

Digital Inclusion and Grassroots Democracy: The Impact of Information Networks on Citizen Participation in India

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital technologies has changed the operation of democratic regimes around the world. Digital inclusion has become an important aspect of grassroots democratic government and engagement. The rapid expansion of information networks like mobile and computer internet, community radio and digital governance has created new channels for citizens to get involved in India. But obstacles such as the digital divide, differences in digital skills, cyber attacks, socio-economic imbalances and disinformation continue to impede fair participation. This study empirically analyzes the impact of digital inclusion on citizen involvement in local democratic process and government. A descriptive analysis was conducted to assess accessibility, awareness, citizen participation and challenges. The results show that information networks do greatly increase civic knowledge and involvement, yet barriers/challenges to inclusiveness continue to exist. In addition, this study also proposes policy-oriented proposals to improve grassroots democratic engagement by bridging socio-legal and digital gaps.

Keywords: Citizen Participation, Digital Inclusion, e-Governance, Grassroots Democracy, Information Networks.

Introduction

The essence of democratic government is inclusive citizen participation, allowing people to shape public policy and hold institutions to account. In India, the right to knowledge and reforms in local governance like the Panchayati Raj system have pursued democratic participation. In India participatory democracy is institutionalised through grassroots groups like Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local groups

(ULBs) that decentralise power and empower local populations. Civil society organizations also support this system by advocacy for awareness, mobilization, transparency and accountability notably among rural communities and marginalized groups, thus enhancing local governance.

Digital inclusion refers to equitable access to and meaningful use of digital technologies across all socio-economic groups. Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) is a key component to enhance the efficiency of digital platforms by improving their accessibility, usability, and fostering public trust in e-government services. In the context of grassroots democracy, digital inclusion has emerged as a catalyst that enables wider participation by connecting citizens to information networks. In rural India, access to information networks such as mobile internet, community radio, and digital governance platforms has the potential to strengthen awareness of rights, governance processes, facilitate participation in local decision-making, and bridge socio-economic and gender gaps in participation.

India presents a strong example of digital governance, with over 958 million active internet users as of January 2026, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges. Initiatives like 'Digital India' have integrated technology into governance, improving service delivery and citizen-state interaction through platforms such as MyGov and other e-governance systems. These information networks empower citizens as well as civil society to mobilize around issues like corruption, environmental protection, and social justice, etc., strengthening local democratic engagement at the grassroots level. However, this

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digital participation remains uneven across regions and communities.

Furthermore, e-democracy, with its participatory, liberal and deliberative paradigms, influences digital platforms so as to increase public engagement and political discourse. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have transformed grassroots democracy in India by boosting transparency, accountability and regime. The advent of digital technologies and information networks has changed the type, depth, and scope of public participation. Digital inclusion in India has expanded access to information networks, enabling citizens to participate in the democratic process, from policy debates to elections, with more knowledge and activism.

Indeed, as digital access has improved, involvement by marginalised and previously under-represented groups has increased. Furthermore, blockchain and Distributed Ledger Technologies (DLTs) are revolutionizing urban governance by providing transparent and immutable records, thereby increasing accountability and reducing corruption. However, even with these prospects, there are still some important gaps and limitations, particularly in rural set-ups, which constrain the use of digital platforms for inclusive participation.

Objectives of the Research

The research has been undertaken with the following aims: contribution of the information network in strengthening the democratic process and governance, emphasizing the necessity to overcome the digital divide so as to ensure equitable participation and assist inclusive institutions aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 10 and 16).

- To measure the extent of digital access and digital proficiency in rural communities.
- To assess the effectiveness of information networks in promoting transparency and accountability.
- To examine the role of information networks in influencing public participation in the democratic process and local governance.

- To identify gaps and obstacles in the implementation of digital inclusion initiatives.

Methodology

The current research adopted descriptive survey approach. Primary data was acquired through a standardized questionnaire to assess awareness, access and involvement level and obstacles. The target demographic includes residents of different socio-economic strata from rural and semi-urban parts of Odisha along with some stakeholders such as Government employees of the administrative department, academicians, political players and specialists on technology, policy and legal aspects. A total of 100 respondents were recruited by stratified random selection. In addition secondary data from various government papers and articles have been used to carry out a doctrinal analysis to show the impact, gaps and challenges.

Impact of Information Networks on Citizen Participation in India

Since 1990s, and basically after 2015, with the acceleration of the 'Digital India' campaign, information networks have emerged as a catalyst in India's democratic landscape and have reshaped the way citizens interact with political institutions and engage in governance. Their effect is multifaceted, encompassing both opportunities and challenges for inclusive and equitable participation.

Prospects

The development of information networks has connected rural and semi-urban populations to the democratic process. In India, the growth of internet connectivity has enhanced rapid, direct, and active citizen participation by enabling faster, inclusive, and decentralized political communication. Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc., foster real-time engagement, enabling citizens to express views, mobilize, and hold leaders accountable. It has reduced the barriers of distance, access, and literacy and has strengthened participatory democracy, paving the path for direct interaction with political leaders and fostering deliberative engagement through audio-video means.

Further, there is an enhancement in electoral participation and transparency. The Election Commission of India is employing ICT tools such as e-registration, digital rolls, and social media digital campaigns to boost voter turnout. Platforms like the National Voters' Service Portal offer easy access to electoral information, while EVMs and VVPAT systems enhance trust through transparency, accuracy, and efficiency.

Digital networks have fundamentally transformed governance by shifting it from a hierarchical, paper-based system to a more efficient, participatory, transparent, and data-driven model, because it reduces administrative delays, discretion, the number of intermediaries, cost; and fosters scale, speed, and reliability of public service delivery. It allows for direct, two-way communication. Digital platforms bring citizens, bureaucrats and private intermediaries together in a real time information ecosystem. E-governance and e-information projects have made public services more accessible, more convenient and more accountable. Digital platforms like MyGov and UMANG allow citizens to avail themselves of services, share ideas, provide feedback and take part in decision making and policy development, enabling active participation. Digital inclusion, e.g., audio/video conferencing, enhances involvement in local governance (Gram Sabhas, civic actions) by lowering barriers and costs of participation (time and travel). It enables the citizens to monitor and evaluate public services in real time, effectively, to make governance more adaptive and outcome-oriented. Digital tools such as publicly accessible information portals, grievance redressal systems like CPGRAMS, and online panchayat records make governmental action more visible, verifiable, and responsive at the grassroots level. Decentralized support mechanisms, along with steps like e-Gram Swaraj, e-District, Meri Panchayat, Panchayat Management System (PMS), and local digital platforms, encourage greater accountability and transparency in local governance. In fact, digital governance has remodeled the relationship between government and citizens (e.g. Bhagidari system initiated by the Government of Delhi).

Further, information networks have empowered civil society as well as grassroots movements. As

observed in the Anti-corruption campaign, e-platforms ease swift mobilization and collective action, enabling information sharing, crowdfunding, and coordination. Overall, it strengthens inclusive and issue-based democratic participation.

Constraints

No doubt, information networks have a significant contribution at grassroots level; however, persisting digital divides limit inclusive participation. Many rural residents, especially economically backward groups and women, confront limited accessibility of digital devices, inadequate internet connectivity, along with a lack of digital literacy, that reinforces socio-economic inequalities within rural community. It renders digital democracy more available to a comparatively small, relatively educated segment and excludes the rest of the rural population.

Misleading information on e-platforms threatens democratic participation. Social media has become a propaganda to propagate politically driven content and fake news. It fosters segmentation, social tension, and echo chambers that limit diverse viewpoints and impair informed democratic deliberation.

Further, cybersecurity and data privacy concerns limit citizen engagement. Booming cases of digital arrest, data breaches, misuse of personal information, and other cybercrimes reduce trust in digital platforms. Furthermore, weak enforcement of laws prompts uncertainty and daunts participation in e-governance. The use of digital surveillance also raises anxiety for grassroots democracy, since technology like facial recognition and data monitoring can be used to follow and undermine local opposition. Basically, it hinders engagement by activists and marginalized groups.

However, institutional and political barriers hinder the effectiveness of information networks. Weak infrastructure, limited awareness and lack of local language inclusion hinder accessibility, while the strategic use of digital channels for political manipulation erodes democratic integrity and participation.

Dimensions	Pre-Digital Inclusion	Post-Digital Inclusion
Access to information	Limited information through officials, print media, local elites	Direct, real-time access through digital platforms and devices like smartphones
Level of Citizen Awareness	Low or limited awareness of rights, services, schemes, governance, or democratic process	Increased awareness through e-portals, social and electronic media, digital campaigns
Citizen Participation	Mostly offline (Gram Sabhas, elections) and low turnout	Hybrid participation due to e-governance, online platforms, social media activism
Marginalized and Weaker Communities	Significant exclusion of rural population, vulnerable, and socio-economically backward groups	Enhanced inclusion via internet connectivity, digital initiatives, digital ID, smartphones
Transparency and Accountability	Obscure process: reliance on intermediaries	Enhanced through open and easily accessible data, digital processes, digital grievance mechanisms
State-Citizen Interaction	One-way and hierarchical	More and direct interaction, feedback-driven (portals, apps)

Issues and Challenges in Digital Inclusion and Citizen Participation at the Grassroots Level

- **Digital Divide and Infrastructure Constraints:** Inclusive participation is hindered by uneven and inadequate access to the internet, digital services, electricity, and network infrastructure across the rural regions, gender, and socio-economic groups, primarily in remote areas.
- **Socio-Economic and Gender Inequalities:** Equitable digital participation is impeded by illiteracy, income disparities, social position, and gender-based barriers, such as restricted access to devices for women because of social norms and safety concerns.

- **Language and Content Barrier:** Local communities are unable to access digital platforms due to the unavailability of content in local languages.
- **Awareness and Information Accessibility Gaps:** Some citizens are unable to avail services due to limited awareness about digital platforms, e-governance services, and community information networks, compounded by fragmented and inconsistent information sources.
- **Low Digital Literacy and Skill Gap:** Participatory outcomes are adversely affected due to limited proficiency with digital tools, e-governance platforms, and rapidly evolving technologies, particularly among less-educated and older populations.
- **Resistance to Technology Adoption:** citizen engagement is reduced due to cultural factors, mistrust of government systems, or unfamiliarity with digital tools.
- **Misinformation and Information Overload:** Informed decision-making is negatively impacted by unverified or overwhelming information, reducing trust.
- **Privacy, Security, and Cyber Threat Concerns:** Instances of personal data misuse, cyber fraud, phishing, and online security risks generate fear and distrust, and discourage citizens from occupying with e-governance tools.

Constitutional and Legal Framework in India

The grassroots democratic foundation in India was laid down by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992), which confer constitutional mandates to Panchayati Raj Institutions across rural regions (Articles 243 A to 243 O) and Urban Local Bodies or Municipalities across urban regions (Articles 243 P to 243 ZG). These reforms have strengthened local self-governance and democratic inclusion, establishing a three-tier system (Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zilla Parishad) at village, block, and district levels,

respectively, reservation for backward classes, and participatory forums like Gram Sabhas.

Further, the participation of civil society in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of developmental works has been increased; and the governance system has become more accessible and responsive at the grassroots level, establishing a decentralized governance mechanism and a strong institutional framework to confer power, responsibility, and financial autonomy to local bodies.

The Right to Information Act, 2005, which empowers citizens to access information and oversee public services, has been enacted for transparency and accountability. The Information Technology Act, 2000, along with other Penal laws, addresses cybercrime and regulates cyberspaces to make the digital platform safe and user-friendly. Additionally, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 acts as a shield to ensure privacy rights, security, and accountability, and to safeguard the personal data of citizens, regulating its collection, storage, and processing by government and private entities. Together, these legal frameworks enhance trust in grassroots democracy and governance, enabling informed and secure citizen participation through digital networks.

Data Analysis

The data has been analyzed based on the responses collected through a questionnaire to find out the ground realities across rural and semi-urban regions.

Regarding accessibility and usability, the majority of responses (73%) indicate that rural and semi-urban population have regular access to digital devices like smartphones, computers, either directly or indirectly. There is also an increase in the dependency on the Common Service Centre. About 68% of the respondents viewed that the internet and other e-platforms are being used regularly to get information about democratic mechanisms and government programs, highlighting that e-platforms are becoming the key sources of governance information. However, some portion of the remote population lacks

regular access, indicating persistent gaps in digital inclusion.

With regard to awareness and participation, 79% of the respondents agreed with the statement that accessibility of online information reduces information asymmetry and increases citizens' awareness of rights, duties, Government schemes, and civic issues, boosting civic and political engagement. 74% respondents gave opinion that e-platforms have increased citizen participation in the decision-making process. A strong majority of respondents (86%) felt that accessibility of digital information has increased the level of participation in local governance and democratic procedure, confirming that information networks, alongside offline channels, encourage grassroots participation. Further, 78% respondents noted that digital inclusion, reliable e-governance platforms create trust, facilitate communication with officials, enhance democratic accountability, and make local governance more transparent and accountable.

A strong majority of respondents (81%) affirmed that broader digital infrastructure coverage, particularly in urban and remote regions, is essential. However, 72% respondents supported the need for community-based networks (radio, local information centers) for bridging gaps, where internet access or digital literacy is limited.

In answering the open-ended question on challenges, respondents highlighted several issues. Firstly, uneven internet connectivity limits equitable participation. Secondly, the unavailability of information in vernacular languages and digital illiteracy prevent citizens from using the e-governance portals directly without any misguiding intermediaries. Thirdly, fake news or misleading information affects decision-making. Fourthly, privacy and security concerns, and ethical issues of surveillance, reduce the willingness of citizens to engage with e-platforms. Fifthly, cyber-victimization, digital arrests, and algorithmic manipulation increase fear and tensions among citizens and authorities, posing significant challenges to trust and participate in online processes. Sixthly, some people are unable to use devices and internet, either

due to social barriers or economic conditions, creating unequal participation.

Findings

The study demonstrates that digital inclusion significantly strengthens democratic governance and grassroots democratic participation in India. Information networks facilitate awareness, participation, and transparency, but challenges persist.

Digital inclusion enhances awareness and participation, but coverage is uneven. Community information networks are crucial for reaching disadvantaged groups. Persistent barriers include limited internet access, low digital literacy, misinformation, privacy and cybersecurity concerns, and socio-economic inequalities. Digital platforms increase transparency and trust in governance when accessible and reliable. Policy interventions are needed to bridge digital gaps and empower citizens at the grassroots level.

Recommendations and Conclusion

A multi-faceted approach is imperative to build a truly inclusive grassroots democracy in India, ensuring that the democratic process has become more inclusive, accountable, and resilient. The policymakers may adopt some strategic interventions to strengthen grassroots democracy and citizen participation, including expansion of affordable access to digital infrastructure across rural regions (broadband, mobile networks), like the BharatNet project, high-level digital literacy campaigns, and civic education about effective use of digital tools to empower disadvantaged groups, particularly in rural and remote regions. Other interventions include development of inclusive e-governance platforms with multilingual and user-friendly interfaces to ensure accessibility for all segments of society; inclusion of community information networks (community-driven platforms) to enhance information dissemination among disadvantaged populations; availability of government data in open space to ensure transparency; address socio-economic impediments by subsidizing tools and internet access; strengthening of government-citizen interaction via online consultations and grievance redressal mechanism; and last but not the least to

heighten misinformation monitoring system, cybersecurity, and awareness.

Digital inclusion is not merely a technological ambition but a democratic imperative. E-networks can diminish inequalities, intensify transparency, and boost citizen participation at local level by expanding access to information and fostering civic engagement. India can not only deepen grassroots democracy but also set a global example of how technology and citizen empowerment go hand in hand by transforming access into meaningful participation.

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