

Review Article

Digital Empowerment Through the Digital India Mission: An Evaluation of Access, Inclusion and Administrative Transparency

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Abstract: The Digital India Mission has emerged as a central pillar of India's governance and development strategy, aiming to integrate digital technologies into public administration and everyday citizen–state interactions. While the expansion of digital platforms and services has been widely acknowledged, there remains a need for careful evaluation of whether these initiatives have translated into meaningful digital empowerment. This paper examines the Digital India Mission through an analytical focus on access, inclusion, and administrative transparency, treating these dimensions as interconnected rather than independent outcomes. It explores how digital infrastructure and online service delivery have reshaped patterns of access to public services, while also assessing the extent to which social, regional, and institutional factors influence inclusion. The study further analyses how digital platforms affect transparency and accountability in administrative processes, drawing attention to both their enabling potential and their practical limitations. The findings suggest that digital empowerment is shaped not only by technological expansion but also by administrative capacity, citizen capabilities, and trust in institutions. By situating digitalisation within broader governance processes, the paper contributes to a more grounded understanding of digital governance reforms and highlights the conditions under which digital initiatives can support inclusive and transparent public administration.

Keywords: Digital India Mission, digital empowerment, public service delivery, digital inclusion, administrative transparency, digital governance

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Digital India Mission

The Digital India Mission emerged at a moment when the Indian state was increasingly confronted with the limitations of traditional administrative systems in addressing the needs of a rapidly growing and diversifying population. Prior to its launch, public service delivery in many parts of the country was marked by delays, procedural opacity, and uneven access, particularly for citizens living in rural and remote areas. At the same time, the expansion of mobile connectivity and basic internet infrastructure had begun to reshape everyday social and economic interactions. The Mission was conceived against this backdrop, with the recognition that digital technologies could be used not merely as tools for automation, but as instruments for restructuring the relationship between the state and its citizens. It sought to move governance processes beyond paper-based systems and physical interfaces, aiming to create a framework where information, services, and opportunities could be accessed with greater ease and predictability.

At a broader level, the Digital India Mission was also influenced by global shifts toward digital governance and the growing belief that technology-driven reforms could enhance administrative efficiency and transparency. However, its background cannot be understood only through a technological lens. The Mission reflected a policy ambition to integrate digital infrastructure with developmental objectives such as inclusion, empowerment, and participatory governance. It attempted to align

economic modernization with social equity by envisioning digital platforms as enablers of education, financial inclusion, health services, and welfare delivery. Rather than treating digitalisation as an isolated sectoral reform, the Mission positioned it as a cross-cutting strategy intended to influence how policies are designed, implemented, and experienced by citizens across different regions and social groups.

1.2 Rationale of the study

The rationale for undertaking this study arises from the growing centrality of the Digital India Mission in shaping contemporary governance and development practices in India, coupled with the need to move beyond celebratory narratives surrounding digital expansion. While the Mission has been widely acknowledged as a transformative policy initiative, its actual contribution to digital empowerment remains uneven and contested. Access to digital infrastructure does not automatically translate into meaningful use, inclusion, or empowerment, particularly in a socio-economically diverse country where disparities in income, education, geography, and social position continue to influence the ability of citizens to engage with digital systems. This study is therefore necessary to critically examine whether the digitalisation of public services has genuinely reduced barriers for citizens or whether it has, in some cases, reproduced or even intensified existing forms of exclusion.

Another important rationale for this research lies in the limited empirical attention given to the governance and transparency dimensions of digital initiatives. Much of the public discourse focuses on technological achievements or

the number of services brought online, often overlooking how digital platforms function in everyday administrative practice. This study seeks to address that gap by analysing how digital tools under the Digital India Mission affect administrative transparency, accountability, and citizen–state interaction. By evaluating access, inclusion, and transparency together rather than in isolation, the research aims to generate a more nuanced understanding of digital empowerment as a policy outcome. Such an analysis is essential not only for assessing the effectiveness of the Digital India Mission but also for informing future digital governance strategies that aspire to be both technologically efficient and socially responsive.

1.3 Research problem and focus

The central research problem addressed in this study concerns the gap between the ambitious objectives of the Digital India Mission and the realities of its implementation on the ground. Although digital platforms and online services have expanded rapidly, there is limited clarity on whether these developments have translated into substantive digital empowerment for all sections of society. In many contexts, digital systems coexist with structural constraints such as uneven connectivity, limited digital literacy, administrative capacity issues, and social inequalities that shape access and usage.

2.1 Concept of digital empowerment

Digital empowerment refers to a condition in which individuals and communities are able to use digital technologies in ways that expand their choices, capabilities, and participation in social and institutional processes. It goes beyond the mere

As a result, the presence of digital infrastructure alone may not ensure inclusive participation or improved governance outcomes. The research problem, therefore, lies in understanding how digitalisation interacts with these constraints and whether it meaningfully alters citizens' ability to access services, exercise agency, and engage with public institutions.

The focus of this study is to empirically examine the Digital India Mission through the interconnected lenses of access, inclusion, and administrative transparency. Rather than treating digitalisation as a purely technical reform, the research situates it within broader governance processes and social contexts. It seeks to identify patterns and variations in how digital initiatives are experienced by different stakeholders, including citizens and administrative actors, and how these experiences reflect the strengths and limitations of current implementation strategies. By concentrating on outcomes rather than intent, the study aims to provide a grounded assessment of digital empowerment as a public policy objective, contributing to a deeper understanding of how large-scale digital governance reforms function in practice.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

availability of devices or internet connections and instead emphasises the ability to understand, navigate, and meaningfully engage with digital systems. Empowerment in this sense is closely linked to agency, as it involves the confidence and competence required to access information, make informed

decisions, and interact with digital platforms without undue dependence on intermediaries. When digital tools enable people to communicate directly with institutions, access services on their own terms, and exercise control over personal data and transactions, they begin to function as instruments of empowerment rather than symbols of technological progress.

At the collective level, digital empowerment also has a governance dimension, as it shapes how citizens relate to the state and to each other. Empowered digital users are better positioned to demand transparency, monitor public

service delivery, and participate in civic and administrative processes. However, this form of empowerment is unevenly distributed, as social and economic factors influence who can effectively benefit from digital opportunities. Education, language, gender norms, and geographic location all play a role in determining the depth of digital engagement. Understanding digital empowerment therefore requires attention to both individual capabilities and structural conditions, recognising that technology can enhance empowerment only when it is embedded within supportive institutional frameworks and inclusive social contexts.

Table: Dimensions of Digital Empowerment under the Digital India Mission

Dimension	Core Elements	Observed Governance Effect
Access	Internet connectivity, online portals, mobile-based services	Reduces physical distance and time costs in service delivery
Inclusion	Rural reach, marginalised groups, digital literacy	Determines equitable participation across social segments
Administrative Transparency	Online tracking, digital records, grievance systems	Improves procedural visibility and limits discretionary practices

2.2 Digital governance and administrative transparency

Digital governance refers to the use of digital technologies to design, implement, and manage public policies and administrative processes in ways that reshape how the state functions and how it interacts with citizens. In this framework, technology is not simply a support system for existing procedures but a mechanism that can reorganise decision-making, information flows, and

service delivery structures. Administrative transparency becomes a central expectation of digital governance, as digital platforms create the possibility of recording, tracking, and displaying administrative actions in real time. When processes such as applications, approvals, and grievance redressal are routed through digital systems, they leave electronic trails that can reduce discretion and limit opportunities for arbitrary decision-making.

At the same time, the relationship between digital governance and transparency is neither automatic nor guaranteed. While digital systems can make information more accessible, transparency depends on how platforms are designed, how data is presented, and how responsive institutions are to citizen feedback. If digital interfaces are complex, poorly explained, or accessible only to a limited segment of the population, they may obscure rather than illuminate

2.3 Inclusion and the digital divide

Inclusion within a digital governance framework refers to the extent to which diverse social groups are able to access, use, and benefit from digital technologies on equitable terms. The idea of inclusion highlights that digital systems are embedded in existing social structures and therefore tend to reflect broader patterns of inequality. The digital divide is not limited to the absence of internet connectivity or devices but also encompasses differences in digital literacy, language proficiency, economic resources, and social support. For many individuals, especially those located in rural areas or belonging to marginalised communities, digital platforms can appear unfamiliar or intimidating, limiting their ability to independently navigate online services. As a result, the promise of digital inclusion often remains unevenly realised across regions and social groups.

The digital divide also operates at more subtle levels, influencing the quality and depth of digital engagement rather than just basic access. Even when connectivity is available, factors such as unreliable networks, limited awareness of digital services, and dependence on intermediaries can constrain meaningful

administrative processes. Moreover, transparency also requires institutional willingness to share information and be held accountable, which cannot be ensured by technology alone. Therefore, administrative transparency under digital governance emerges from the interaction between technological tools, bureaucratic practices, and citizen engagement, making it a dynamic and contested outcome rather than a fixed achievement.

participation. These conditions can create new forms of exclusion, where individuals

are formally included within digital systems but lack real control over their interactions with them. Addressing inclusion, therefore, requires an understanding of how social, cultural, and institutional factors intersect with technology. It involves recognising that digital empowerment depends not only on expanding infrastructure but also on building capacities and trust, ensuring that digital governance mechanisms are responsive to the lived realities of diverse populations.

3. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the extent to which the Digital India Mission has contributed to digital empowerment by improving access to public services, promoting inclusion, and enhancing administrative transparency. The research seeks to move beyond surface-level indicators of digital growth and instead focus on how digital initiatives function in practice within everyday governance contexts. By

analysing access, inclusion, and transparency as interconnected dimensions, the study aims to assess whether digitalisation has altered the quality of citizen–state interaction and reduced procedural barriers in public administration. This objective reflects an effort to understand digital empowerment as an outcome shaped by both technological design and institutional behaviour.

A secondary objective of the study is to identify the challenges and limitations that influence the implementation of digital governance initiatives under the Digital India framework. This includes examining structural constraints, capacity-related issues, and social factors that affect how digital platforms are adopted and used by different stakeholders. Through this analysis, the study aims to generate insights that are relevant for policy refinement and future governance reforms. Rather than offering a descriptive account of digital initiatives, the objectives are oriented toward critical evaluation and empirical understanding, contributing to informed discussions on how digital policies can be made more inclusive and effective.

3.2 Research questions

The research questions guiding this study are framed to explore how the Digital India Mission operates as a mechanism of digital empowerment within the broader context of public governance. Central to the inquiry is the question of whether increased digitalisation has translated into improved access to public services for citizens across different social and regional contexts. The study asks how citizens experience digital platforms in their interactions with the state and whether these platforms reduce

dependency on intermediaries and procedural complexities. By focusing on lived experiences rather than formal policy claims, the research questions seek to capture variations in access and usability that shape the effectiveness of digital governance initiatives.

In addition, the study raises questions about inclusion and administrative transparency as key dimensions of digital empowerment. It examines whether digital initiatives have narrowed or reproduced existing social and economic divides and how these outcomes differ across groups and locations. The research also questions the extent to which digital systems have enhanced transparency and accountability in administrative processes, or whether they have simply digitised existing bureaucratic practices. Together, these questions provide a coherent framework for analysing the outcomes of the Digital India Mission, linking policy intent with empirical realities and governance performance.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design

The research design adopted for this study is guided by the need to evaluate the Digital India Mission as a complex public policy initiative rather than as a purely technological programme. The study follows an analytical design that combines descriptive and interpretative elements, allowing for an in-depth examination of how digital governance initiatives function in practice. This design makes it possible to capture both institutional processes and stakeholder experiences, thereby linking policy frameworks with implementation outcomes. By focusing on access, inclusion, and administrative

transparency, the research design ensures that the analysis remains grounded in governance outcomes rather than technical performance indicators alone.

The design also reflects the exploratory nature of the study, as digital empowerment is shaped by multiple social, administrative, and infrastructural factors that interact in dynamic ways. Instead of testing a single hypothesis, the research design emphasises contextual understanding and pattern identification across different dimensions of digital governance. This approach allows the study to accommodate variations across regions, administrative settings, and user

experiences while maintaining analytical coherence. Through this design, the research aims to generate insights that are empirically grounded and relevant for policy analysis, without reducing the complexity of digital governance to narrowly defined variables.

This subsection should explain the overall research design adopted, such as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods, and justify why it is appropriate for evaluating a large-scale governance initiative like Digital India.

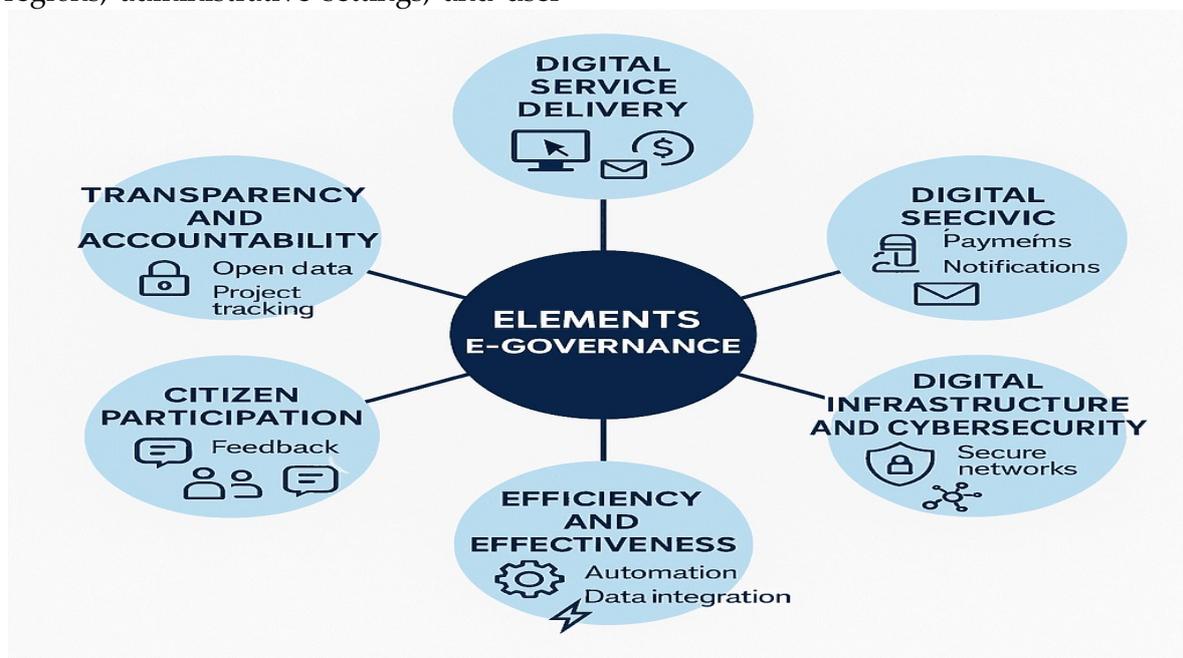


Figure: Conceptual elements of electronic governance and public administration systems

4.2 Sources of data

The study draws upon a combination of primary and secondary sources of data in order to develop a balanced and context-sensitive analysis of the Digital India Mission. Primary data forms an important component of the research, as it enables direct engagement with the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders involved

in or affected by digital governance initiatives. This includes inputs gathered through interactions with users of digital public services, as well as observations related to the functioning of digital platforms in administrative settings. Such data helps capture everyday realities that are often absent from official accounts and provides insights into how digital systems

are actually used, understood, and negotiated by citizens and administrators.

Secondary data is used to complement and contextualise primary findings, offering a broader policy and institutional perspective. This includes government policy documents, programme guidelines, administrative reports, and publicly available data related to digital service delivery. Academic literature and analytical reports are also consulted to situate the study within existing debates on digital governance and empowerment. Rather than treating these sources as definitive accounts, the research uses them as reference points for comparison and interpretation. The combination of primary and secondary data allows the study to triangulate findings and strengthen the reliability of its analysis, ensuring that conclusions are grounded in multiple forms of evidence.

5. OVERVIEW OF THE DIGITAL INDIA MISSION

5.1 Key components and objectives

The Digital India Mission is structured around a set of interconnected components that collectively aim to integrate digital technologies into the core functions of governance and development. At the foundation of the Mission lies the expansion of digital infrastructure, which is intended to create the basic conditions necessary for online service delivery and digital

5.2 Institutional and implementation structure

The institutional and implementation structure of the Digital India Mission is shaped by the need to coordinate actions across multiple levels of government and a wide range of administrative bodies. At

communication. This infrastructural emphasis reflects the understanding that access to reliable connectivity is a prerequisite for any form of digital engagement. Alongside infrastructure, the Mission places importance on the creation of digital platforms and systems through which public services can be delivered in a more streamlined and standardised manner. These platforms are designed to reduce procedural complexity and enable citizens to interact with government institutions without repeated physical visits.

The objectives of the Digital India Mission extend beyond administrative efficiency to encompass broader goals related to empowerment and inclusion. A key objective is to make governance more transparent and responsive by minimising discretionary practices and increasing the traceability of administrative actions. Another objective is to enhance citizen participation by enabling easier access to information and services across sectors such as education, health, welfare, and financial services. The Mission also seeks to foster a digitally informed society by encouraging digital literacy and awareness, recognising that technological access must be accompanied by the ability to use digital tools effectively. Together, these components and objectives reflect an attempt to position digitalisation as a means of reshaping governance practices and expanding opportunities for citizens rather than as an end in itself.

the national level, the Mission is guided by central ministries and departments responsible for policy direction, standard setting, and overall coordination. These institutions play a crucial role in defining priorities, allocating resources, and developing common digital frameworks that can be adapted across sectors. The

centralised formulation of broad guidelines is intended to ensure coherence and interoperability among digital platforms, while still allowing flexibility in execution across different administrative contexts.

At the same time, implementation largely depends on state governments and local administrative units, which are responsible for translating national objectives into operational practices. This multi-level structure introduces both opportunities and challenges, as it allows for contextual adaptation but also requires effective coordination and capacity at sub-national levels. Differences in administrative readiness, technical expertise, and infrastructural conditions across states influence how digital initiatives are rolled out and sustained. As a result, the institutional structure of the Digital India Mission is not a single, uniform system but a layered arrangement in which outcomes are shaped by interactions between central direction and local implementation capacity. Understanding this structure is essential for analysing variations in performance and the uneven impact of digital governance reforms across regions.

6. ACCESS TO DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

6.1 Expansion of digital infrastructure

The expansion of digital infrastructure has been a central pillar of the Digital India Mission, as it seeks to establish the basic technological conditions necessary for digital governance and service delivery. Efforts to improve connectivity, strengthen network coverage, and support digital platforms reflect an understanding that infrastructure forms the backbone of any digital initiative. In many regions,

especially those previously characterised by limited communication facilities, the introduction of digital infrastructure has altered the possibilities for interaction between citizens and public institutions. Administrative processes that once required physical presence have increasingly been shifted to online modes, reducing time and travel costs for some users and reshaping expectations about access to public services.

Despite these advances, the expansion of digital infrastructure has unfolded unevenly, revealing differences in quality, reliability, and reach. Urban and semi-urban areas have generally benefited more quickly from improved connectivity, while remote and geographically challenging regions continue to face constraints. Infrastructure expansion is also shaped by maintenance capacity and institutional coordination, as digital systems require ongoing technical support rather than one-time installation. As a result, the effectiveness of infrastructure expansion cannot be assessed solely by coverage figures but must be examined in terms of functionality and user experience. These variations play a significant role in determining whether digital infrastructure serves as an enabling foundation for empowerment or remains a symbolic indicator of development without consistent practical impact.

6.2 Accessibility of digital public services

The accessibility of digital public services depends not only on their availability online but also on how easily citizens can understand and use them in everyday situations. Digital platforms are often designed with the intention of simplifying procedures, yet their actual accessibility is shaped by factors such as language options, interface design, clarity of

instructions, and the stability of digital systems. For many users, especially first-time or less experienced digital participants, navigating online portals can be challenging when processes are fragmented or technical terminology is used without adequate explanation. Accessibility therefore becomes a matter of usability, where the design of digital services plays a critical role in determining whether citizens can independently complete administrative tasks.

Another important dimension of accessibility relates to awareness and support mechanisms surrounding digital services. Even well-designed platforms remain underutilised if citizens are unaware of their existence or uncertain about how to engage with them. In several contexts, individuals rely on intermediaries to access digital services, which can undermine the intended benefits of direct access and transparency. This reliance often reflects gaps in digital literacy, trust, or confidence rather than a lack of infrastructure alone. Evaluating accessibility thus requires attention to both technical design and social conditions, recognising that digital public services become genuinely accessible only when users feel capable of engaging with them without excessive difficulty or external dependence.

7. DIGITAL INCLUSION AND SOCIAL EQUITY

7.1 Inclusion of marginalised and rural populations

The inclusion of marginalised and rural populations within the framework of the Digital India Mission remains a critical measure of its success as a digital empowerment initiative. For many

individuals in rural areas, digital platforms represent a new mode of interaction with the state that can potentially reduce physical distance and administrative barriers. When digital services function effectively, they offer opportunities for easier access to welfare schemes, information, and grievance mechanisms. However, the extent to which these opportunities are realised depends heavily on local conditions such as connectivity quality, availability of shared access points, and the presence of supportive institutional arrangements. In areas where these conditions are weak, digital initiatives may exist in form but remain limited in practical reach.

Marginalised social groups often face additional challenges that shape their engagement with digital systems. Economic constraints, limited educational opportunities, and social hierarchies can restrict digital literacy and confidence, leading to continued reliance on intermediaries or informal networks. In some cases, digitalisation may unintentionally shift administrative burdens onto citizens who are least equipped to manage them independently. Inclusion, therefore, cannot be assessed solely by counting registered users or digital transactions. It requires an understanding of whether digital platforms actually enhance autonomy and reduce vulnerability for marginalised populations. Examining these dynamics helps reveal whether digital governance reforms are narrowing long-standing inequalities or reproducing them in new technological forms.

7.2 Gender and regional dimensions of digital inclusion

Gender and regional contexts play a significant role in shaping patterns of

digital inclusion under the Digital India Mission. Access to digital technologies is often influenced by social norms and household dynamics that affect women differently from men. In many settings, women have less control over digital devices and limited opportunities to develop digital skills, which can restrict their ability to engage independently with online public services. Even when digital infrastructure is available, these social factors influence how and whether women use digital platforms, shaping the depth of their participation in digital governance. As a result, digital inclusion from a gender perspective cannot be understood solely through access statistics but must consider everyday practices and power relations within households and communities.

Regional disparities further complicate the landscape of digital inclusion, as variations in infrastructure, administrative capacity, and socio-economic conditions influence how digital initiatives are implemented and experienced. Regions with stronger institutional support and better connectivity are more likely to see sustained use of digital services, while others struggle with inconsistent networks and limited technical assistance. These regional differences intersect with gender and other social factors, producing uneven outcomes across the country. Understanding digital inclusion therefore requires attention to how gendered experiences and regional contexts interact, shaping both opportunities and constraints. Such an analysis highlights the need for place-sensitive and socially informed approaches to digital governance that go beyond uniform implementation models.

8. ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSPARENCY AND GOVERNANCE OUTCOMES

8.1 Digital platforms and transparency in service delivery

Digital platforms have increasingly become central to the delivery of public services, reshaping how administrative processes are structured and perceived by citizens. By moving applications, approvals, and service requests to online systems, these platforms introduce new forms of visibility into administrative procedures. Citizens are often able to track the status of their applications, receive automated updates, and access records that were previously difficult to obtain. This visibility has the potential to reduce uncertainty and limit discretionary practices, as procedural steps become more clearly defined and documented. In this sense, digital platforms can contribute to greater transparency by making administrative actions more predictable and open to scrutiny.

However, the relationship between digital platforms and transparency is mediated by design choices and institutional practices. Transparency is strengthened when information is presented in clear and accessible formats, but it can be weakened when platforms are fragmented, poorly maintained, or difficult to navigate. In some cases, digital systems reproduce existing bureaucratic complexities in electronic form, offering limited improvement in clarity from the user's perspective. Moreover, transparency also depends on how responsive institutions are to grievances and feedback generated through digital channels. Without timely administrative follow-up, the informational openness created by digital platforms may not

translate into meaningful accountability. Examining service delivery through this lens helps assess whether digitalisation has genuinely enhanced transparency or merely altered the mode of administrative interaction.

8.2 Accountability and citizen engagement

Digital governance initiatives have created new possibilities for accountability by opening additional channels through which citizens can interact with public institutions. Online grievance systems, feedback mechanisms, and information portals provide spaces where citizens can register concerns and seek redress without relying solely on face-to-face interactions. These mechanisms have the potential to make administrative processes more answerable by creating digital records of complaints and responses. When effectively managed, such systems can reduce delays, limit informal negotiations, and provide citizens with a clearer understanding of how decisions are made and acted upon within public administration.

Citizen engagement through digital platforms, however, varies significantly depending on awareness, trust, and institutional responsiveness. While some citizens actively use digital channels to monitor services and express concerns, others remain hesitant due to limited familiarity with technology or scepticism about whether their participation will lead to tangible outcomes. Engagement is also influenced by how administrations perceive and respond to digital inputs. If feedback and grievances are

acknowledged promptly and addressed transparently, digital platforms can strengthen participatory governance. Conversely, when responses are delayed or opaque, citizen engagement may decline, reinforcing perceptions of distance between the state and the public. Analysing accountability and engagement together highlights the conditions under which digital governance can move beyond procedural efficiency to foster more interactive and responsive public institutions.

9. CHALLENGES IN DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT

9.1 Structural and infrastructural constraints

Structural and infrastructural constraints continue to shape the implementation of digital governance initiatives under the Digital India Mission, often limiting their reach and effectiveness. At the infrastructural level, inconsistent connectivity, frequent service interruptions, and limited technical maintenance capacity affect the reliability of digital platforms. These issues are particularly visible in remote and economically weaker regions, where digital systems may function intermittently or depend on shared access points. Such conditions undermine user confidence and discourage sustained engagement with digital services, reducing the potential benefits of digitalisation for both citizens and administrators.

Table 1: Dimensions of Digital Empowerment under the Digital India Mission

Dimension	Key Focus Areas	Governance Implications
Access	Digital infrastructure, online public services, connectivity reach	Reduces physical barriers and improves availability of government services
Inclusion	Rural participation, marginalised groups, digital literacy	Determines equitable use of digital platforms across social groups
Administrative Transparency	Online tracking, digital records, grievance portals	Enhances accountability and limits discretionary administrative practices

Structural constraints also arise from institutional arrangements and administrative practices that influence how digital initiatives are managed. Limited coordination between departments, uneven distribution of technical expertise, and rigid procedural norms can slow down implementation and adaptation. In some cases, digital systems are layered onto existing bureaucratic structures without adequate process reform, resulting in parallel systems that increase complexity rather than reduce it. These constraints highlight that digital governance is not solely a technological challenge but a structural one, requiring organisational change and capacity building alongside infrastructure development. Recognising these limitations is essential for understanding why digital empowerment outcomes remain uneven despite significant investments in digital expansion.

9.2 Capacity, literacy, and trust issues

Capacity-related challenges play a significant role in shaping the outcomes of digital governance initiatives, as both administrative actors and citizens require specific skills to engage effectively with digital systems. Within public institutions, limited technical training and high workloads can restrict the ability of

officials to manage digital platforms efficiently or respond promptly to online queries and grievances. When administrative capacity is stretched,

digital systems may exist in form but function poorly in practice, leading to delays and user frustration. These issues are often compounded by frequent changes in digital procedures, which require continuous learning and adaptation within already constrained institutional environments.

Digital literacy among citizens is equally critical in determining whether digital platforms foster empowerment or exclusion. For many users, unfamiliarity with online interfaces, fear of making errors, or limited understanding of digital processes reduces confidence in engaging with digital services independently. Trust also emerges as a key factor, as citizens may hesitate to rely on digital systems if they are uncertain about data security, privacy, or the responsiveness of authorities. When trust is weak, individuals may revert to informal intermediaries or traditional methods, undermining the intended benefits of digital governance. Addressing capacity, literacy, and trust together is therefore essential for creating conditions in which

digital initiatives can be used meaningfully and sustainably.

10. DISCUSSION: POLICY INTENT AND EMPIRICAL REALITIES

10.1 Interpreting access, inclusion, and transparency outcomes

Interpreting the outcomes of the Digital India Mission requires viewing access, inclusion, and transparency as interconnected rather than isolated dimensions of digital governance. Expanded access to digital infrastructure and online services has undoubtedly altered the modes through which citizens interact with the state, reducing physical barriers and increasing the speed of certain administrative processes. However, access in itself does not guarantee equitable participation. Variations in digital literacy, socio-economic position, and regional conditions influence who can make effective use of digital platforms and who remains dependent on intermediaries. As a result, the outcomes of increased access reveal a layered reality in which opportunities for engagement coexist with new forms of exclusion.

Similarly, gains in transparency through digital platforms must be assessed in terms of how information is experienced and used by citizens. While digital systems often make procedural steps more visible, their contribution to accountability depends on institutional responsiveness and clarity. Inclusion and transparency intersect in important ways, as groups with limited digital capacity may find it difficult to benefit from transparent processes even when information is technically available. Interpreting these outcomes together highlights the need to move beyond numerical indicators of

digital reach and instead focus on qualitative changes in governance practices and citizen experiences. This integrated perspective provides a more grounded understanding of digital empowerment as a policy outcome shaped by both technological and social factors.

10.2 Implications for digital governance theory

The findings of this study carry important implications for digital governance theory by highlighting the limits of technology-centric explanations of administrative reform. Digital governance is often theorised as a linear progression in which the adoption of technology leads to greater efficiency, transparency, and participation. However, the observed outcomes of the Digital India Mission suggest that governance transformations are mediated by institutional capacity, social structures, and political contexts. This implies that digital governance should be understood as a process embedded within existing administrative systems rather than as a disruptive force that automatically reshapes them. Theoretical approaches that overlook these contextual factors risk overstating the transformative power of digital tools.

The study also contributes to digital governance theory by reinforcing the importance of viewing citizens as active participants rather than passive users of digital systems. Empowerment emerges not from access alone but from the ability to engage, question, and influence administrative processes through digital means. This perspective challenges theories that equate digitalisation with participation without examining how power, literacy, and trust shape engagement. By foregrounding these

dynamics, the study supports a more nuanced theoretical understanding of digital governance, one that recognises the interplay between technology, institutions, and society in shaping governance outcomes.

11. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 Strengthening inclusive digital infrastructure

Strengthening inclusive digital infrastructure requires a shift in policy focus from mere expansion to long-term functionality and equity. While extending connectivity remains important, equal attention must be given to the reliability, quality, and local relevance of digital infrastructure. In many areas, particularly those that are geographically remote or socially disadvantaged, infrastructure investments need to be accompanied by sustained technical support and maintenance mechanisms. Without these, digital systems risk becoming underutilised or abandoned, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion rather than empowerment. Inclusive infrastructure must therefore be designed with an understanding of local conditions, ensuring that digital access is stable enough to support regular and meaningful use.

Inclusion also depends on how infrastructure interfaces with social and institutional environments. Shared access facilities, community-based digital centres, and locally supported service points can play an important role in bridging gaps where individual access remains limited. However, these mechanisms are effective only when they are integrated into broader governance systems and supported by trained

personnel. Strengthening inclusive digital infrastructure thus involves aligning technological investments with capacity-building initiatives and institutional accountability. Such an approach recognises that digital infrastructure is not merely a physical or technical asset but a public resource whose value is realised through sustained use and trust across diverse social groups.

11.2 Enhancing transparency and administrative capacity

Enhancing transparency through digital governance requires deliberate efforts to align technological systems with administrative practices and institutional norms. Digital platforms can make procedures more visible, but transparency is meaningful only when information is accurate, timely, and presented in a manner that citizens can easily understand. This calls for administrative commitment to regularly updating digital records, responding to online queries, and clearly communicating procedural requirements. When transparency is treated as an ongoing responsibility rather than a one-time outcome of digitisation, digital platforms are more likely to foster trust and reduce ambiguity in service delivery.

At the same time, strengthening administrative capacity is essential for sustaining transparency in digital governance. Public officials need adequate training and institutional support to manage digital systems effectively and respond to citizen interactions in a timely manner. Capacity-building initiatives should focus not only on technical skills but also on adapting administrative workflows to digital environments. Without such adaptation, digital tools may coexist with traditional practices in

ways that increase complexity rather than efficiency. Enhancing transparency and capacity together acknowledges that technology alone cannot reform governance; it must be accompanied by organisational learning and a commitment to accountable administrative behaviour.

12. CONCLUSION

12.1 Summary of key findings

The study finds that the Digital India Mission has played an important role in reshaping the landscape of public service delivery by expanding digital access and introducing new modes of interaction between citizens and the state. Digital platforms have reduced certain procedural barriers and improved the visibility of administrative processes, particularly in contexts where infrastructure and institutional support are relatively strong. At the same time, the findings indicate that access alone does not ensure digital empowerment. Variations in digital literacy, infrastructural reliability, and administrative responsiveness significantly influence how citizens experience and benefit from digital governance initiatives.

The research also highlights that inclusion and transparency outcomes remain uneven across social groups and regions. Marginalised populations, women, and residents of less-developed regions often face constraints that limit their ability to engage independently with digital systems. While digital tools have the potential to enhance accountability, their impact depends on institutional capacity and the willingness of administrations to respond effectively to citizen inputs. Overall, the key findings suggest that digital empowerment under the Digital

India Mission is a conditional outcome shaped by the interaction of technology, institutional practices, and social contexts rather than an automatic result of digital expansion.

12.2 Scope for future research

Future research on digital governance and empowerment can build upon this study by adopting more granular and comparative approaches. While this research offers an evaluative understanding of access, inclusion, and transparency, further studies could examine specific sectors such as health, education, or welfare delivery in greater depth to understand how digital platforms operate within distinct administrative environments. Comparative research across states or regions would also be valuable in identifying how variations in institutional capacity, political priorities, and socio-economic conditions influence digital governance outcomes. Such analyses can help move the discussion from general assessments to more context-specific insights.

There is also scope for future research to focus more closely on citizen experiences and long-term behavioural changes associated with digital governance. Longitudinal studies that track how individuals and communities adapt to digital systems over time would provide deeper insight into whether digital empowerment is sustained or remains episodic. Additionally, further exploration of trust, data security, and ethical concerns in digital governance could enrich theoretical and policy debates. Expanding research in these directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how digital initiatives can be designed and

implemented in ways that are both

effective and socially inclusive.

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