**Digital Democracy and E-Governance in India: The ‘Eternal Summer’ of Good Governance**

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***Abstract***

*As new global standards of governance emerge, citizens of various countries are compelling their governments towards efficient and accountable governance, as they increasingly become aware of the costs of corruption. In furtherance of this objective, India seeks to provide digital democracy through E-Governance and the launch of the ‘Digital India’ initiative. Undoubtedly, e-governance brings in the automation required to weed out corruption. Citizen interaction with the government is effortless, smooth and faster thereby leading to the enhancement of good governance. This paper analyses the various programs adopted by the Government of India to provide ‘Digital Democracy’ to its citizens and how these initiatives have impacted the growth of corruption.*

*Governments across the world are seeking to improve upon their efficiency and transparency as a part of their online digital transformation during these pandemic times. The world has gone online where people have switched over to digital formats of work and governance in an almost painless manner. It is in this scenario that ‘Digital Democracy’ in India is visualised as the ‘Eternal Summer’ of good governance, which will elevate the country to new levels of achievement and success.*

**Keywords:** E-Governance, Good Governance, Digital Democracy, Corruption, Digital India

*Transparency is the key to good governance & e-governance is the only effective way of transparent governance.*

- *Narendra Modi*[[2]](#footnote-2)

‘Digital transformation’ has become the new governance paradigm in these Covid-19 times. In the past few years, digital technology has become the precursor of accelerated economic growth, the world over. In India as well, it is a vital factor which has enhanced the promotion of social and economic equity by increasing the access to information for everyone and reducing corruption. Today, there exists a dire need for greater attention to the conduct of external and internal affairs of governance of countries. No nation can afford to ignore the corrupt and unethical behaviour of their officials as it can result in misallocation of resources[[3]](#footnote-3) and an increasing inefficiency in governance. For democratic processes to unfold, it is essential to incorporate transparency, accountability and public participation in the systems of governance.[[4]](#footnote-4)

India is a country whose diversity of culture, tradition, language and geography is unparalleled. The British rule impacted the monetary condition of the people and left a huge number of people below the minimal socioeconomic benchmarks.[[5]](#footnote-5) Good governance i.e. providing maximum services to people in a short period of time[[6]](#footnote-6), is the need of the hour. It is e-governance providing for ‘direct democracy’[[7]](#footnote-7) which can fulfil the dream of good governance. Governments across the world are seeking to improve upon their efficiency and transparency as a part of their online digital transformation. This has resulted in a huge expansion of digital services and online platforms.[[8]](#footnote-8) The aim being to transform the paper-based traditional systems used to interact with citizens, into faster and smarter services which the ease of technology brings.[[9]](#footnote-9) India is one of the few countries which has undertaken many projects under e-governance to improve the quality of interaction between the society and government.[[10]](#footnote-10)

During the pandemic there has been a sudden spurt in the usage of digital technology on account of the necessary precaution of ‘social distancing’. The world has gone online where people have switched over to digital formats of work and governance in an almost painless manner. Consequently, every government is displaying its digital agility to salvage the ailing citizenry. In fact, there has been a complete refurbishment of governmental attitude. It is in this scenario that ‘Digital Democracy’ in India is visualised as the ‘Eternal Summer’ of good governance[[11]](#footnote-11), which aims to elevate the country to new levels of achievement and success. E-government and e-democracy are fields which tap the potential of the internet to promote transparent governance and accountability, ultimately deepening the democratic culture.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**From Aristotle to Facebook: The New Paradigm of ‘Digital Democracy’ and E-Governance**

Ancient Greece, with diversity in culture and manifold ideas, was able to harmonise conflicting interests and opinions through platform for debate and discussion. Citizens could listen to public debates and take collective decisions in the amphitheatres.[[13]](#footnote-13) Flash forward to the 21st century where social media and internet have bridged all the gaps between people in the world. During the second reported quarter of 2020, 3.14 billion people have been using the core products of Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram and Messenger.[[14]](#footnote-14) These online digital platforms are the new public spaces where politics is discussed and social causes are debated. It is the modern version of the Greek amphitheatre.[[15]](#footnote-15) It is where democracy thrives today. The online platforms have paved the path for ‘Digital Democracy’ in India where the participation of people in the day-to-day activities has seen a manifold increase. Narendra Modi rightly says, “The beauty of e-governance is that a few keystrokes can bring smiles on a million faces.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Governance pertains to “safeguarding the legal rights of all citizens” and more importantly, it is concerned with “ensuring equitable access to public services and the benefits of economic growth to all.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The government for carrying out its purpose must be “transparent in its dealings, accountable for its activities and faster in its responses.”[[18]](#footnote-18) This is an extremely significant component of good governance. Kate Oakley, defines e-governance as “a set of technology-mediated processes that are changing both the delivery of public services and the broader interactions between citizens and government”.[[19]](#footnote-19) E-governance allows the government to redefine its role as being more citizen-oriented and improve its efficiency of public service while reducing corruption. E-governance ensures that the interaction between the government and its citizens is “friendly, convenient, transparent and less expensive.”[[20]](#footnote-20) E-governance is defined as the application of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to the governance, to bring in Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent (SMART) governance.[[21]](#footnote-21) The process of e-government involves four stages. Firstly, publication of information on website for citizens to seek knowledge about procedures, governing the delivery of different services. Secondly, clients can download applications for receiving services. Thirdly, electronic delivery of documents. Lastly, electronic delivery of services.[[22]](#footnote-22) Consequently, e-governance uses the electronic medium to enhance and augment good governance.

Digital democracy, according to Hacker & Dijk is “a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space, and other physical conditions, using ICT or computer-mediated communication (CMC) instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional (“analogue”) political practices.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Online spaces have replaced the physical spaces as venues of politics and social interaction. The traditional, inefficient and lethargic democratic systems have lost their effectiveness. It is time to go digital especially in the times of the pandemic. Digitalisation makes day-to-day administration easier as digital tools offer an efficient way of governance.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Technology Tackles Corruption and Boosts Integrity**

According to Transparency International, India is ranked at position no. 80 in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI-2019).[[25]](#footnote-25) In addition to this, the degree of corruption in India becomes evident from the remarks of late Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, Ex-Prime Minister of India when he stated that, “out of each rupee spent on such programs only 15 paisa reached the beneficiary with 40 paisa being spent on overheads and 45 paisa lost due to corruption.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Government corruption and mismanagement costs lives and loss of financial resources. In the current situation of a global health crisis, the prevalence of corruption is further fuelling a spiralling tragedy. Corruption undermines efficiency and reduces the fragile trust that society places in the government. Further, the pandemic has created conditions in which corruption can flourish.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Transparency International, the NGO, defines corruption as “the abuse or misuse of entrusted power for private gain.”[[28]](#footnote-28) According to the World Bank, corruption means when, “public office is abused for private gain when an official accepts, solicits or extorts a bribe.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Corruption pertaining to e-government is usually referred to as “administrative or bureaucratic corruption, ranging from petty to grand corruption.”[[30]](#footnote-30) It is important that both grand and small-scale corruption activities are reduced and it can be done through government e-solutions such as e-procurement, e-customs etc.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Dwivedi rightly asserts that, “corruption is the biggest barrier to Good Governance and protection of the common good.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Bardhan defines corruption as the “use of public office for private gains.”[[33]](#footnote-33) The misuse of the public office can occur through various mediums like “bribery, extortion, and influence peddling, nepotism, embezzlement, fraud, insider trading and conflict of interest or speed money.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

Technology is the most promising driver of integrity. The data-driven, tech-based anti-corruption solutions enable transparency which is critical for anchoring confidence and restoring trust in government. Technological innovations can disrupt corruption risks and boost integrity systems. Digitalised data has become a critical asset to “detect and deter fraud risks, complex networks and corrupt practices.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

Tech eliminates or minimises the usage of paper and opening up of data. Consequently, it cuts through the red-tape and through the automation of public services it reduces solicitation of risks, such as business permits and tax payments. Blockchain technologies posit secure transactions and tamper-proof records.[[36]](#footnote-36) This makes them corruption resilient with an unalterable audit trail. Further, digital identity solutions facilitate due diligence to manage compliance risk and prevent money laundering.[[37]](#footnote-37) India has been significantly successful in its experience with e-governance and ICT initiatives in improving the accessibility and reducing corruption.[[38]](#footnote-38)

It is essential to introduce e-government platforms and digital tools which can contribute to greater transparency as they assist in tackling corruption in government services. These are promoted by international organisations and the World Bank as the adverse economic impact of administrative corruption include “reduction in effectiveness and efficiency of public services, inflated transaction costs, distorted incentives and undermining the rule of law.”[[39]](#footnote-39) As per the World Bank corruption is one of the “greatest obstacles to economic development and social development.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

**‘Digital India’: Leveraging the Power of Technology**

The Government of India under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi has emphasised the significance of E-Governance in the country. Accordingly, with the aim of transforming India from a “slow-moving bureaucratic economy into a digitally empowered society”, the government has launched the ambitious ‘Digital India’ initiative.[[41]](#footnote-41) In December 2018, Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi while speaking about the Digital India initiative said, “The Digital India initiative apart from increasing our convenience is also enhancing transparency and enabling reduction of corruption.”[[42]](#footnote-42) The initiative was launched to “leverage the power of technology and to make technology more accessible.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Its objective is to reduce corruption and to bring public delivery service at the doorsteps of the poor, to connect and empower people in areas relating to health, education, labour and employment, commerce, etc. The initiative comprises of several projects which will focus on better governance, knowledge and universal phone connectivity across the country.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The ‘Digital India’ initiative comprises of three major components which form the fundamental basis of the program. The program is driven by universal digital literacy, digital delivery of all government services to citizens, and development of secure and stable digital infrastructure. This is being carried out by aiming to connect the rural areas with high-speed internet networks. This has proved to be the most viable option during the public health crisis of Covid-19, when almost all activities are being conducted online to maintain ‘social distancing’. In fact, under the program the effort is to shift the governance from E-Governance to M-Governance where ‘M’ stands for Mobile-Governance.

The Government of India has launched a number of schemes such as BharatNet, Bharatmala, Startup India and Standup India, Make-in India, Sagarmala, industrial corridors, UDAN-RCS, dedicated freight corridors, and E-Kranti which are interconnected with the ‘Digital India’ initiative.[[45]](#footnote-45) Some of the significant initiatives under this enterprise are:

* Digi-Locker – To store crucial documents like Voter ID Card, Pan Card, BPL Card, Driving License, education certificates, etc. in the cloud, this service called the Digi-Locker has been introduced.
* MyGov.in – A significant portal which works as an online platform to engage citizens in governance through a “Discuss”, “Do” and “Disseminate” approach.
* eSign Framework – To enable users to digitally sign a document online using Aadhaar authentication. This service will provide a convenient method of transacting business.
* Swach Bharat Mission mobile app - Organizations and citizens can through the use of this app access information regarding the cleanliness drive and achieve the goals of the mission.
* National Scholarship Portal – With the objective of making the scholarship process easy, this national portal has been begun. From submitting the application, verification, sanction and disbursal to end beneficiary, everything related to government scholarships can be done on this single online portal.
* eHospital – People can avail services like online registration, payment of fees and appointment, online diagnostic reports, checking on the availability of blood online, etc. through this Online Registration System.[[46]](#footnote-46) The eHospital services have made it easy to take online appointments in 322 major hospitals.[[47]](#footnote-47)
* Digitize India Platform - This initiative will lead to the digitization of data and records on a large scale in the country to make easy and quick access to them possible.
* Bharat Net - Under this initiative, a high-speed digital highway will connect all 250,000 Gram Panchayats of the country. This is the world’s largest rural broadband project using optical fibre.[[48]](#footnote-48) Over 1.19 Lakh Gram Panchayats have been connected through Optical Fibre to provide seamless high-speed internet connectivity.[[49]](#footnote-49)
* Wi-fi Hotspots - Development of high speed BSNL wi-fi hotspots throughout the country is yet another initiative to improve the digital connectivity in India.
* Next Generation Networks - Launched by BSNL, this service will replace 30-year old telephone exchanges to manage all types of services like voice, data, multimedia and other types of communication services.
* Electronics Development Fund - The fund will be set up to support the manufacturing of electronics products that would help create new jobs and reduce import. The funds will promote innovation, research and product development to create a resource pool within the country.
* Centre of Excellence on Internet of Things (IOT) - In partnership with NASSCOM, DeitY and ERNET in Bangalore, Centre of Excellence will enable rapid adoption of IoT technology and encourage a new growth strategy. IoT will help the citizens in services like transport system, parking, electricity, waste management, water management and women’s safety to create smart cities, smart health services, smart manufacturing and smart agriculture, etc.

In addition to the above services, the initiative has achieved a number of goals. 55 lakh post-offices have been digitally connected and approximately 1 crore digital transactions take place in a day. 65 Lakh Common Service Centers (CSC) are functional and 2.39 lakh gram panchayat’s have the presence of CSC. Pensioners do not need to visit the bank branch which disburses their pension every year. BHIM UPI: A fintech innovation of India that has transformed the digital payment ecosystem. It has made it possible to make payments using a simple and easy to use mobile app.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Driven by the explosion in mobile connectivity and propelled by the iconic BharatNet program leading to nationwide permeation of internet infrastructure, India is becoming one of the fastest digitising nations in the world.[[51]](#footnote-51) This in turn has led to an exponential growth of data consumption and the emergence of start-ups in the digital transformation space thereby creating new livelihoods, services and wealth for Indians.

**Tech Turning the Tide against Corruption**

“Political will can turn the tide against corruption.”[[52]](#footnote-52) No nation in the world is immune from corruption. Corruption destroys the ability of any government to help in the growth of the economy and it erodes the trust of the people in public institutions. Therefore, it is extremely important to keep pace with the development in technology and its use in combatting corruption and graft. It is here that e-governance can be used to fight corruption.

Kehoe notes that corrupt practices such as bribes, kickbacks, and gifts raise the real and hidden cost of doing international business, which negatively affects consumers.[[53]](#footnote-53) It is true that access to digital information provides the common man with information and knowledge of the public and business transactions, which in turn creates an open and free society. This kind of a transparent economy leads to a lower level of corruption.[[54]](#footnote-54) Technology can play a vast role in depressing corruption by its automated processes and access to information. Some of the techniques and measures to reduce and eliminate corruption through online portals and web-based technology are discussed hereunder:

*Social Security Entitlements -* The absence or inaccessibility of social sector data results in seepages in entitlements and benefits like healthcare and old age pensions.[[55]](#footnote-55) Corruption occurs in such instances when public officials keep a cut for giving what is rightly due to citizens and when citizens bribe officials to avail what is more than due. Taking the example of the state of Uttar Pradesh in India, the Janani Suraksha Yojna scam disclosed that a woman declared herself pregnant five times in ten months to avail the benefits of the scheme.[[56]](#footnote-56) To plug in such occurrences, the Indian Government has launched the Unique Identification Number initiative (Aadhaar), where the biometric and demographic data of the Indian citizens is linked to social benefits like public distribution system entitlements.[[57]](#footnote-57)

*Petty Corruption -* Petty corruption can be easily reduced through the elimination of human contact. Discretionary power in activities like licence renewals for vehicles, shops etc. is a source of bribery.[[58]](#footnote-58) The availability of online digital formats for the submission of forms and documents for renewal is an uncomplicated method of restricting trivial corruption. Another source of bribery is through the civic enforcement activities like challaning offenders of traffic regulations.[[59]](#footnote-59) This kind of corruption can be dealt through camera aided signals, computerised check-points and generation of E-challans.[[60]](#footnote-60)

*Corruption in Public Procurement -* Public procurement is a government activity most vulnerable to corruption. This is due to the “the volume of transactions and the financial interests at stake”" in addition to “the complexity of the process, the close interaction between public officials and businesses, and the multitude of stakeholders.”"[[61]](#footnote-61) E-auctions and e-procurement structures can effortlessly remove corruption activities like kickbacks to government. The transparent edifice and fair bidding arrangements eliminate the fraud, collusion and graft imbedded in public procurement. For instance, Chile's electronic public procurement portal, ‘Chilecompra’ has helped to effectively and efficiently deliver citizen services and goods and by bringing transparency in public spending.[[62]](#footnote-62) Additionally, promoting transparency in the process of recruitments for various public sector positions through the use of online and digital platforms will eliminate the virus of sleaze. Web-based technology for e-recruitment improves recruitment efficiency, reduces costs and most significantly removes the potential for bribery.[[63]](#footnote-63)

*Mobile-based Money Transfer Systems* - Large scale corruption of black money laundering can be curtailed through currency-less or cash-less futuristic banking systems. Encouraging digital money transactions and imposing a cap on large cash transactions will assist in truncating evasion and corruption. Though India is primarily a cash-based economy, there is a need to reduce the system of payments in cash as “cashless transactions and corruption are negatively corelated.”[[64]](#footnote-64). Small scale corruption can also be curbed though the use of mobile-based money transfer systems like Paytm as digital transactions are comparatively easy to trace.[[65]](#footnote-65) In East Africa, the mobile payment service ‘M-Pesa’ by the population is a huge success story which made monetary transfers easier and also fought corruption.[[66]](#footnote-66)

*Crowdsourcing Information on Corruption -* According to Elers, “social media had given the average person powerful new tools to fight endemic corruption” and “now people have new tools to identify” corruption and “demand change.”[[67]](#footnote-67) The Indian online initiative of ‘I Paid a Bribe’ focuses on retail corruption and is one of the largest online crowdsourced anti-corruption platform in the world.[[68]](#footnote-68) This website empowers citizens, governments and organisations to confront retail corruption.

Technology can never be the ultimate quick-fix solution. To harness the potential, governments have to ensure that the changes and innovations take place at all levels. New technologies in the form of websites, mobile phones, applications etc., facilitate the reporting of corruption; provide access to official information; monitor the efficiency off social services.[[69]](#footnote-69) These e-governance activities endeavour to improve the government interaction with citizens.

**Conclusion**

The objective and aim of good governance is to provide reliable, fast-paced and transparent government services. On account of the rapid growth in the usage of internet and technology, especially during the pandemic, the governments have altered their working techniques from manual to digital and are increasingly providing services through online platforms to the citizens. IT and Digital technology have emerged as the most effective instruments to provide hassle-free services to citizens.[[70]](#footnote-70)

India through the introduction of the ‘Digital India’ initiative is striving to transform access to public services through the use of digital technology. The improved online infrastructure and the increased internet connectivity is an endeavour to reduce corruption at various levels. E-governance not only levies a huge check on corruption but also improves the generation of revenue for the government. Additionally, it lowers administrative costs and increases the response time of the government services.

The explosion in technology like big data for capturing, data mining for detecting, mobile applications for increasing accessibility and forensic tools for reducing opportunities for corruption,[[71]](#footnote-71) has immense potential to bring in transparency and the ‘eternal summer’ of good governance. However, digitalisation and e-governance cannot guarantee the end of corruption. It can only provide a suitable platform to reducing corruption in the society. Ultimately, the elimination of corruption is determined by the character of the people manning the public sector systems in any country. As Naskar says, “In order to build a truly civilized society, we need, not democratic government, but meritocratic government.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

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