

Digitalization as a Catalyst for Integrated Rural Governance

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Abstract

The transition towards digitalization is an inseparable part of rural governance in the 21st century. The Central as well as the state governments are increasingly adopting the digital technologies in order to make rural governance more coordinated, transparent and citizen oriented. By adopting an inclusive and holistic approach the governments can leverage the digital transformation to straighten rural institutions and advance sustainable and equitable rural development. Examining the major digital governance policies and programmes of the Government of India the article proposes a few policy recommendations for strengthening the integrated and sustainable rural governance. The article also examines digitalisation as a catalyst for integrated rural governance, bridging the gap of administrative initiatives and public needs by fostering coordination among the government agencies, enhancing transparency and accountability for promoting inclusive and participatory governance.

Keywords

Digital Governance, Digital India, Good Governance, Citizen Centric Governance, Smart Villages.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 17.07.2026

Approved: 08.09.2026

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*Digitalization as a Catalyst
for Integrated Rural
Governance*

RJPP April 26-Sept.26,

Vol. XXIV, No. II,

Article No. 29

Pg. 255-265

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[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpp.2026.v24i02.029](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpp.2026.v24i02.029)

**This article has been peer-reviewed by the Review Committee of RJPP.*

Introduction

Digitalization has become an important issue of academic discussion in recent years throughout India. The policy makers, scholars and development practitioner have increasingly focused on how digitalization transforming India into a knowledge economy and digitally empowered society, with governance by expanding accountability, transparency and people participation. The Digital India programme has connecting and delivering the government programmes and services to mobilize the capability of information technology across government departments. Before analysing the perspectives and issues involving in subject, there is the need to explain the concept of government and governance. The phrases governance and government are related in a number of ways. Comprehending the difference between government and governance is essential to understanding these two concepts. In general government refers to “the formal institutional processes at the level of the nation state to maintain public order and facilitate collective action”. A government, in other words, is a group of individuals who run the state for a fixed period of time. It holds the legitimacy and coercive power to manage the public affairs and administer the functions of the state. We see the different states have various forms of government, like dictatorship or democracy, but the most of the modern states are democratic. However, when it comes to governance, it refers to “the eager maintenance of the atmosphere, by the state, in which men have the opportunity to be their best selves”. It involved decision making, policy implementation and the enforcement of the rules and regulations. The government of a democratic state control and governs the state by making and implementation of law, rules, and regulations. To put it simply, governance is the process by which the government runs its operations. The most recent attempt has to create e-government as good governance. A citizen using an e-governance system can access government services around-the-clock, for a minimal fee, and without any hassles. Transparency, accountability, and the elimination of corruption are all made possible by e-government. The World Bank define “e- Governance is the process through which different government organizations employ information technology to reinterpret their interactions with the public, private sector, and other organizations”. In recent times, e-governance is a commonly used word. It is also known as information technology-based governance which provides government services to the entire population through the use of information and communication technology. In fact, the majority of both developed and developing nations in the modern world exhibit the characteristics of e-governance. The proliferation of technology is having an impact on every aspect of day-to-day life.

Literature Review

The idea of rural governance through digitalization in India is closely connected with the broader concept of e-governance and digital government. In this part, we have reviewed very few important works in short time related to Integrated Rural Governance through Digitalization and tried to understand the theoretical foundation and ground reality of rural digital governance in India. The following literature provides important theoretical and analytical foundations for understanding rural digital governance in India

The Digital India initiatives have significantly influenced rural governance by expanding internet connectivity, digital literacy, and online public services. Studies suggest that Digital India has improved access to welfare schemes and governance services in rural communities. Naik (2012), in his study on “Fostering Inclusive Growth through E-Governance,” highlighted the role of e-governance in promoting inclusive rural development. The study examined that rural telecentres and ICT-enabled governance have enhanced information flow and service delivery in rural areas. The study also argues that digital governance can promote inclusive development and reduce rural isolation.

Yadav and Singh (2013), in “E-Governance: Past, Present and Future in India,” provided a broad overview of the development of e-governance in India. The study focuses on the evolution of digital governance from traditional administrative systems to technology-driven governance models. The study also explained that e-governance initiatives in India aim to improve transparency, accountability, efficiency and people’s participation in government.

Janowski (2015), in his study on “Digital Government Evolution: From Transformation to Contextualization,” stated that digital governance has shifted from simple computerization of administrative processes to broader socio-economic transformation. He emphasized that digital governance must be adapted according to social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. The study also suggested that digital government programmes are more effective when they consider local conditions and developmental challenges.

Dunleavy et al. (2006), in their study on “Digital Era Governance: IT Corporations, the State and E-Government” discussed how information technology has transformed the structural and functioning of modern governance. Their work highlighted the growing role of information technology in restructure the public administration and governance practices. In Indian rural perspective, this approach can be observed in initiatives such as digital land records, online welfare distribution,

Aadhaar-linked services, and e-governance platforms that attempt to simplify rural administration and improve transparency.

Malhotra (2010) in his study on “Citizen-centricity for e-Governance Initiatives in Rural Areas” depicted that e-governance initiatives in rural areas could strengthen democratic governance by increasing citizen participation and improving accessibility to public services.

Kumar et al. (2014) examined the study on “ICT in Local Self Governance: A Study of Rural India,” explored the role of Information and Communication Technology in strengthening rural local governance. The authors explained that ICT has become an important tool for improving service delivery and governance efficiency in rural areas.

Islam (2025), in “Digital Transformation and Local Self-Governance in India,” examined how digitalization transforming local self-government institutions in India. The study focused that digital platforms help in maintaining records, monitoring rural development programmes, and encouraging people participation in rural governance. As well as socio-economic inequality, digital illiteracy, and uneven technological infrastructure continue to create barriers to successful implementation of digital governance in rural India.

Das (2026), explored during his case study on Gram Panchayat in West Bengal, that digital tools positively influenced administrative efficiency and public engagement. The study showed that digitization reduced paperwork, accelerated service delivery, and enhanced communication between local authorities and citizens. At the same time, the research identified problems such as digital illiteracy, infrastructural limitations, and lack of institutional readiness, which restricted the full realization of digital governance objectives.

Debbarma et al. (2022) in their study on Tripura observed that e-Panchayat initiatives strengthened rural governance by improving public service delivery and promoting transparency. The study highlighted that digital governance systems simplify administrative work, improve record management, and make public services more accessible to rural peoples. The study also further that digital transformation can empower local institutions when combined with proper institutional support and citizen awareness.

Overall, these studies collectively show that digitalization has transformed rural governance in India by improving administrative efficiency, transparency, accountability, and people’s participation. At the same time, the literature highlights major challenges like digital divide, lake of infrastructure, and low digital literacy, which continue to affect the effectiveness of digital governance initiatives in rural areas.

Research gap of the study

Through the extensive literature review it has been found that a limited attention was given on ground level reality analysis of rural governance. Moreover, the study seeks to bridge between the policy decisions and implementation gap through an empirical data analysis. Some of the major objectives which have been dealt with under the paper are as follows.

Objectives

1. To assess the impact of digitalization in enhancing the efficiency and inclusiveness of rural governance.
2. To examine how digitalization has expedited the transparency and accountability of local governance.
3. To review the various projects and policies that has launched in strengthening the rural governance.

Methodology

In order to complete the paper, I have followed the qualitative method and as a part of this the content analysis of various projects, government records and archival data has been consulted. The critical analysis has been done using thematic analysis and micro-observation of ground reality.

In the following sections the major projects and policies associated with the efficacy of governance have been categorically discussed.

Digital India

Digital India is a wide nation wise programme which focuses on delivering digital literacy and accessibility of digital resources to all peoples. It has driven on reshuffle various existing programme that encourages the transforming from tradition of the state. It plays a pivotal role for the smooth progress of day-to-day livelihood of the citizens. Indian economy is growing at a very rapid pace. India used to be mostly recognized as an agricultural nation, but times have changed significantly since then. India has essentially initiated a vigorous technological revolution. Nowadays, peoples are observed using digital tools to finish their everyday tasks, beginning with cell phones. For example, Akodara is a first digital village situated in Gujarat. The Government of Gujarat in collaboration with ICICI Bank adopted the village and transformed it into a working model of Digital India. This village an ideal example of what a digital village would look like, from installing CCTV cameras to opening bank accounts and turning cashless transaction.

The Government of India has mainly focused to increase digital literacy in rural areas, and it is attempting to speed up this process by developing a number of

initiatives. By providing internet access facilities in their offices and producing computer resource documents to oversee their operations, panchayats hope to provide services to the public in a timely manner.

Programmes for Digital India

The following initiatives were taken by the Government of India to promote technology enabled rural governance:

MyGov.in: MyGov is an innovative citizen engagement platform for healthy exchange of thought, ideas and views involving citizens and experts with the ultimate goal to contribute for socio-economic transformation of India. Through this platform the citizens can submit their opinion and suggestions on diverse governance and public policy issues. The programme also used for design logos and taglines of different governmental initiatives like Swachh Bharat and Digital India.

National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN)

Every capital of the state, offices, and districts have optical fiber connectivity down to the block level. Through this programme 2,50,000 Gram Panchayats would be linked. Therefore, existing Public Sector Undertaking (PSU) Fibers like BSNL, RailTel, and Power Grid would be used to link to Gram Panchayats as needed. The Gram Panchayats will be benefited from the increased bandwidth that the dark fibre connectivity. This is popularly known as the National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN). It would reduce the communication gap between Gram Panchayats and Blocks.

Common Service Centres (CSC)

The common service centres programme is one of the Digital India Project's mission-mode activities. The CSCs serve as access points for essential public services such as education, healthcare, finance, agriculture services, and a variety of business-to-consumer (B2C) services for those residing in rural and remote location of the country. By using this Pan-Indian network connectivity, which serves the nation's varied regional, geographic, linguistic, and cultural communities, the government may achieve its goal by creating a society that is socio-economic and technologically inclusive.

Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme (DILRMP)

The Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme (DILRMP), focus on digitalize, modernize, and integrate land records rooms, creating a transparent, error-free, and efficient land management system. It aims to develop a practical integrated land information management system by leveraging existing land record similarities to reduce land disputes and fraud. This programme involves the computerization of land records, survey/ re-survey, computerization of registration

and mutations throughout the country. As of late 2024, approximately 98.5% of rural land records have been digitalised in India.

Ayushman Bharat

The Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM) launched by the central government in September, 2021 aims to provide the required infrastructure to enable India's integrated digital healthcare system. The main components of this programme include identity card (ID) for citizens to link their health records across different healthcare service providers, a Healthcare Professional Registry (HPR) for delivery of health services, a Health Facility Registry (HFR) for repository of all healthcare facilities, supported by Unified Health Interface (UHI) and Health Information Exchange and Consent Managers (HIECM). It also focused on digital ways to reduce the gap between different stakeholders of healthcare sector.

e-Shram

The e-Shram platform is developed by the Ministry of Labour and Employment to benefit of workers including migrant workers, construction workers, gig and platform workers, who are associated with unorganised sector. They are not members of ESIC or EPFO. It provides the benefits to the workers by registering Shramik Yojana and obtaining an e-Shram card which can be used all over country.

Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA)

The programme of Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) is launched by Ministry of Education, Government of India in collaboration with the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the National Institutes of Technology (NITs), and other prestigious governmental engineering schools around the country, including the College of Engineering in Pune. The main motto of this programme to enhance rural areas by leveraging knowledge institutions to build the architecture of an inclusive India. It involves interacting with nearby communities and utilizing technology to improve their quality of life.

Bharat Net

The Bharat Broadband Network Limited, sometimes known as BharatNet, is a broadband infrastructure provider established by the Ministry of Communication's & Telecommunications and Department of Telecommunications. It is envisaged that the endeavour will enhance the intermediate level of the country's broadband internet connection in order to achieve the goal of Digital India, providing all 250,000 Gram Panchayats, or around 625,000 villages, with broadband connectivity of at least 100 Mbit/s. As of May 26, 2025, the BharatNet project has brought high speed internet to over 2,14,325 Gram Panchayats. Near about 6.92

lakh kilometres of optical fibre cable has been laid under this project. More than 12,81,564 Fibre-To-The-Home (FTTH) connection has been commissioned, 1,04,574 Wi-Fi hotspots have been installed. The villages once lacked basic internet access now have digital tools at their doorsteps.

PMGDISHA

The Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA) was approved by the Union Cabinet, Government of India in **February 2017**. The main motto of this programme is to educate 6 crores rural families in digital literacy by training one person per household within March 2020 and has a budget of Rs 2,351.38 crores. It offers a free 20-hour (10–30 days) course for rural citizens aged between 14 to 60 years, focusing on operating digital devices, internet usage, and cashless transactions.

The PMGDISHA project was implemented by CSC e-Governance Services India Limited; this project is being carried out across 2.52 lakh Gram Panchayats. It depends on 5.34 lakh Common Service Centres (CSCs) spread throughout the country. This scheme has registered nearly about 7.35 crores beneficiaries, out of which 6.39 crores people have successfully completed training, and 4.97 crores people have received their certificates up to the institutional closing period on 31st March 2024. Globally, this is one of the largest digital literacy initiatives. Besides, PMGDISHA, different initiatives have been taken to extend digital literacy, enhance technical skills, and promote innovation.

Digital farming

Agriculture is an important source of income for most Indians, and technology has spurred a new revolution in the agriculture sector. Digital agriculture in India is transforming farming through technology-driven solutions like AI, drones and satellite imagery, targeting enhanced efficiency and farmer income. The Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the central, state, and private sectors have started a number of ICT projects for the agricultural sector, such as e-Krishi, Digital Crop Surveys, Krishi Decision Support system, the Village Resource Centre (VRC), and so on.

It is feasible to see the growing potential for digitalization in the way crop insurance programs, such as the Prime Minister's Crop Insurance Programme, are being implemented, given the government's belief that the future will be digital. The insurance portal can be accessed by using an app as part of the scheme, and money is directly transferred to the bank account of the farmers.

Technology use among farmers is increasing as a result of these digital activities. Other technological developments are being utilized to assess crops and

lands for insurance coverage, settle land disputes, etc. These include of drone technology, geo-tagging, satellite mapping, and geo-imaging.

Since India is a nation with a wide variety of languages and climates, digital technology can help with the effective spread of knowledge and a better understanding of a farm's microclimate for productive production. This can help with agricultural yield estimates and estimations, early disease and pest identification and treatment, and selecting the optimal seed variety. Precision farming is another area that has potential for innovation.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the digitalisation has brought a fundamental transformation in the landscape of rural governance by creating greater opportunities for administrative integration, transparency, efficiency and inclusive citizen centric participation. The rural peoples will be greatly benefited from being able to use the internet to execute a variety of online services. The rural economy, living conditions, convenience of work, and internet literacy can all be improved through digitization. Through the internet, India's rural areas may connect to the metropolis around the world. This digitization will be highly beneficial to the farmers. The farmers can only receive information relating to their numerous farming, cattle, crop, etc. used by internet. The Government of India has spent the last five years concentrating on the digital village initiative. The pilot project, which involved six villages, proved successful. The communities of Akodara and Dhasai become digitally active after this scheme is put into place. If we see the different corner of the country especially Kerela is recognised as first fully digital state, Akoli is a village of Telangana which fully digitally literate, Dhanuri village of Graeter Noida, Pansari village (Adarsh Gram) situated at Sabarkanta district of Gujrat, Upeda village located at Hapur district of Uttar Pradesh are very good in cashless payments. Besides, ATM Didi of Jharkhand villages to provide banking services directly to rural households, especially remote household. The Government of India planned for all government agencies to implement IT-based public grievance redressal, electronic databases, complete workflow automation, and re-engineering of all government processes. Undoubtedly the digitalization may enhance the quality of life and governance in rural peoples, but the problem arises regarding the execution of these digital services as in most of areas in rural India do not have infrastructural facilities namely, sufficient fibre optical, proper high-speed network and so on. Most of the peoples in rural areas are live in the below poverty line. Even they do not have formal educational and have a least technical knowledge. Most of the digital services are availed by mobile phones but the people cannot manage a smart phone even in these days due to financial

hardship. So, in order to address all the issues a holistic approach is required. Some of the measures like strengthening rural digital infrastructure, promoting digital literacy and capacity building integrating various digital platforms should be adopted immediately. Collectively these policy measures can lead to the effective transformation of digitalisation which must promote an accountable and integrated rural governance.

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