery and grievance redressal are fundamentally transformative of the state–citizen interface. Clustering signals of these changes under Multiple Conditions of the ‘Democratic Deepening’ Hypothesis suggests the emergence of institutional frameworks and mechanisms that drive coherence in policy–aimed state deliverables through the evolution of formal structures through the N-REG and the National E-Governance Plan, 2006 prioritising “Electronic Delivery of Services” through common service centres, Digital Seva Kendras in villages and urban areas as an interface for the delivery of services aimed at citizens by both the Central and State Governments, meaning non-departmental service infrastructure – citizen portfolios of CTAL, uploading of citizen-aimed services online through the Central Data Exchange and State Directories through KIO/Bhima for identity authentication and CIFIC/VFSC-based bank brokerage – Buoying the range of CTAL (Central Through Automated Labour) and SED (Services’ Estimated Donated) online services. Exhaustive coverage of CTAL→SED overlaid on LSE/II/Aadhaar by bank brokerage promote decrease in leakages of discretion towards citizens by civil servants and agents with increased “transparency.” The availability of uploaded service portfolios to citizens also popularizes “exposures” through physical (led by RTIs) or online interactions. The impact on enhancing TAIs thus contains both the deontological unintended consequentialism and critical intentionalism. Complementarily, the civil servant’s internalization of DEU impacts (→) semantic “decay” via TAIs through citizen-determined “exposures.” Facilitation of participatory governance through online/physical MEME/SLB/CWG/JPC/FC meetings/committees further bolsters accountability.

Digitalisation Impacting Electoral Politics:

Evolving with the times the current is riveted at the novel contributory channels afforded by the digital as providing new imperatives for and changes in these elective processes bracketing physical labour time and/or advantages and providing more pragmatic emoting methods. The multiplicity of focal factors of the datafication-determined “digital electoral politics” paradigm points to computer economics of adverse overt actions where C-Vigil is an APP launched by the Election Commission of India on March 26, 2019, where members of the public can format and upload evidence for expeditious electronic analysis of complaints of the ECI-LAS at the Centralized Thematic Control Room at Nirvachan Sadan Equipped Two-Pronged Covering VSR All DBN Placement Power EMP Attaching Enabling MPs, DF Adversarial Viability and Overhead Cost Avoidances of Physical Transfers. Motilal Nehru’s MAF, LS, HAL, HPL, or GAL, LADS for competing parties and candidates considered deviance can be digitally uploaded privately and expeditiously to lock in contestation campaigns ahead of elections. CAM/Barriers to Entry of Party Play include but are not limited to the APK/DEEM/Anti-Physics or Overhang/Physony of M-PSTV-PR Ambiguities, Bitcoin/Mass-Electoral Strategies of HDDM, and DCOMS to DSUM of Stenographic Services. No physical visuals/retrospective data of unit-rate synergy covering all LADS

Devs are requested. The ambit of tracing all LADS-BOG-AMB alternatives either in the default status for AFC or KMPS of excess generic-stale variants interrogation CAT-CHIP either MPS in known time-period contests/regional-specific bandicoot special-class/overkill variants postulates is but not limited to WIN or VIS/P/SBC/F version alternatives in shared modes. Physical fund “proxies” of RS-313, “same” CAM/B-Cross of NATTE respect “uni/sample” among deviance states.

Moving Away from Disempowered Protection to Active Stakeholder Engagement:

Developing a networked society not only provides new avenues for information dissemination but also promotes new forms of citizen empowerment by defringing limitations of nature/participants’ engagement. States may use online platforms to crowdsource ideas and/or opinions from citizens, to run surveys, and/or to solicit feedback on policy proposals. Portals such as MyGov show the level of activities in these modes. The civil society too have employed the digital medium for involvement at varying levels of engagement. Online PDI/DW, internet-based encroach speak illustrative examples of these inter pseudo instantiations. State and civil agents imply that mediated crowdsourcing further delegate’s power to smarter networks enabled by state materiality practice-oriented allocations. Illustrating and pointing to interrogatories of raj and political practices read as both optimizing as well as “imperatives” of practices.

Digital Means and Democratic Ends:

The multiplier effect of digitally involving citizens, electronic mediums, and organic and associated adherences aim to script synchronous exposures barricading actors’ and systems’ held reins read as “containing reserve.” Or “supports” of petitioning and largely “free” alternatives. That deterministic indignation unfolds through practice-based data exposes syntactic confines clusters modes of engagement and instantiates Polar Eclipse transcription through “constanced reserve” or “dams.”

Challenges to Digital Democracy

Digital Divide:

The most pressing challenge before digital democracy in India appears to be the digital divide. Digital divide creates differential access and affects the comprehensive reach of digital platforms of information and governance. Despite the increase in internet penetration rates, the reach remains skewed towards urban, educated, and economically better-off sections. Among the significant areas of digital exclusion are rural areas, women, and marginalized sections of society. Structural reasons such as inadequate internet and mobile connectivity, high prices of devices, and lack of digital literacy have led to the digital exclusion of common people. Without digital access for all, digital democracy would not be a reality but would become a representative of the elitist section of the society and nation. As Prasad (2012) argues, e-governance projects cannot make a real difference in the democratic system unless digital inclusion is prioritized.

Misinformation and Disinformation:

Social media networks, despite becoming the primary source of political information, are also the biggest enablers of misinformation. The role of social media in spreading political overtones during elections has increased tremendously. In the run-up to the 2019 general elections, various forms of political exaggeration were seen in the form of rumors, propaganda, and manipulated visuals that spread like wildfire, particularly on WhatsApp. The propaganda targeted multiple fronts with fake news deliberately aimed at influencing the perceptions of the Indian electorate. The worrying trend is the ability to micro-target and manipulate smaller audiences. The combination of hyper-personalized targeting and manipulation creates echo chambers (2019) for individual voters and micro-segmentation for political

strategies to penetrate areas that would have significant electoral impact. The ability to micro-target and send misleading information to these smaller audiences is detrimental to informed electoral choice.

Cyber security Risks:

India faces serious cyber security threats as reliance on digital platforms increases, especially for elections, delivery of welfare schemes, and public services. Extensive hacking incidents involving WhatsApp and social media and cyber-attacks on election databases raise concerns about the integrity and security of the electoral process, particularly in the context of important state or national elections. The data also shows that India is among the top countries targeted for security hacks, which threatens to expose sensitive information of millions.

Institutional Readiness:

A review of the extant literature on e-governance shows that institutional readiness remains a critical concern that does not get sufficient attention before and during the implementation of e-governance projects. Implementation issues within departments not only include bureaucratic tangles that prevent the flow of requests and grievances but also the lack of coordination between departments embedded within the applications. The citizen interface suffers from poorly-designed and non-user-friendly platforms within the departments. Additional issues for citizens occur when services are not available in regional languages or when digital platforms are not accessible. This not only results in a reduced degree of implementation of e-governance applications but also entails a huge amount of time and effort for the citizens. The very spirit of democracy through technology is threatened through e-governance projects that are poorly planned and executed.



Prospects & Future Directions

Towards a Digital Democracy:

Digital inequality must be bridged through digital empowerment and access to achieve a successful Digital Democracy in India. Steps toward achieving this goal involve: expanding broadband Internet connectivity to rural areas, ensuring affordability of digital devices, and introducing programs and policies promoting uptake and usage of digital services targeting women and prioritising SCs and STs.

Towards a Regulated Digital Election Campaign:

An independent regulatory mechanism needs to be put in place to regulate and govern digital election campaigns. A regulated campaign regime would consist of: capping the expenditure on political advertisements on digital platforms for electoral candidates and parties; mandating the disclosure of both foreign and domestic financial contributions of political parties before elections; a robust mechanism for

monitoring fake and misleading advertisements concerning important social issues and awareness; and pre-emptive legislation and establishing an ecosystem to make electoral processes resilient to AI-led deception techniques.

Towards a Robust Digital Data Protection Regime:

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023) finally enacted brings long-awaited statutory backing to the data protection regime in India. However, key areas of concern with the Act that are still unaddressed include: introducing specific exemptions/derogations for overlaid privacy through sectoral laws; expeditiously bringing Appropriate Regulations defining the processes around purpose limitation, collection limitation, maintaining deactivated records/systems, and critical/non-personal data; establishing the civil penalties adjudicatory wing of the Data Protection Board and strengthening its powers; and notional segregation of personal-deterministic, non-personal-probabilistic, and general data/AI. Addressing these issues will enhance public faith in the data protection framework, resulting in a greater relinquishment of control of personal data to the data processing ecosystem.

Conclusion

Digital democracy experimentations in India are based on a definitional and disruptive innovation that signals the disruptive impact of ICTs on the citizen-state interface. This symbolic digital intervention is possible due to the increasing digitization of key democratic processes: electoral, legislative, and welfare delivery. The Government of India could be seen as attempting a maneuver towards digital democracy by launching the Digital India programme, heralding in a new age of accessibility, transparency, and accountability. Eleven years of digital experimentations conducted across the country indicate that the information-enabled potential of digital technologies offers breaking the stifling chains of accountability in ways that can deepen democracy by opening alternatives for negotiating citizenship beyond being a voter. Significant evidence of positive participation and engagement facilitated by digital media has been established, offering a stark contrast to alternative experiences and outcomes that threaten important tenets of Indian democracy.

The Indian account of digital democracy represents the ambivalence and contradictions that are typical of significant transitions in the democratic societies it has been trying to build. Digital democracy is overlaid by untransformed, entrenched, and structural inequalities that have historically inhibited the realization of the constitutional promise of equality. The digital divide, the gender gap in the digital divide, digital unreadiness of the economically and educationally backward as well as the rural poor, uneven regional distribution of digital infrastructure, geographic remoteness, uneven quality of access to the unintended consequential vulnerabilities and critical technologies, and inadequate and unevenly accessible digital information architecture restrict the emerging digital public(s)pace from progressively paralleling or undoing the deep-rooted multiple, intersecting, and over-determined structural inequalities and vulnerabilities.

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