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Digital Governance as a Catalyst for Social Reform in India

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Abstract

Digital governance means using technology to deliver public services, share information, and make government more open and responsive to citizens. This article looks at how digital governance is helping social reform in India. It traces the journey from early laws like the Information Technology Act, 2000 and the Right to Information Act, 2005 to major initiatives such as Digital India, Aadhaar, Direct Benefit Transfer, Jan Dhan accounts, and UPI. It shows how these efforts have reduced middlemen, improved transparency, included more women, farmers, students, and people with disabilities, and made services easier to reach. The article also discusses key challenges: the digital divide, privacy and data protection, technical failures, cyber fraud, and fake news. A short international comparison with Estonia and the United Nations E-Government Survey shows what other countries have achieved and where India's low-cost public platforms stand. The article concludes that technology alone is not enough. Reform will be real only when digital tools are inclusive, secure, available in local languages, and trusted by the people they are meant to serve.

Key-words - responsive, governance, transparency, reform, digital-divide.

Introduction

Think about twenty years ago, how a common person in India got a ration card or a pension. They used to stand in long queues, went from one office to another, and often had to wait for a long time to get their work done. Today, many of these tasks can be completed with just a click on your phone. This overall change is called digital governance. It means the government uses technology for delivering various services, sharing information, and listening to people. But technology is merely a tool. What matters the most is whether it helps in bringing real changes in society such as more equality, more honesty, and more dignity for each and every citizen.

Digital governance is not something new to India. The Information Technology Act of 2000 gave legal recognition to electronic records and digital signatures, which was the first big step in this field.¹ In 2005, the Right to Information Act gave citizens the right to ask questions and demand answers from the public offices.² This law considered as an early reform in transparency, and till date most RTI applications and their replies can be filed and tracked online.

The biggest move came in 2015; the government launched the Digital India programme, to make government services available electronically to the

citizens, to improve internet connectivity, and to teach digital skills.³ Since then, thousands of services, from birth certificates to income tax filing, have moved online. In villages, Common Service Centres help people who cannot use these services on their own.

One of the most important highlights of this journey is Aadhaar which is a twelve-digit identity number given to residents of India. It is now held by almost 130 crore people.⁴ Before Aadhaar, many marginalised and poor people had no proof of who they were, so they were not able to open a bank account or claim government subsidies and benefits. With this a person's identity can be linked to a bank account and a mobile number, money from government schemes can now go directly into the beneficiary's account. This is called Direct Benefit Transfer, and it has drastically reduced the role of middlemen who once used to take a share out of these benefits.⁵

Another digital revolution can be seen in the Banking sector. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, started in 2014, led to open bank accounts for crores of people who had never entered a bank.⁶ The idea behind this is simple: when people have a bank account, digital payments will follow. The Unified Payments Interface, or UPI, now handles more than 10 billion transactions every month.⁷ Today, from a vegetable seller, a tea-stall

owner, to a big shopkeeper all accept UPI payments. In a formal economy setup, this has made small businesses more visible and made payments faster and safer.

Digital governance has also helped social reform but in a less visible way. Farmers can check their land records and current crop prices on their phones. Students in faraway places and remote villages can attend online classes and take digital courses. People with disabilities can avail services from home without travelling. Language tools like Bhashini are also being developed so that people can use digital services in their own mother tongue and not just in English or Hindi.⁸ When services speak the language of the people, more people feel included.

But it would not be right to say that everything is perfect in this model. The biggest problem seems to be the digital divide. Many people, especially in rural areas and villages, older citizens, and poor women, do not own a smartphone or simply do not know how to use phone. Internet speed is weak in many rural and hilly areas. If a service is available only online, then those without access of phone and internet may be left further behind than before. Reform is real only when it reaches the last person in the line, so digital services must always come with training, help centres, and offline options.

Privacy is another very serious issue linked to it. When so much of our personal information is stored digitally, there is always a risk of it being leaked, misused, or sold. In 2017, the Supreme Court of India said clearly that privacy is a fundamental right under the Constitution.⁹ This judgment pushed the country towards making a data protection law, and finally in 2023 Parliament passed the Digital Personal Data Protection Act. It says that companies, government and non-government bodies must take respective person's consent before using their personal details and data and also ensure to protect it properly.¹⁰ The real test now is how strictly and carefully this law is followed in daily life.

There are other problems as well for everyday working. Sometimes a fingerprint does not match, a server is down, a name is spelt differently in two records, and a poor person is denied their ration or pension. Cyber frauds are rising too, and many people lose money to fake calls and messages. Fake news spreads quickly on social media and can divide communities. So, digital governance needs two things at same time: strong technology and strong safety norms, along with awareness among citizens.

So, what should India do next? First, the government must provide cheap and reliable internet services to every single village and remote areas. Second, people need digital literacy and schools, colleges, and community centres must teach it. Third, government services, websites and apps should be simple, easy to use, and available in local languages. Fourth, there must be a strong and quick way for grievance redressal and get problems fixed when technology fails. Finally, data protection rules must be followed honestly so that citizens can trust the system.

In the end, digital governance is not about apps, websites, or fancy machines. It is about people. A farmer getting the right price for his crop, a girl getting her scholarship on time, a worker getting his wages without delay, and a citizen being treated with respect by the system: these are the true signs of reform. If India keeps

technology open, fair, and safe, it can make governance more honest and society more equal. The goal is not a "digital India" alone, but a better India in which digital tools serve every person.

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