

Voice of the Citizen and Choice of the Government: Reassessing the dynamics of Governance in India

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Abstract:

This article examines the evolving relationship between the “voice of the citizen” and the “choice of government” in India’s governance landscape. Based on the conceptual debates, policy reforms, and secondary data, the study analyses how citizen participation, both institutional and digital, shapes governance outcomes. The paper has outlined the steps taken by India in reducing poverty, increasing its digital governance and human development. It has noted significant problems that remain to be tackled which include inequality, lack of administrative capacity, the Centre-State tussle and the digital divide. It opines that good governance must have a balance between the state and the meaningful citizen participation and reinforce institutional functions to guarantee equitable development. The article concludes by outlining policy directions for building a more inclusive and citizen-centred governance model.

Keywords: governance, citizen participation, digital governance, policy, development.

1. Introduction

The basis of good governance lies in the cultivation of trust between the state and its citizens. Citizen-centric governance seeks not merely the delivery of services but the enhancement of citizen welfare and satisfaction across all levels of administration. The responsiveness, quality and accessibility of the delivery of public services in a large and diverse polity like India influence the relationship between the state and citizens to a large extent. India being the largest democracy in the world offers a great background of studying the issue of governance as a dynamic process which accommodates the elements of participation, accountability, transparency and sustained citizen engagement.

In recent decades, the discourse has shifted from a narrow understanding of “government” to the broader and more complex notion of “governance.” This change signifies the recognition that power is not only exercised through formal state actors, but also distributed within a network of actors, inclusive of civil society groups, private companies, and non-state actors. The global institutions, including the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have played a crucial role in facilitating this conceptual shift. The UNDP (2024) defines ‘Governance’ as the system of values, policies and institutions through which a society manages its economic, political, and social affairs, emphasising interactions among the state, civil society, and the private sector in decision-making and implementation (*Governance*, n.d.).

In this dynamic form, governance extends beyond administrative setups to include the process in which decisions are arrived at, participants are incorporated or excluded and the accountability of the assessing institutions. Governance is a multifaceted concept that pertains to the structures, systems and practices through

which organisations operate and achieve their objectives. Further, promoting good governance constitutes a multidimensional challenge, as its core elements such as participation, transparency, accountability, and efficiency are mutually reinforcing.

2. Conceptual Framework:

The relationship between citizen voice and government choice occupies a central position in contemporary governance theory. Citizen's voice is the ability of individuals and communities to express their preferences, impact the process of policy making and hold the institutions accountable. The choice of the Government on the other hand is related to the mandate of elected bodies and political organizations to formulate and enact policies within the limits of the political directive, institutional limits and developmental imperatives. The interaction between these two dimensions is mediated by institutional arrangements and the broader nature of state - society relations.

Furthermore, Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) highlights the dense networks of trust and reciprocity which improves state responsiveness and reduces regional disparities. Building on this, Elinor Ostrom (1990) in his notion of polycentric governance suggests that governance works best through decentralization and overlapping institutional arrangements, however, pertaining to Indian context, this potential is often constrained by centralised policy impositions that limit local autonomy. Archon Fung (2006) in a participatory perspective emphasizes that citizen engagement becomes meaningful only when it is effectively linked to actual decision-making authority, wherein a gap is visible in many digital governance platforms. Finally, Mark E. Warren (2009) underlines that, while formal democratic structures ensure electoral and institutional accountability, the weaker societal accountability continues to hinder truly responsive governance outcomes in practice.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

- Examine the conceptual relationship between citizen voice and government choice in the aspect of governance.
- Analyse the role of institutional and digital mechanisms of citizen participation in shaping the outcomes of governance.
- Assess India's developmental trajectory using key socio-economic indicators.
- Trace the challenges to governance in structural and institutional form.
- Suggest measures for an inclusive and citizen-centred governance.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and an analytical research design based on the collection of secondary data from recent sources (2025–2026), including the MoSPI, NFHS-5, UNDP, World Bank, IMF, and ILO, along with updated estimated values from the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey and Union Budget 2025–26. It incorporates the content analysis of key governance initiatives with interpretive policy analysis of constitutional provisions, focussing on the 73rd and 74th Amendments, and major initiatives such as Digital India and Centrally Sponsored Schemes. The approach further links the reforms in the governance and participatory measures to developmental outcomes through an interpretive analytical framework.

5. The Changing Dynamics of Governance in India

India's governance landscape has seen a major transformation in the last few decades, marked by a gradual shift from a state-centric model of administration to a more participatory and networked centered governance. The constitutional decentralisation of 73rd and 74th Amendments established forums of citizen involvement on the grassroots level and the local bodies could much more actively participate in the planning and implementation. A key aspect of this transformation has been the expansion of digital governance. The presence of platforms like MyGov, CPGRAMS and UMANG has enabled citizens to interact directly with the state while the proliferation of digital payments, which occurred mainly through the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has fuelled the digitisation of the typical economic activity hugely.

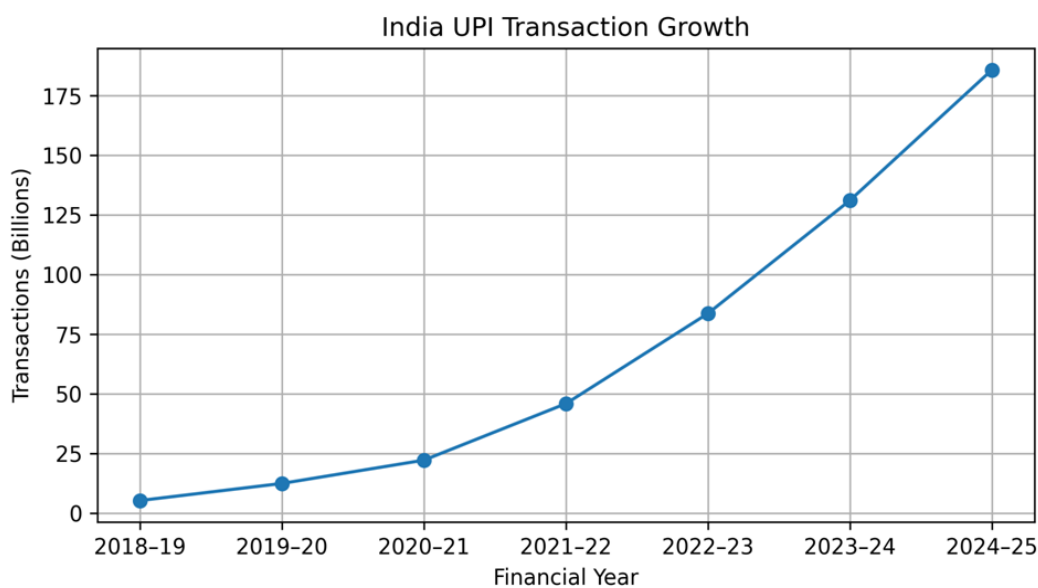


Figure 1: India UPI Transaction Growth
(Source: NPCI, Worldline)

As per the chart (Figure 1) mentioned above, UPI had processed approximately 228.5 billion transactions, marking a 33 per cent increase over the previous year, with a total transaction value reaching ₹299.74 trillion in 2025 (Worldline, 2025). This growth reflects a broader shift towards a micro-transaction economy in which digital governance tools reach well beyond formal administrative interfaces.

6.1 Governance Outcomes and Developmental Trends:

In recent years, India's human development index has evolved from 134th rank to 130th rank among 193 nations reflecting HDI of 0.685 in 2023 has been improvised. The advancement in this is complemented by an increase in life expectancy to 72 years and an increase in per capita income.

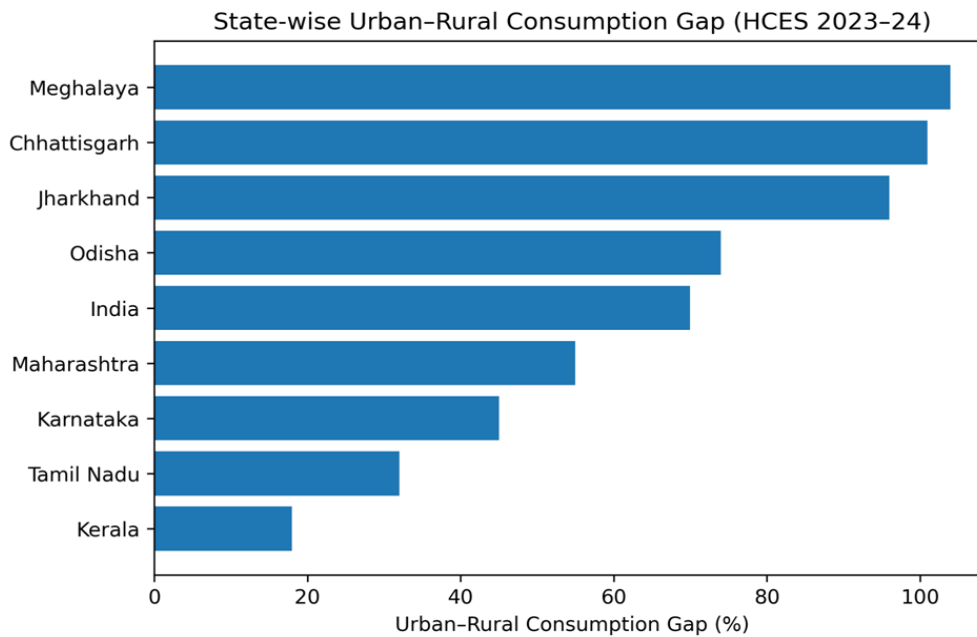
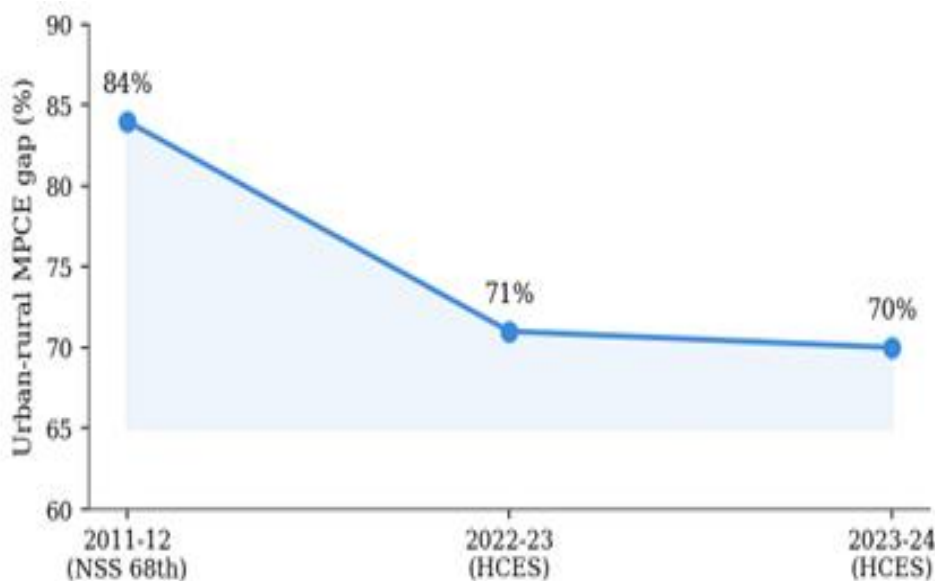


Figure 2: Urban Rural Consumption Gap - States and India (Source: MoSPI, HCEs 23-24)

As per the Urban Rural Consumption Gap (Figure 2), national level improvement marks a significant difference in living standards across regions. The Household consumption Expenditure Survey (2023 -24) data reveal the overall urban rural consumption division has narrowed from 84% in 2011-2012 to 70%.



Figure

3: National Urban Rural Consumption Gap (Source: MoSPI 2024)

As per the Figure 3 - The national urban rural consumption gap 2023-24, it is evident that disparities among states remain substantial. The gap ranges from 18% in Kerala to 104% in Meghalaya (Figure2), where Jharkhand and Chattisgarh also recording the widest differences. Similarly, gender inequality persists in shaping the development outcomes, as participation of female labour force remains at around 32% compared to 76% of men (UNDP,2025).

6.2 Case Studies: Government Responsiveness to Citizen Demands:

Citizen's experience often reveals more about governance rather than government indicators alone. Several well documented events depict the influence of administrative capacity in shaping government ability to respond to public concerns. One of the significant examples is Bhopal Gas Disaster (1984) where survivors seeking compensation, healthcare and environmental rehabilitation survived years of legal battles. As a final settlement the Supreme Court delivered its final verdict nearly five years later, disputes over implementation persisted for decades thereafter (Union Carbide Corporation vs. Union of India, 1989 SCC (2) 540). In Thoothukudi, Tamilnadu, a large public protest against the Sterlite Copper plant arose alleging the environmental and health risks which eventually escalated into police firing in 2018, highlighting the defects in early public engagement and consultation. In (2020-2021) the farmers protest paved a different path thereby parliament repealed three farm laws in late 2021 (Government of India 2021) reflecting the persistent citizen participation can influence the public policy. Similarly recent events, including the ethical violence in Manipur from May 2023 and recurring urban floods in Chennai, particularly in 2015 raised a concern with regard to speedy relief measures, coordination among agencies and prevention of disaster leading to a subsequent review by parliament, judiciary and administrative. Collectively, these instances highlight the persistent institutional weakness, including delayed administrative action, inadequate prior consultation, ineffective grievance redressal mechanisms. These challenges reflect the pattern observed in the quantitative findings and suggest effective governance depends not only on participation but the administrative capacity to respond to public needs in a prompt and meaningful manner.

6.3 Findings and Discussions:

The research determines three patterns coming out of the data and to begin with, convergence at the national level of consumption coincides with the increasing divergence between countries at the state level hence pointing out to the fact that there is unequal distribution of governance even as the aggregate indicators also become better. Secondly, digital governance platforms have broadened its scopes, and its use is still associated with the current administrative capacity. Third, the equity-based gains are declining on the human development gains: the HDI is increasing, and the consumption levels are increasing but the states where the administrative system is the weakest are the ones with the largest urban-rural and gender disparities.

Such trends indicate that citizen participation in its own does not matter when it comes to governance; it is institutional capacity. In strong administrative systems (such as in Kerala), participatory and digital mechanisms will result into smaller disparities. In capacity weak places, the identical constitutional and digital architecture is on paper but cannot bridge the gap, as in Meghalaya and Chhattisgarh. This indicates a conditional form of governance which requires the value of citizen voice to be actualised as a result of the strength of action on it, and as remaking the relationship between citizen voice and government choice in terms of the strength of its implementation.

6. Conclusion

The discussion that has been carried out in this paper shows that the citizen voice / government choice relationship in India is entrenched in a developing system of governance marked by widening participatory opportunities and institutional diversities. A trend in the administration of India ascertains that constitutional decentralisation and digital growth have set structural preconditions of governance being citizen centric but are not yet equally distribution its advantageous results throughout the states. Bringing this gap is a task that

involves direct focus on administrative capacity, as opposed to the expansion of participatory channels, and hence, so that the benefits will manifest in national indicators will be complemented by convergences in states.

In the study, there is an argument that the society needs to get out of the binary concept of participation and authority but instead consider governance as a social contract between the two. To reinforce this balance, we must both provide additional avenues of engagement, but also enhance institutional capacities to ensure that participation is significantly reflected in policymaking. It is in this context that the actualisation of the citizen-based governance process in Italy will eventually rely on the capacity of the state to harmonise the responsiveness with effectiveness, which will lead to the achievement of more equitable and sustainable development levels.

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