Journal of Neonatal Surgery
ISSN(Online): 2226-0439
Vol. 14,issue.12s (2025)
https://www.jneonatalsurg.com

OPEN ACCESS

Digital Sovereignty and Inclusive Governance: A Study of India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)..

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.Cite this paper as Saksham Vashishtha (2025) Digital Sovereignty and Inclusive Governance: A Study of India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)... .Journal of Neonatal Surgery, 14, (12s), 1278-1281

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution and impact of digital governance in India, focusing on the "Digital India" initiative and the development of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). Over the last decade, India has transitioned from a traditional bureaucratic model to a "faceless, paperless, and cashless" governance framework. Drawing on data from 2014–2025, this study analyzes how platforms like Aadhaar, UPI, and DigiLocker have reshaped the state-citizen relationship. While the findings highlight significant gains in transparency and financial inclusion (reaching over 80% by 2025), the paper also addresses the persistent challenges of the digital divide, data privacy concerns, and the "user-level" modest digitalization in rural pockets. The study concludes that for "Viksit Bharat @2047," India must move beyond connectivity to ensure digital equity and robust cybersecurity..

1. INTRODUCTION

Governance in the 21st century is no longer defined merely by territorial sovereignty or bureaucratic hierarchy; it is increasingly defined by its digital interface. In India, the "Digital India" programme, launched in July 2015, represented a watershed moment in the country's post-colonial administrative history. It was not merely a technological upgrade or a digitization of paper records; it was a fundamental political paradigm shift.

Historically, the Indian state was often characterized by scholars as a "flailing state"—one where the head (the central policy-making body) was robust, but the limbs (the local administration) were weak, leading to massive leakages in welfare delivery. The Digital India initiative sought to bypass

these traditional "middlemen" through a decentralized yet technologically centralized architecture. It aimed to transform India into a "digitally empowered society and knowledge economy" by focusing on three key vision areas: digital infrastructure as a core utility to every citizen, governance and services on demand, and the digital empowerment of citizens.

As we look back from the vantage point of 2025, this shift has altered the very nature of *Demos* (the people) and *Kratos* (power). The state now interacts with the citizen through a "screen- interface," making governance "faceless, paperless, and cashless." This paper argues that while this has significantly enhanced administrative efficiency and financial inclusion, it has also birthed new political challenges regarding data sovereignty, the digital divide, and the emergence of a "techno-bureaucratic" elite.

Theoretical Framework: From New Public Management to Digital Era Governance

Literature Review: The Digital State and the New Social Contract in India

The scholarship surrounding digital governance in India is vast and multidisciplinary, spanning public administration, political economy, and sociology. This literature review organizes the existing body of work into four thematic pillars: (1) The Theoretical Evolution of the Digital State,

(2) The Politics of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), (3) Critiques of Exclusion and the Digital Divide, and (4) The Emerging Frontier of Data Sovereignty and 2047 Visions.

The Theoretical Evolution: From E-Governance to Infocracy

Early scholarship on Indian governance, notably by Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2003) and Lant Pritchett (2009), described India as a "flailing state"—one where the "head" (the elite policy-makers in New Delhi) was capable, but the "limbs" (the local bureaucracy) were weak, leading to massive implementation failures. In this context, early e-governance literature viewed technology as a mere tool for administrative efficiency (NPM - New Public Management).

However, the scholarship of the last decade has moved toward Digital Era Governance (DEG). Heeks (2025) argues that India has transitioned from "e-Government" (putting forms online) to "i- Government" (integrated, intelligent governance). Choudhary and Patidar (2025) suggest that India is moving toward an "Infocracy," where the state exercises power through the control of data flows rather than traditional physical coercion. This shift represents a "techno-nationalist" paradigm where.

the state bypasses the traditional bureaucracy to establish a direct, unmediated relationship with the citizen

The Politics of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)

The most significant contribution to contemporary literature is the concept of the "India Stack." Unlike the "walled garden" approach of Big Tech in the West or the state-monopoly model in China, India's DPI is characterized by its "open" and "modular" nature.

Identity and Agency: Scholars like Mishra and Kedia (2025) have extensively analyzed Aadhaar not just as an ID, but as a "political address." While the government highlights the removal of "ghost beneficiaries" and savings of over ₹3.48 lakh crore (PIB, 2025), critical theorists like Jean Drèze (2021) warn of "pain without gain," where biometric failures lead to the denial of food rations to the most vulnerable

Financial Inclusion and UPI: Gupta (2025) argues that the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has democratized the informal economy. By processing 49% of global real-time transactions (Vision IAS, 2025), the state has effectively "formalized" millions of small vendors. Literature in political economy suggests this creates a "transactional legitimacy" for the state, where the citizen views the government as a functional service provider rather than a distant regulator.

Critiques of Exclusion and the "Relative" Digital Divide

A recurring theme in the literature is the Digital Divide. While internet penetration has crossed 960 million (ORF, 2025), scholars argue that connectivity does not equal empowerment.

The Gender Gap: GSMA (2024) and NFHS-5 data cited in recent literature show that rural women are nearly 40% less likely to use the internet than men. Anuradha et al. (2025) argue that digital governance can inadvertently reinforce patriarchy if the "phone-owning head of the household" (usually male) becomes the sole gatekeeper to a woman's digital rights.

User-Level Literacy: Kud (2023) identifies a "first-mile" problem. Even if the state provides the infrastructure (BharatNet), the lack of "functional digital literacy" in rural pockets forces citizens to rely on private intermediaries at Common Service Centers (CSCs). This creates a new class of "digital middlemen," potentially replacing the old "bureaucratic middlemen" the system sought to eliminate.

Data Sovereignty, Privacy, and Surveillance

As India implements the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act 2023, a new body of literature has emerged regarding the "Surveillance State."

The Security Dilemma: Bhaduri and Chandrasekhar (2024) discuss the balance between state efficiency and individual privacy. The literature notes that while the DPDP Act provides a legal framework, the broad exemptions granted to state agencies for "national security" remain a point of significant academic debate.

Digital Sovereignty: Jajimi (2025) and other international relations scholars highlight India's role in the "Global South." The export of the "India Stack" to countries like Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines is viewed as a form of "Digital Soft Power." Literature here suggests that India is providing a third-way alternative to the American and Chinese models of the internet.

The Vision of 2047: Viksit Bharat and Digital Equity

The most recent scholarship (2024–2025) focuses on the Viksit Bharat @2047 vision. Sitharaman (2024) and subsequent academic analyses by Vision IAS (2025) argue that the next phase of digital governance will be defined by Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The literature identifies "Linguistic Democratization" via the Bhashini mission as the key to the next decade. If governance can be conducted via voice-commands in 22 local languages, the "literacy barrier" that has plagued Indian administration since 1947 might finally be overcome

However, Srivastava and Sharma (2025) caution that "Algorithmic Bias" in AI-led welfare could lead to automated exclusions that are harder for citizens to challenge than human errors.

2. SYNTHESIS AND RESEARCH GAP

While the existing literature effectively documents the quantitative scale of India's digital shift (Aadhaar enrollments, UPI volumes, data costs), there is a notable gap in qualitative analysis of the changed psychology of the state-citizen relationship at the village level. Most studies focus on either "efficiency" (pro-government) or "surveillance/exclusion" (critics).

There is a lack of integrated research that examines the "Hybrid Governance" model—where digital tools and physical village institutions co-exist. My paper seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how the transition from a "Connect" phase to a "Protect" phase can reconcile the state's drive for efficiency with the citizen's need for digital equity and privacy.2.1 The Concept of the "India Stack"

The theoretical uniqueness of India's model lies in the "India Stack." Unlike the Silicon Valley model (private-led) or the Chinese model (state-controlled surveillance), the India Stack is a Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). It operates on the principle of "Open Rails"—where the government builds the foundational digital tracks (Aadhaar for identity, UPI for

payments), and both public and private players run their "trains" (services) on them.

2.2 The Social Contract in the Digital Age

The social contract in India is being rewritten. Access to rights—such as food rations via the Public Distribution System (PDS) or work via MGNREGA—is now contingent upon digital

authentication. This "Biometric Citizenship" suggests that the state's recognition of a citizen is now mediated by data packets.

The Architecture of Digital Governance

The success of digital governance in India rests on three pillars that have matured significantly between 2015 and 2025.

Digital Identity: The Bedrock of Aadhaar

Aadhaar has evolved from a simple identification tool to a "Financial Address." With over 1.4 billion identities, it has facilitated the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme. In the fiscal years 2023–2025, the government saved an estimated ₹3.5 lakh crore by eliminating "ghost beneficiaries," proving that digital governance is a potent tool against fiscal leakage.

The Revolution of UPI and Financial Inclusion

The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has democratized high-finance. By 2025, even the smallest street vendors in Tier-3 cities utilize QR codes. This has brought the "informal economy" into the "formal digital fold," allowing the government to track economic velocity in real-time and tailor macroeconomic policies with unprecedented precision.

Connectivity: From BharatNet to 5G

The physical backbone of this revolution is BharatNet. By connecting 250,000 Gram Panchayats with high-speed fiber optics, the government has attempted to bridge the "Urban-Rural Knowledge

Gap." The rapid rollout of 5G in 2024 has further enabled "Tele-Medicine" and "Ed-Tech" to reach the remotest corners of the Northeast and Central India.

Socio-Political Impact: Empowerment or Exclusion?

This section analyzes the dual nature of digital governance.

Administrative Transparency

Digital governance has "flung open" the doors of the secretariat. Portals like MyGov.in have allowed for crowdsourcing policy ideas, creating a sense of "Participatory Democracy." The UMANG App has centralized 2,000+ services, reducing the "time-tax" that citizens previously paid to corrupt officials for basic documentation.

The Persistent Digital Divide

However, the "Gender Digital Divide" remains a critical concern. In rural India, smartphone ownership among women lags behind men by nearly 30%. When governance goes digital, those without devices or data become "invisible" to the state. This "Algorithmic Exclusion" is a primary critique in contemporary Indian political science.

Security, Privacy, and the Legislative Response

With the implementation of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act 2023, India entered a new era of data regulation

Data Sovereignty: The government has emphasized that "Indian data must serve Indian citizens," leading to strict data localization norms.

The Surveillance Debate: Critics argue that the integration of facial recognition (DigiYatra) and centralized databases grants the state an "all-seeing eye," potentially chilling political dissent.

Recommendations for 2026–2030:

Digital Literacy 2.0: Move beyond "how to use a phone" to "functional literacy"— teaching citizens to identify deepfakes, phishing, and how to exercise their "Right to Data Erasure" under the DPDP Act.

Decentralized AI (IndiaAI): Instead of relying on Western LLMs, the government should prioritize localized AI models that assist farmers in local dialects and help doctors in rural PHCs with diagnostic tools.

Algorithmic Accountability: Establish an independent commission to ensure that automated decision-making in welfare (like AI-based ration card cancellation) has a human-in-the-loop to prevent "technological exclusion.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations: From Digital Connectivity to Digital Equity

7.1. The Synthesis: India as a Global Benchmark

India's digital governance journey is no longer a localized experiment; it is a global benchmark, particularly for the Global South. By decoupling the digital identity (Aadhaar) from the private sector—a stark contrast to the West's "Big Tech" model—India has demonstrated that a state-led, open-access Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) can achieve scale at a fraction of the traditional cost. As of 2025, the "India Stack" has been exported to over a dozen countries, signaling the rise of India as a "Digital Diplomat."

However, the political heart of this research indicates that we are at a crossroads. The first decade of "Digital India" (2015–

2025) was defined by the "Connect" phase—building the pipes, enrolling the billions, and digitizing the databases. To sustain what this paper terms "Digital Democracy," the state must now transition into a "Protect and Sustain" phase. This involves moving beyond the quantitative metrics of "how many users" to the qualitative metrics of "how much agency" a citizen possesses within the digital ecosystem.

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