



UNRAVELLING THE COMPLEXITY: CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

The use of technology in democratic processes, or "digital democracy,"⁷⁶⁰ has grown in importance in the twenty-first century. The development of digital technologies in India, a nation renowned for its thriving democratic system, has presented both opportunities and difficulties. This essay examines the idea of digital democracy, including its applicability to India, its promise, and the challenges it faces. It explores topics like cybersecurity, the digital divide, internet disinformation, privacy challenges, and electoral integrity. It also examines steps that can be taken to overcome these obstacles and promote an inclusive, open, and safe digital democracy in India. In India, digital democracy has the potential to significantly increase political accountability, transparency, and involvement. But in order to enjoy these advantages, the problems it encounters must be resolved. To create a thriving digital democratic system, it is imperative to address the digital gap, combat misinformation, protect privacy, ensure election integrity, boost cybersecurity, encourage digital literacy, and rein in hate speech. India can pave the way for an inclusive, transparent, and safe digital democracy that really empowers its people by tackling these issues and taking a comprehensive approach that engages the government, IT businesses, civil society, and citizens.

Keywords : Digital Democracy , Misinformation , Digital Gap , Democracy, Privacy.

GRASP - EDUCATE - EVOLVE

⁷⁶⁰ Keneth L.Hacker, Digital Democracy : Issues and Theory of Practice (2000)

I. Introduction

India, the largest democracy in the world, is changing due to the quick use of digital technologies. The idea of digital democracy has become more well-known as the country embraces the digital era. Digital democracy is the use of digital tools and technologies to advance democratic procedures, give citizens more authority, and improve ties between the people and their government. New options for political engagement, information transmission, and public engagement have emerged as a result of the development of the internet, social media platforms, and mobile technologies. India is starting down this road, but there are a number of obstacles to overcome before digital democracy can be successfully implemented there. This essay will assess alternative ways to create a successful digital democracy in India and analyse its difficulties and opportunities.

II. Digital Divide⁷⁶¹

The digital gap is one of the main obstacles to digital democracy in India. The disparity between people and communities who have access to digital technologies and those who do not is referred to as the "digital divide." A sizeable section of the population in a nation as diverse and large as India still lacks access to the internet and electronic devices. Due to their exclusion from online discussions, debates, and decision-making processes, people without digital access experience a disparity in political involvement and information availability. The internet infrastructure must be improved, more affordable devices must be made available, and marginalised populations must be encouraged to become digitally literate in order to close this divide and create a truly inclusive digital democracy. The inclusiveness of digital democracy is hampered by the multiple problem of the digital divide in India. Rural and distant places may lack these amenities,

⁷⁶¹ Andreea Stoiciu, The Role of e-Governance in Bridging the Digital Divide, UN Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/role-e-governance-bridging-digital-divide> (July 31st 2023, 5:00 PM).

whereas urban areas frequently have greater internet connectivity and access to digital equipment. This gap is brought on by inadequate infrastructure, a lack of widespread knowledge of the advantages of the internet, and economic inequality. The Indian government has launched many initiatives like "Digital India" to encourage digital literacy⁷⁶², increase broadband access, and offer inexpensive digital services in order to close the digital gap. To guarantee that every citizen has fair access to digital resources, the government must step up its efforts. Public-private partnerships can be extremely important for providing internet access to underdeveloped communities. Additionally, community-driven projects and campaigns for digital literacy can give people more authority.

III. Online Misinformation

The spread of false information⁷⁶³ and fake news online is a serious danger to India's digital democracy. As social media has grown in popularity, false narratives can spread quickly and shape public opinion, polarising and confusing the public. Voters may make choices based on misleading or inaccurate facts, which can have an impact on electoral processes. Fact-checking programmes, media literacy efforts, and more accountability from internet platforms are just a few of the multifaceted strategies needed to combat misinformation. The dissemination of false information online is a challenging issue that has the potential to erode democracy by manipulating public opinion and misrepresenting the truth. Social media sites and messaging applications in India have been crucial in spreading false information, which frequently causes racial tensions and bloodshed. In order to address this

⁷⁶² P. John Williams, Technological Literacy and Digital Democracy, Springer Link, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137394750_5 (July 31st 2023, 6:30 PM).

⁷⁶³ David Rand, Nathaniel Sirlin, Digital Literacy Doesn't Stop the Spread of Misinformation, Scientific American, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/digital-literacy-doesnt-stop-the-spread-of-misinformation/#:~:text=When%20we%20looked%20at%20the,people%20who%20lacked%20digital%20literacy> (August 1st, 8:30 AM).

problem, school curricula should include media literacy lessons that teach students to evaluate the information they find online. To find and flag deceptive content, social media networks must invest in reliable fact-checking tools and algorithms. Collaborations between academia, fact-checking agencies, and internet businesses can help the effort to combat false information.

IV. Privacy Issue

To understand the preferences and conduct of citizens, digital democracy primarily relies on data gathering and analysis. However, this data-driven strategy⁷⁶⁴ prompts grave worries about data protection and privacy. The lack of comprehensive data protection regulations in India leaves citizen data open to abuse and security breaches. Strong data protection legislation must be passed, and procedures must be in place to guarantee responsible data management by both public and private organisations, in order to increase trust in the digital democratic system. India's citizens are exposed to privacy violations and unauthorised data sharing due to the absence of adequate data protection regulations. Concerns about how the government and commercial organisations manage individuals' personal information are raised by this lack of regulation, particularly in the context of digital democracy. To secure the data of its residents, the Indian government must give the enactment of a strong data protection framework top priority. The law should demand greater transparency from data collectors, give people more sovereignty over their data, and apply severe punishments for data breaches. As a result, citizens' faith in the digital democratic ecosystem will increase knowing that their personal information is secure.

V. Electoral Integrity⁷⁶⁵

⁷⁶⁴ Renata Avila, Fixing Digital Democracy? The Future of data-driven political campaigning, open Democracy, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/fixing-digital-democracy-future-of-data-driven-political-campaigning/> (August 1st, 10:00 AM)

⁷⁶⁵ Ujjawal Kumar Singh, Anupama Roy, Election Commission of India: Institutionalising Democratic Uncertainties (2019).

Maintaining electoral integrity is essential for any democracy, and digital technologies have created fresh difficulties in this area. The security and openness of electoral systems must be maintained, whether they use electronic voting machines (EVMs) or online voting. To maintain faith in the voting process, concerns concerning voter verification, EVM tampering, and voter data security must be addressed. The credibility of a democratic system depends on maintaining the integrity of elections. Even though India's Election Commission has successfully used electronic voting machines (EVMs) in elections, worries regarding EVM fraud and tampering continue. The Election Commission should improve the security aspects of EVMs and encourage more transparency in the electoral process to allay these worries. Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT)⁷⁶⁶ implementation for EVMs can assist in confirming the accuracy of electronic votes. Regular, impartial audits of the electoral process can help increase public trust in the fairness of elections.

VI. Cybersecurity Risks

The nation is also exposed to cybersecurity risks as a result of its growing reliance on digital platforms. Malicious actors may try to interfere with digital systems, sway public opinion, or compromise private information about the government. To protect digital democracy from cyber-attacks, it is crucial to strengthen cybersecurity measures and promote good cyber hygiene. Threats to cybersecurity have the power to impair the operation of the executive branch, the electoral system, and vital infrastructure. India has experienced cyberattacks in recent years that have targeted several industries, underscoring the necessity for effective cybersecurity measures. Modern cybersecurity infrastructure should be purchased by the government, and specialised agencies should be set up to deal with cyber threats. Government officials and staff

⁷⁶⁶ EVM, VVPAT and NOTA, Sveep, <https://ecisveep.nic.in/files/category/45-evm-vvpat-and-nota/> (August 1st, 1:00 PM).

members can improve their capability to recognise and counter cyberattacks by participating in regular training and capacity-building programmes. India's cyber defence capabilities can be improved through cooperation with international partners in the exchange of cybersecurity intelligence.

VII. Digital Literacy and Awareness

Digital Literacy and Awareness: The success of India's digital democracy depends on the promotion of digital literacy and awareness. Many people lack the knowledge needed to use digital platforms and comprehend their online rights and obligations, especially in rural areas. Citizens can be empowered to take an active part in the digital democratic process by receiving education about digital tools, online safety, and critical thinking. A necessary condition for meaningful involvement in digital democracy is digital literacy and awareness. While urban populations have mostly embraced digital tools, participation is more difficult for rural and less tech-savvy people due to their lack of familiarity with these platforms. The government should create extensive digital literacy programmes that are adjusted to diverse groups in order to encourage digital literacy. Citizens of all ages can receive training in digital skills at schools, colleges, and community facilities. NGOs and other civil society groups can be very important in raising awareness and promoting ethical digital citizenship.

VIII. Online Hate Speech and Trolling

Online trolling and hate speech have also increased in the digital domain, which can impede productive debates and deter people from participating in political conversations. Social media rules, strict content moderation measures, and initiatives to foster positive online discussion are all necessary to address this issue. Hate speech and trolling have become more prevalent online, which adds to the poisonous nature of digital democracy. Social media sites have the potential to become echo chambers where people are

harassed for expressing their thoughts and competing viewpoints are stifled. Social media businesses must implement stringent content moderation procedures to stop hate speech and trolling in order to address this problem. Instead than strengthening echo chambers, algorithms should be created to encourage healthy debate and a variety of opinions. Online environments can be made more positive and respectful by fostering responsible behaviour and digital empathy.

IX. Conclusion

India's transition to digital democracy offers a unique chance to strengthen the country's democracy, encourage citizen engagement, and improve governmental accountability. The way individuals interact with democracy, obtain information, and make decisions could be completely transformed by the incorporation of digital technologies. However, for India to fully benefit from digital democracy, it must address its problems head-on and put complete solutions in place. The digital divide must first and foremost be closed in order to ensure an inclusive digital democratic ecosystem. A sizable segment of the population still lacks access to digital technologies despite substantial advancements in internet infrastructure expansion and digital connection. Marginalised populations are disproportionately impacted by this division, which denies them the right to access and participate in the democratic process. The government should step up efforts to supply affordable devices, increase internet connectivity in underserved areas, and implement focused programmes for digital literacy to solve this issue. In order to accomplish these objectives and give every citizen the opportunity to actively participate in the digital democracy, public-private collaborations might be extremely important. Second, to protect the credibility of online democracy, it is crucial to combat fake news and online misinformation. The growth of false narratives on social media sites has the power to sway public opinion, twist the truth, and split society apart. Campaigns for media literacy

that cultivate critical thinking and encourage habitual fact-checking among individuals should be incorporated into educational curriculum in order to address this problem. In addition, social media corporations should use cutting-edge algorithms and fact-checking programmes to spot and stop the spread of false information. Collaborations between digital companies, fact-checking agencies, and civil society can help make the fight against internet misinformation even more effective. Thirdly, to increase confidence in the digital democratic system, privacy concerns must be effectively handled. Online information sharing by citizens is rising, which raises questions about data security and unauthorised access. India urgently needs to implement comprehensive data protection law that gives people more control over their data, places strong fines on data breaches, and otherwise protects citizens' rights to privacy. Additionally, ethical norms in data collecting, storage, and utilisation must be prioritised by the government and digital corporations. Fourth, maintaining public faith in digital democracy depends on maintaining the integrity of electoral processes. Despite the fact that electronic voting machines (EVMs) have simplified the voting process, worries about EVM⁷⁶⁷ manipulation still exist. The Election Commission should put additional security measures in place, such as Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) devices, to provide a verifiable paper trail for electronic votes in order to improve electoral integrity. Regular independent audits of the electoral process can increase trust in the process and show how transparent digital democracy is. Fifth, the security of digital democracy is seriously threatened by cyberthreats. India's reliance on digital technology for governance is growing, which makes its key infrastructure and data systems more vulnerable to cyberattacks. India must make investments in cutting-edge cybersecurity infrastructure and create

specialised bodies to deal with cyber incidents if it is to effectively counter cyber threats. The nation's cyber defence capabilities can be improved through cooperation with international partners in the sharing of cybersecurity intelligence. Sixth, empowering citizens to participate successfully in the digital democratic ecosystem requires the promotion of digital literacy and awareness. To close the digital literacy gap and make sure that people have the skills necessary to use digital platforms and participate responsibly, comprehensive digital literacy programmes should be offered through schools, colleges, and community centres. NGO's and groups representing civil society. Last but not least, it is crucial to stop online trolling and hate speech in order to promote a positive and healthy online conversation. To stop the spread of hate speech and to keep the internet a place for open debate and a variety of opinions, social media platforms must impose strict content moderation procedures. India can build a more inclusive digital democracy that respects the rights and dignity of all citizens by encouraging digital empathy and productive conversations. In conclusion, the promise of digital democracy is a more accountable, transparent, and participatory governance system in India. By embracing digital technologies, citizens can be better equipped to participate actively in democracy, make informed decisions, and hold governments responsible. To create a strong digital democratic system, it is necessary to address the issues of the digital divide, online misinformation, privacy concerns, electoral integrity, cybersecurity threats, digital literacy, and online toxicity. To solve these challenges and develop an inclusive and transparent digital democracy that supports democratic governance principles, policymakers, tech corporations, civil society, and citizens must cooperate and work in unison. India can pave the road for a democratic future that genuinely empowers all of its inhabitants and preserves the values of democracy in the digital age by

⁷⁶⁷ EVM, Election Commission Of India, <https://eci.gov.in/evm/> (August 1st, 4:00 PM)



appropriately utilising the potential of digital technologies.

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