

‘DIGITAL INDIA’ PROGRAMME: A CONSTITUENT TO E-DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

Reghunath V

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, NSS College, Pandalam, Pathanamthitta, Kerala
Email: vreghunath@rediffmail.com

Received: April 2020 Revised and Accepted: June 2020

ABSTRACT: The present-day digital revolution in India allows its citizen to participate in democratic activities more efficiently than ever. The rational establishment of information and communication technology has made India a hub of major cyber activities in the world. It is widely accepted that digital technology can now help India to realize the ambition of creating e-democracy here. The ‘Digital India’, a campaign in the direction to make India a digital hub, has begun in July 2015 with some well-directed programmes. These programmes now bring some incredible changes in the information infrastructure of the country. The shortage of information and communication facilities in rural India remained a hindrance towards the advancement of e-democracy up to recent times. But the 4-lakh kilometre long fibre optics network that has been laid down as part of the ‘Digital India’ programme across the country could eliminate this divide to a great extent by providing high-speed internet facilities to both rural and urban India. The establishment of Common Service Centres (CSC) and conversion of post offices into multi-service centres also helped the country to bridge the digital divide existed among citizens. The open data platform (<http://data.gov.in>) facilitates the proactive release of datasets in an open format by the ministries or departments for use, reuse, and redistribution for the public and academia become an outstanding method for acquiring transparency in governance. MyGov.in is a platform for citizen engagement in governance. Some other tools, like messaging through SMS and email, also employed for enhanced citizens’ participation. By this study, it is found that India, the largest democracy in the world, is getting the status of an accepted digital democracy or e-democracy in the current scenario.

KEYWORDS: e-Democracy, Digital India, e-Governance, Digital Democracy, Information and Communication Technology, Common Service Centres.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indeed, India has tremendously been improved in terms of IT infrastructure and its procurement of internet-based industries and services. The nation-building process is fast, progressing more justifiably and equitably in every part of India. This has made possible because of the well-informed citizens created by the digital revolution in the country. The utilization of Information and Communication Technology in a more virtuous manner by the government, allowed millions of poor Indians to enjoy real freedom, and now they become conscious about their innate rights too. It is argued that digital technology can now definitely help India to realize the ambition of creating a just and equitable society there. When Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi proclaiming the ‘Digital India’ programme, nobody in the country had believed that these programmes would have such a far-reaching positive outcome. The maximum mobile internet speed that offered by the then 3G mobile phone technology in early 2014 was only 9 megabyte per second. Still, it was not enough for a country like India to progress digitally. So, the government approved all the applications from cell phone providers to operationalize 4G technology in the country. The enormous speed that has been created by the fourth-generation (4G) mobile phone and internet technology allowed the government to start the aforesaid new Information Technology revolution called ‘Digital India’ and through that a digital democracy or e-democracy in India.

Digital India as a campaign was launched in India on July 1, 2015, by the Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi. It is an initiative that can be realized both as an enabler and beneficiary of key schemes run by Government of India such as e-Kranti, Stand up India, JAM Yojana (Jandhan Aadhaar Mobile) Bharatmala, Make in India, Bharat Net, Sagarmala, UDAN-RCS, Dedicated Freight Corridors, and Industrial Corridors. This initiative aimed at digital empowerment of Indian people by providing numerous online infrastructures irrespective of geographical limits and enhancing rural digital literacy. Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL) is in charge of implementing the Bharat Net project and is the primary custodian of the digital India programme. The motto of ‘Digital India’ Mission is ‘power to empower’. The programme constituted as part of this mission mainly focused on three areas:

1. Provide digital infrastructure as a core utility to every citizen.
2. Governance and services on demand (day and night).
3. To watch over the digital empowerment of every citizen.

The government of India, with its progressive policies, has changed the IT establishment strategy of the country from traditional to modern through a handful of digital smart projects. The opinions, in this regard, of some learned writers that point out the emergence of some possible traits of e-Democracy in India, are worth mentioning here.

“The digital smarts and social media popularity of the Prime Minister and his Cabinet are now being actively leveraged to establish a direct connection between the government and its citizens. Think of it as a modern-day version of Akbar’s Diwan-i-Aam where any aggrieved citizen, however lowly, could ring the palace bell, and report injustices to the sovereign. The e-governance initiatives of the Modi regime seek to achieve precisely this, through digital connectivity.” (Krishnan, 2016)

The ‘Digital India’ programme will enable citizens to access wireless internet easily, promote the use of digital platforms, and make e-services available to people in an effective manner. This innovative idea will help bring down the use of paper and will provide Internet services to rural areas. This will ensure that the remotest communities of India are included in the digital transformation process. Information is the key to development. Internet and mobile connectivity in all communities will enable them to elevate their knowledge level, awareness level and finally socio-economic status (Srivastava, 2017)

It is a mission to translate India into a global digital powerhouse. It comprises various initiatives under the single programme each targeted to prepare India for becoming a knowledge economy and for bringing good governance to citizens through synchronized and co-ordinated engagement of the entire government. (Boro, 2017)

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Various literature on the areas of e-governance, information and communication technology, digital politics, digital divide, etc. are reviewed to conduct this study. E-governance is possible everywhere, in every form of government, but e-democracy is possible in democracies alone. There is a major thumb rule in the application of e-governance or e-democracy in the world. The major rule in this regard is that the e-government should focus more on ‘government’ than on ‘e’. All the digital facilities should be provided to the citizen for his wellbeing. It is the process of transformation of the relationships of government with its constituents. (Satyanarayana, 2006)

‘E-democracy: A New challenge for Measuring Democracy’ is an article that highlights the importance of digital media’s potential for democratizing political communication and processes. It also poses a question of digital media’s contribution to the improvement of the quality of democracy. (Kneuer, 2016)

‘E-Governance: A Step Towards Digital Democracy’ is a scholarly paper about the importance of e-governance in India. It says that that the e-governance makes the government process accountable and provide vital inputs to the government’s policy-making process. The automation thus happened by the effective utilization of ICT speeds up the routine administrative functions. It enables the government to work better, yields higher revenue growth, and costs less, apart from servicing citizens’ needs as never before. Citizens can freely interact with various government departments anytime, anywhere with maximum speed and with minimal effort, and this is what digital democracy means. (Nair, 2008)

‘A Refreshed ‘Digital India’ Programme will Play a Critical Role in the Pursuit of \$5 Trillion Economy’ is an article by Mr Arun M. Kumar, Chairman and CEO, KPMG. According to this article, India is one of the fastest digitizing states in the world. All these achievements are because of the dramatic improvement in mobile connectivity and penetration of internet infrastructure nationwide by the Bharat Net programme. The emergence of start-ups in the digital transformation space that is creating new livelihoods, services, and wealth for millions of Indians are also highlighted. (Kumar, 2019)

In the opinion of Pat Hall, information technology and in particular, the internet should be available to all peoples in their mother tongue irrespective of the numerical strength of the population. Information technology must move to meet the user community and provide services fully localized, working in local languages, and according to local cultural conventions (Keniston & Kumar, 2004).

The Multiple Pillars of ‘Digital India’ that are a Catalyst to e-Democracy

The ‘Digital India’ programme is planned to have multiple pillars. They are the broadband highway, universal access to mobile connectivity, public internet access programmes, e-governance, e-Kranti (electronic delivery of services), information for all, electronics manufacturing, IT for jobs and early harvest programme. Among these, the first six pillars are the real catalyst to develop e-democracy in India. The broadband highway, as envisaged by ‘Digital India’ aims at broadband internet connectivity for all, transcending the division of rural and urban. The broadband highway, especially to rural India, will enable different stakeholders to utilize different services

in the areas of agriculture, banking, e-Panchayaths & RD, e-health, e-education, e-governance, e-commerce and more importantly a well-planned electricity distribution management to urban and rural India. E-governance is a 'government process re-engineering,' using IT to simplify and make the government process more efficient. The universal access to mobile connectivity aims to increase network penetration and to fill the gaps in the connectivity all over India. The establishment of Common Service Centres (CSC) and conversion of post offices into multi-service centres are the chief components of the Public internet access programme. 'Transforming e-governance for transforming governance' is the mission of e-Kranti. It considers the critical need for transforming e-governance and promote mobile governance and good governance in the country. The e-Kranti put forth 44 mission mode projects, grouped into three – Central 15, the States 17 and integrated 12. Another important pillar of 'Digital India' is the provision for information to all. The open data platform (<http://data.gov.in>) facilitates the proactive release of datasets in an open format by the ministries or departments for use, reuse, and redistribution for the public and academia. MyGov.in is a platform for citizen engagement in governance. Other tools, like online messaging through SMS and email, are also employed.

E-Democracy

E-democracy, in its simplest sense, is the smart use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools to enrich and transform the existing systems of governance and practices. The new forms of online communications initiated by digital technology allow us to overcome the various existing problems of participation, lack of time to interact, and lack of opportunity for policy discussions, etc. The compelling use of ICT strengthens democratic efficiency, flexibility and obligations and provides public engagement in national institutions greater incentive. This leads to better political choices for society as a whole.

E-democracy is formed out of the combination of two words, electronic and democracy. Digital democracy or internet democracy is the use of information and communication technology in political and governance processes. It incorporates information and communications technology to promote democracy; this may include private partnership and government owned firms. It is a form of government in which all adult citizens are eligible to participate equally in the proposal, development, and creation of laws. (Jafarkarimi et al., 2014)

e-democracy helps in the dissemination of political information to the public and enhanced communication and participation in the governing process. Participants of e-democracy would include civil society, administrators, politicians, and the economy. E-democracy is not just paying fines or taxes over the internet but acts as a channel of communication between the public and administrators over the matter of reducing tax, improving the conditions of the road, consulting the experts on various matters of agriculture, gardening, rearing of cow, cooking, education, etc. It also empowers citizens in the process of making major political decisions. E-democracy initiatives could be e-forums, e-town hall meetings, e-consultations, e-referenda, e-voting, e-rule making, and other forms of e-participation. (Iyer, 2014)

E-democracy, therefore, is the citizens' direct participation in various administrative and law-making processes of the state. The 'Digital India' thus, developed out of the Information and Communication Technology now makes the representative democracy of India into a direct democracy form, where all citizens get a share in the administration of the state.

Two models of people's participation exist in e-democracy. They are the consultative model and the deliberative model of participation. In the consultative model, the citizens can communicate their opinion and desire to the government using different e-communication channels. The information received by these interactions will form important resources for further policy legislations and governance. In the deliberative model, there is multidirectional interactivity between the people and legislatures. Here the public will get an opportunity to participate in the deliberations and policy framing process along with the legislators. Of this, the consultative model is the most possible one in the present-day circumstances of India.

III. E-DEMOCRACY SPECIFIC PROGRAMMES

- **National Information Infrastructure (NII)**

Building ICT infrastructure is one of the key prerequisites for establishing e-democracy in the state. The National Information Infrastructure (NII) is one such instrument that integrates different networks and cloud infrastructure in the country, to provide high-speed internet connectivity and cloud platform to various government departments up to the grass-root level. A total of 2,50,000 village panchayaths of India will be covered under the fibre optics network by the completion of this mission. These networks, after their completion, will act as the channel of communication between the people and between people and the government like the nervous system in the human body. Then the people will get a chance to participate in online discussions about political issues with increasing interest and frequency.

- **Universal Access to Mobile Connectivity- Broadband for All**

The problem of mobile phone connectivity shall be a hindrance to the growth of e-democracy in India. More than forty thousand villages in India are still not covered under mobile networks. The mobile phone and mobile internet connectivity in each village are an essential requirement to establish an information society here. The universal access to mobile connectivity is a comprehensive development plan put forth by the government of India to establish mobile coverage to remaining uncovered villages in a phased manner.

- **Public Internet Access Programmes**

The Common Service Centres (CSCs) under the Digital India programme is planned to constitute about 2.5 lakh centres all over India. CSCs would be made viable and multi-functional end-points for the delivery of government and business services. These establishments later would act as a means for two-way communication between the people and government or between people and legislators in e-democracy.

- **Aadhaar - Digital Biometric Identity Infrastructure**

This digital identity module, being part of the digital revolution in India has the purpose of authentication of residents to prove their identity and for service providers to confirm that the residents are 'whom they say they are' to supply services and give access to different benefits now. But the very identity of citizens would later allow the state to carry out the e-voting in India, which may become the revolutionary part of e-democracy.

Service Delivery Gateways

- **National e-Governance Service Delivery Gateway (NSDG)**

The principal objective of the national e-governance strategy is to make all resources of the government available to everyone in his region through popular service providers. These outlets ensure efficiency, transparency & reliability of such services at low costs to satisfy the basic needs of the common man. One of its aims is to cooperate, collaborate and incorporate information through the various agencies of the Center, States and the Local governments in order to accomplish this aim. This job is made very difficult by governments that are marked by island networks of legacy systems using disparate platforms and technology and distributed through various geographic areas in different state of automation. The National e-Governance Service Delivery Gateway (NSDG) simplifies this challenge by serving as a standard messaging switch and provides smooth data interoperability and collaboration across countries.

- **State Data Centres**

Under National e-Governance Service Delivery Gateway (NeGP), there are state data centres for the States to combine services, applications, and infrastructure to provide efficient electronic delivery of Government to Government (G2G), Government to Citizen (G2C) and Government to Business (G2B) services. The States will offer these services through a shared distribution mechanism impeccably supported by core connectivity infrastructures such as State-Wide Area Network (SWAN) and Common Service Centre (CSC) that are the part of national e-governance service delivery gateway. The state data centres would provide many functionalities like the central repository of the state, secure data storage, online delivery of services, citizen information/services portal, state intranet portal, disaster recovery, remote management, and service integration, etc. State data centres would also provide better operation and management control and minimize the overall cost of data management, IT resource management, deployment, and other costs.

- **Open Digital Platforms**

There are two citizen-centric platforms provided by 'Digital India' mission for the use of people around the country. They are the Open Data Platform and Citizen engagement platform. The open data platform (data.gov.in) facilitates the proactive release of datasets in an open format by the departments for use, reuse, and redistribution by the stakeholders. MyGov.in is a platform for citizen engagement in governance, acts as a medium to exchange ideas and suggestions with the government. It will facilitate two-way communication between citizens and the government to bring in good governance. Apart from this, the government shall proactively engage through social media also.

IV. CONCLUSION

India, the largest democracy in the world, has had an impetus growth in terms of its information communication technology infrastructure. The notable infrastructural improvements in rural and urban India, by the mission 'Digital India,' were the laying of 4- lakh kilometres long optical fibre network across the country, connecting 15 lakh Panchayaths via high-speed broadband internet, and establishment of wi-fi hotspots by about fifty thousand Panchayaths in the country. The Internet penetration has been reached its ever time height in India recently. Astonishingly, rural India is approaching towards urban India regarding the daily internet usage rates. The regular internet users of the country have reached about 50 crore people now. This steady improvement in

digital infrastructure now allows the country to continue with e-democracy policies. The success of e-democracy lies in the large scale participation of the citizens in the daily functions of the government in a regular manner. The main goal of e-democracy shall be strengthened by incorporating citizens in the political debate. Internet connectivity will enable the people to participate in online discussions that once have been the monopoly of a few political elites. By this digitalized participation, we can expect increased transparency and legitimacy of our political systems through a well-informed democratic engagement.

The advancement of e-democracy can only be accomplished by the active engagement of citizens in the world using the digital channels available. So, the government needs to digitalize more and more services and processes immediately. The increased use and publication of government data will attract more and more people towards digital platforms to engage with it. Where more data is available to the public and other government departments, there is more participation and accountability. E-participation will enable a more advanced political debate through digitalized venues. The main methods for these are the creation of web sites where citizens can address and solve their issues regularly. Online voting shall be a realistic method with which citizens could consistently and easily participate in governmental affairs, but it is still a distant reality. Online voting may receive higher voter turnout too in respective elections.

V. REFERENCES

- [1]. Boro, M. C. (2017). Digital India: Concepts and Implications. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 5(4), 922–927.
- [2]. Hassan Manazir, S., & Govind, M. (2019, August). *Digital Democracy & India: Study of Evolution in Citizen e-Participation Frameworks*. Presented at the National Conference on Emerging Trends in Information Technology, University of Delhi.
- [3]. Iyer, L. (2014). Opportunities and Challenges in Implementing e-Democracy in India. *Research Journal of Science & IT Management*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3409851>
- [4]. Jafarkarimi, H., Sim, A., Saadatdoost, R., & Hee, J. M. (2014). The Impact of ICT on Reinforcing Citizens' Role in Government Decision Making. *International Journal of Emerging Technology and Advanced Engineering*, 4(1), 642–646.
- [5]. Keniston, K., & Kumar, D. (2004). *IT Experience in India: Bridging the Digital Divide*. New Delhi: SAGE India.
- [6]. Kneuer, M. (2016). E-Democracy: A New Challenge for Measuring Democracy. *International Political Science Review*, 37(5), 666–678. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512116657677>
- [7]. Krishnan, A. (2016, December 8). The Government at your beck and call. Retrieved January 12, 2020, from The Hindu Business Line website: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/aarati-krishnan/the-government-at-your-beck-and-call/article9418274.ece>
- [8]. Kumar, A. M. (2019, July 4). A refreshed 'Digital India' programme will play critical role in the pursuit of \$5 trillion economy. *The Economic Times Rise*. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/startups/newsbuzz/a-refreshed-digital-india-programme-will-play-critical-role-in-the-pursuit-of-5-trillion-economy/articleshow/70067053.cms>
- [9]. Nair, P. (2008). E-Governance: A Step Towards Digital Democracy. *CSI Journal of Computing*, 147–154.
- [10]. Satyanarayana, J. (2006). *E-Government: The Science of the Possible*. New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India.
- [11]. Srivastava, S. (2017). Digital India-Major Initiatives and their Impact: A Critical Analysis. *ELK Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Retail Management*, 8(3), 21–32.