

Good Governance in India: Public Policy, Decentralization, and Gender Inclusion

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Abstract

Inclusive governance, especially gender-responsive policymaking and participatory digital governance is essential for achieving sustainable democratic development in India. As an essential facet of democratic administration and public policy, good governance plays an indispensable role in the twenty-first century. In India, governance reforms have actively and increasingly been focused on transparency, accountability, digital transformation, decentralization, and inclusive participation. Simultaneously, women's participation in governance institutions has also become a critical indicator of democratic legitimacy and policy responsiveness. This study critically examines the relationship between good governance and public policy in India with particular emphasis on digital governance and gender-inclusive policymaking. The research adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology based on secondary data collected from government reports, governance indicators, policy documents, and scholarly literature published between 2020–2025. Special focus shall be made on contemporary governance reforms including Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), Aadhaar-enabled welfare systems, Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), e-governance initiatives, and women's political participation in governance institutions.

Keywords: Good Governance, Public Policy, Digital Governance, Women's Participation, Inclusive Governance, Digital India.

Introduction

In the contemporary times, the dialogue on good governance has become increasingly significant in the arenas of Public Administration and Development Studies. Governance, today, is not just limited to but extends beyond the traditional functions of government and includes interactions among state institutions, civil society, private actors, and citizens. International organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identify transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, and inclusiveness as essential characteristics of good governance. There is no doubt in the fact that good governance plays a vital role in ensuring a smooth and efficient implementation of the public policies. The issues related to governance have been given due attention in the recent past and lucrative efforts have been made to judiciously and wisely implement the same.

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‘Governance’ – as the name suggests – is defined as an ‘act of control’ or a ‘way of governing’. Undoubtedly, it is an ‘act or manner of governing: the method of control’ – it encompasses the dynamic interaction between government and society, particularly in the processes of decision-making, implementation, and accountability within an increasingly complex world.

Good governance is a normative and value-oriented concept characterized by ethical, transparent, accountable and participatory administration directed towards public welfare. It signifies the judicious and equitable exercise of authority in pursuit of collective well-being. The concept acquired global prominence through development discourse, particularly through World Bank initiatives linking governance with sustainable and inclusive development. The major elements of good governance include participation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equity, inclusiveness, consensus orientation, and the rule of law. All these elements vouch for active and responsible governance processes where all stakeholders are ensured of an impartial, equitable and all-inclusive social structure.

Public Policy and good governance are intrinsically interconnected. Public Policy seeks to advance societal welfare, whereas good governance ensures its effective formulation, execution, and evaluation. Together, they constitute indispensable instruments for democratic administration, sustainable development, and socio-economic transformation. In the present era of economic liberalization and with the expansion of digital technologies, governance reforms have accelerated in India - leading to an increasing shift in public policy towards citizen-centric administration, digital service delivery, and decentralized governance. Programs such as Digital India, Aadhaar, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanisms have transformed the relationship between the state and citizens – thereby, improving administrative accessibility and reducing leakages in welfare delivery. At the same time, democratic governance in India is, increasingly, been evaluated through the lens of inclusiveness and representation. Women’s participation in governance institutions has also now been recognized as a critical component of governance quality because gender-inclusive governance improves welfare outcomes, accountability, and policy responsiveness. This study critically examines contemporary governance reforms and public policy mechanisms in India while evaluating women’s participation as a measurable indicator of inclusive governance.

Research Problem

Despite significant governance reforms and technological advancement, India continues to face persistent governance challenges such as corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, implementation deficits, digital divisions, regional inequality, and gender disparities in political representation. Although digital governance and decentralization have improved administrative accessibility, the extent to which these reforms contribute to inclusive and participatory governance remains contested.

The research paper seeks to attempt an analysis of whether recent governance reforms in India have strengthened democratic accountability and all-inclusive public policymaking.

Objectives of the Study:

The present paper aims to study and analyze:

- The relationship between good governance and public policy in India.
- The recent governance reforms and digital public infrastructure initiatives.
- Women's participation as a dimension of inclusive governance.
- Governance performance through recent empirical indicators.
- Contemporary challenges affecting governance effectiveness.

Apart from the above, the study shall also try to attempt an analysis of the changes in the implementation of public policy in India as a result of the digital governance reforms. Further, the women's participation and their contribution to inclusive governance shall also be a subject of study in this paper. The major governance challenges that affect the policy outcomes in India and the effectiveness of recent governance reforms in ensuring accountability and citizen participation shall also be relied upon in this study.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and analytical research methodology based on secondary data. Data has been collected from reports published by:

- Election Commission of India (ECI)
- Ministry of Panchayati Raj
- NITI Aayog
- Reserve Bank of India (RBI)
- Transparency International
- UN Women
- World Bank
- Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI)

Contemporary scholarships on governance in India have increasingly shifted from traditional bureaucratic administration towards digital, participatory, and inclusive governance frameworks. India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) model has transformed governance through Aadhaar-linked welfare delivery, UPI-based financial inclusion, and digital service integration. Digital governance has also been found to have improved administrative transparency and reduced welfare leakages. The governance effectiveness in India is significantly dependent upon implementation capacity at State and Local levels. The study highlights persistent Regional asymmetries in Public Policy outcomes despite National Governance reforms.

It has also been found that the women-led governance institutions demonstrate stronger welfare orientation and greater responsiveness toward healthcare, education, sanitation, and nutritional policies. When given opportunities, women have proven themselves to be global leaders. The UN Women India (2024) reports that gender-inclusive governance improves democratic legitimacy and policy accountability.

Further study also reveals that COVID-19 accelerated digital governance adoption but also exposed deep inequalities in digital accessibility and administrative inclusion. Recent governance literature also focuses on data governance, artificial intelligence, digital citizenship, and surveillance concerns emerging from rapid technological integration in governance systems. The existing literature demonstrates substantial progress in governance reforms; however, there remains limited integration of governance indicators, digital public infrastructure, and gender participation within a unified analytical framework. The present paper seeks to address this research gap.

The study is based on the theory of participatory and inclusive governance. According to the UNDP framework, good governance consists of:

- Participation,
- Transparency,
- Accountability,
- Rule of Law,
- Responsiveness,
- Effectiveness,
- Equity, and
- Inclusiveness.

The study also conceptualizes women’s participation and digital accessibility as measurable governance variables. Governance quality is therefore evaluated not merely through administrative efficiency but through inclusiveness, participation, and equitable policy outcomes.

Digital Governance and Public Policy in India

India has emerged as one of the world’s leading examples of Digital Governance Transformation. Launched in 2015 - the Digital India initiative aimed to create digitally empowered governance through Online Public Services, Digital Identity Systems, and Financial Inclusion Mechanisms.

The integration of Aadhaar, Mobile Connectivity, and Banking Systems—popularly known as the JAM Trinity – has expanded welfare delivery mechanisms significantly. The following table clearly illustrates the growth of Digital Governance Indicators in India in a span of ten years (2014-2024):

Indicators	2014	2024
Internet Users	~250 Million	~954 Million
Aadhar Coverage	~600 Million	>1.3 Billion

UPI Transactions (Monthly)	Minimal	17+ Billion
DPT Transfers	Limited	₹6.9 Trillion+
Online Government Portals	Fragmented	Integrated Digital Platforms

Source: RBI (2024), TRAI (2024), Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (2024).

The above data clearly indicates a significant expansion of digital governance infrastructure in India. Digital public infrastructure has improved financial inclusion, reduced welfare leakages, and enhanced administrative transparency. However, it is also a clear fact that unequal internet access and digital illiteracy have continued to affect marginalized populations, particularly women and rural communities.

Women’s Participation and Inclusive Governance

Women’s participation has become a crucial indicator of Democratic Governance and Policy Inclusiveness in India. Constitutional decentralization through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments significantly expanded women’s political participation at the grassroots level. These aimed to establish local self-government as the third tier of governance. While, 73rd Amendment aimed to empower Rural Panchayati Raj Institutions, the 74th Amendment empowered Urban Local Bodies – thereby, enabling active participation of women candidates and stake-holders in governing bodies. The following Table no.2 clearly illustrates the rise in the representation of Women in Governance Institutions in India within a time span of fourteen years (2010-2024):

Year	Lok Sabha (%)	Panchayati Raj Institutions (%)
2010	10.9	36
2015	11.8	42
2020	14.4	44
2024	15.2	46

Source: Election Commission of India (2024), Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2024).

The above data clearly demonstrates that reservation policies have significantly improved women’s representation in local governance institutions. However, it is also a cruel fact that women, still, remain underrepresented in National and State-Level Political institutions even today. The women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions often prioritize social-welfare-oriented policies like:

- Sanitation
- Maternal Healthcare
- Drinking Water
- Education

- Nutrition
- Self-help groups
- Rural Livelihoods

This, indubitably, indicates that gender-inclusive governance positively influences public policy priorities and local development outcomes. It is also worth noting that studies reveal that most of the female representatives focused on women concerns in contradiction to their male counterparts.

Women-Led Development and Public Policy

Contemporary governance discourses in India have shifted from ‘women’s development’ toward ‘women-led development.’ No doubt, the women’s participation in governance is indispensable for the effective formulation and implementation of public policies in the country. Being nearly half of the population, women bring diverse perspectives and frameworks to the understanding of governance as they function at grassroots level and with their undiluted experiences, inhibit the power to ensure a more responsive governance. Their active participation in legislation, local self-government bodies, bureaucracy and policy-making institutions strengthens democratic accountability and ensures that public policies include concerns such as health, education, nutrition, sanitation, gender justice, and social welfare more comprehensively and effectively.

Recent public policies increasingly integrate gender-responsive governance mechanisms. Major women-centric policy initiatives in India include:

- Beti Bachao Beti Padhao
- Mission Shakti
- Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana
- National Rural Livelihood Mission
- Gender Budgeting Frameworks
- Stand-Up India

These policies aim to improve women’s socio-economic participation and strengthen inclusive governance. In September 2023, the Hon’ble Parliament passed the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women’s Reservation Act) – this, further, reflects the growing recognition of women’s political participation as an essential democratic requirement in the country.

Challenges to Good Governance in India

Empirical evidence suggests that India has made substantial progress in expanding digital governance and grassroots democratic participation, particularly through Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, challenges such as corruption, digital inequality, implementation gaps, bureaucratic inefficiency, and underrepresentation of women in higher political institutions continue to affect governance effectiveness. Despite significant reforms, several structural challenges continue to affect governance quality. Governance effectiveness can be measured

through policy delivery indicators and International Governance Assessments in as reflected in the following Table no. 3:

Indicator	Performance
SDG India Index Score	71
Corruption Perception Index Score	39/100
Female Labour Force Participation	~37%
Digital Payment Transactions	Global Leader
Ease of Living Digital Access	Expanding
Women in State Assemblies	~9%

Sources: NITI Aayog (2024), Transparency International (2026), RBI (2025), UN Women (2024).

Undoubtedly, India has demonstrated substantial progress in digital administration and welfare delivery. No doubt, governance challenges such as corruption, implementation deficits, and gender inequality continue to affect policy effectiveness. Even today, India continues to face corruption-related challenges in public administration and policy implementation. While digital governance has improved accessibility, unequal access to technology remains a major obstacle for rural populations, women, and economically weaker communities. Administrative delays, weak coordination, and procedural complexities continue to hinder policy implementation and women, till date, remain underrepresented in higher political institutions, bureaucracy, and policymaking bodies despite progress at the grassroots level. Rapid expansion of digital governance has also generated concerns regarding data security, surveillance, and citizen privacy.

Conclusion

The study reveals that governance in India has increasingly shifted toward digital, participatory, and citizen-centric administration. The expansion of Digital Public Infrastructure has significantly improved welfare delivery, financial inclusion, and administrative transparency. The analysis further demonstrates that women's participation strengthens governance quality by enhancing policy responsiveness and welfare orientation. However, representation gaps in higher political institutions continue to limit fully inclusive governance. The findings indicate that governance effectiveness depends not only on technological advancement but also on equitable access, institutional accountability, and participatory representation.

Good governance and public policy in India are increasingly shaped by digital transformation, participatory governance, and inclusive policymaking. India has made substantial progress in digital public infrastructure, decentralized governance, and welfare delivery mechanisms. However, persistent challenges such as corruption, implementation deficits, digital inequality, and gender disparities continue to affect governance outcomes.

In a diverse and hierarchical society like India, women's inclusion in governance promotes social justice, strengthens institutional legitimacy, and bridges the gap between policy objectives and ground level realities. The presence of women in decision-making positions inspires political awareness and civic participation among other women, thereby deepening democratic culture. Hence, it is concluded that women's participation is not merely a social inclusion issue but a measurable determinant of governance quality and democratic accountability. Strengthening gender-inclusive governance, improving digital accessibility, enhancing institutional transparency, and ensuring effective policy implementation are essential for sustainable democratic development in India.

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