

Digital Democracy and the Transformation of Political Participation in India: Emerging Trends and Democratic Challenges

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Abstract:

Digitalisation has progressively changed the character of democratic participation in India, opening up new spaces for political communication, mobilisation and interaction between citizens and the government. This paper examines the emerging trends and democratic challenges of digital political participation in India, during the period 2014-2024, characterised by rapid growth of internet connectivity and the 2014, 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The study is based on secondary data collected from authentic sources such as the Election Commission of India (ECI), the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India reports and relevant scholarly literature. The analysis reveals that social media engagement, online political discussion, digital campaigning, youth mobilisation, hashtag activism and direct communication between political actors and citizens have opened up political participation through digital platforms. Evidence also suggests that social-media news consumption and political interest are linked to greater levels of online political participation in India (Ahmed, 2024). But digital democracy still has to contend with the digital divide, misinformation, political polarisation, privacy concerns, online hate speech and AI-generated deepfakes. The paper argues that digitalisation has created a fundamental democratic paradox: while it creates opportunities for political participation, unequal access and new forms of digital manipulation can undermine inclusive and informed engagement. Digital inclusion, media and online literacy, data protection, responsible platform governance and safeguards against AI-enabled manipulation are key for enhancing India's digital democracy, the study finds.

Keywords: Digital Democracy; Political Participation; Social Media; Digital Divide; Electoral Politics; Misinformation.

1. Introduction:

Democracy is based on the capacity of citizens to take part in public affairs through voting, political communication, political mobilisation, deliberation and interaction with institutions of governance. Political participation has traditionally taken the form of elections, political parties, public meetings, demonstrations, print and broadcast media, and direct contact with political representatives. But the rapid development of digital technologies has changed these traditional forms of participation. The internet, social-media sites and digital communication technologies have created new spaces whereby citizens can

obtain political information, express opinions, interact with political actors and engage in collective political activities. Digital means are becoming more and more relevant for political participation.

In the last decade, India has witnessed an impressive growth of digital connectivity. According to Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), India had 267.40 million internet subscribers in December 2014 (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2015). TRAI's official December 2024 data report 970.16 million internet subscribers, including 944.96 million broadband and 25.20 million narrowband subscribers (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2015) (TRAI, 2025). This dramatic increase in digital connectivity has provided an increasingly important technological basis for political communication, online mobilisation and citizen engagement.

This transformation has been further enabled through the institutional development of digital governance. The Digital India Program was initiated by the Government of India on 1st July 2015 with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. Its three core vision areas include: digital infrastructure as a utility for every citizen, on-demand governance and services, and digital empowerment of citizens (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2024). The development of digital public services and digital platforms has thus opened up more channels for citizens to engage with government institutions.

The process of digitisation has also gained increasing importance in electoral politics. The period 2014–2024 is particularly significant as it covers three consecutive Lok Sabha elections in a phase of rapid growth of India's digital ecosystem. The voter turnout rose from 66.44% in 2014 to 67.40% in 2019, but then fell to 66.10% in 2024, according to the Election Commission of India (ECI). Total votes polled, too, increased from 55.42 crore in 2014 to 61.47 crore in 2019 and 64.64 crore in 2024 (Election Commission of India, 2025). Although shifts in electoral engagement cannot be solely attributed to digitalisation, these developments offer an important lens with which to explore the changing nature of political communication and participation.

1.1 Digital Democracy in the Indian Context:

Such Indian experience thus reflects a shift toward a more digitally mediated democratic milieu. Digital platforms have allowed political parties and leaders to speak directly to citizens, and citizens have new opportunities for political expression, information sharing and mobilisation. Meanwhile, the rise of digital democracy has led to concerns about the digital divide, misinformation, political polarisation, privacy and the rise of AI-enabled manipulation. Therefore, the present study examines the period 2014–2024 as a significant period of India's digital transformation to understand how digital democracy has affected political participation and what democratic challenges have emerged with this transformation.

2. Review of Literature:

The massive growth of internet connectivity and social-media platforms has led to a huge expansion of the literature on digital democracy and political participation in India. So far, the literature can be divided into three interrelated themes: digital media as a new space for political participation, the redefinition of electoral politics through digital platforms, and the democratic dilemmas in digital participation.

2.1 Digital Media and New Forms of Political Participation:

There is growing evidence that digital technologies have widened traditional boundaries of political participation. According to Raj (2023), who studied digital media and women's political participation in

India, digital platforms have opened up new possibilities for women to express their political opinions, engage in social and political mobilisation and join online communities. The study especially emphasises the rise of feminist counter-publics through digital spaces, but also identifies online trolling and harassment as barriers to inclusive participation (Raj, 2023).

Ahmed, Masood and Wang (2024) make an important empirical contribution by studying online political participation in India through the intersection of political interest, social-media news use and religious status. Their results indicate that those who are more politically interested and more likely to consume political news via social media are also more likely to participate in online political activities. Importantly, their findings suggest that social media can have a more powerful mobilising effect among politically interested members of religious minorities than among members of the majority group. In this study, we show that digital political participation is not monolithic but is heterogeneous across social and political characteristics (Ahmed, 2024).

More recently, Das (2026) argues that social media has transformed the nature of political participation in India from a phenomenon associated with traditional political institutions to a more continuous, visible and interactive process. The study contends that digital platforms provide spaces for citizens to participate in political communication and participation beyond elections and traditional organisational structures. At the same time, Das points to misinformation, political polarisation and unequal access to digital technologies as key structural tensions within India's emerging digital democracy (Das, 2026).

2.2 Digitalisation of Electoral Politics:

Another important strand of the literature is the growing role of social media in Indian electoral politics. In comparing the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Shivaraju (2025) contends that social media has shifted from a supplementary communication mechanism to an increasingly prominent constituent of electoral campaigning, voter outreach and political mobilisation. The study finds Facebook, X/Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube as important platforms used by major political parties to engage in targeted messaging and digital strategies (Shivaraju, 2025).

The literature thus indicates a broader transformation in the relationship between political actors and citizens. Digital platforms allow political parties and candidates to communicate rapidly and directly with voters and citizens to respond, share and circulate political messages. This is a shift from primarily one-way political communication to a more interactive digital environment.

2.3 Democratic Challenges of Digital Participation:

But scholars caution against assuming that digitalisation is an automatic synonym for democratic deepening. Digital political participation may be undermined by major challenges such as misinformation, political polarisation and unequal digital access (Das, 2026). In a similar vein, (Raj, 2023) emphasises online harassment and trolling as impediments to women's effective engagement in digital political spaces. Shivaraju (2025) also stresses the growing importance of misinformation and new forms of manipulated digital content in modern electoral politics (Shivaraju, 2025).

2.4 Research Gap:

The reviewed literature shows that digital platforms have increased political communication, created new forms of participation and transformed electoral campaigning, but also created challenges regarding inequality, misinformation, polarisation and online exclusion. Although existing studies have examined

specific elections, platforms, political actors and forms of online participation, comparatively fewer studies in the reviewed literature bring these dimensions together in a longitudinal secondary-source analysis covering the 2014–2024 period. This study thus aims to fill this gap by exploring emerging trends of digital democracy and their impact on political participation while analysing the key democratic challenges associated with digitally mediated political participation in India.

3. Research Objectives:

- i. To examine the emerging trends of digital democracy and their influence on political participation in India
- ii. To analyse the major democratic challenges associated with digital political participation in India

4. Research Methodology:

The study's research design is descriptive and analytical to study the emerging trends and democratic challenges of digital political participation in India. It is based exclusively on secondary data sources. The study covers the period 2014–2024, a period chosen to accommodate the significant expansion of digital communication along with the 2014, 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Data is sourced from authoritative sources including the Election Commission of India (ECI), Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India reports, NITI Aayog, Data.gov.in, United Nations publications and relevant peer-reviewed academic literature. The collated information is analysed using descriptive, comparative and trend analysis, aided by tables and figures where necessary. The study focuses on two dimensions: (i) new forms of digital political participation and (ii) democratic challenges arising from digitalisation, such as the digital divide, misinformation, polarisation, privacy issues and AI-enabled political manipulation.

5. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

5.1 Concept of Digital Democracy

The term digital democracy is used loosely to mean the use of digital information and communication technologies to improve democratic processes, institutions and citizen participation. It includes the ways in which digital technologies facilitate political communication, access to information, public deliberation, civic engagement and interaction between citizens and political institutions. Digital technologies have contributed to the emergence of a hybrid political environment, in which traditional and digital forms of political communication increasingly interact (Chadwick, 2013). Coleman and Blumler (2009) similarly argue that digital technologies can offer new opportunities for citizens to connect with political institutions and participate in democratic processes (Blumler, 2009).

However, digital democracy should be distinguished from related concepts. E-government refers essentially to the use of information and communication technologies by government institutions to deliver information and public services to citizens (United Nations, 2024). E-governance is wider, involving the use of digital technologies to improve governance, institutional interaction, transparency, accountability and stakeholder participation (United Nations, 2024). Digital citizenship is the ability of citizens to share in social and civic life in a responsible and effective manner through digital technologies (Mossberger, 2008). Online activism, in contrast, is the use of digital platforms to advocate, campaign, collectively act and mobilise around political or social causes (Earl, J., & Kimport, K., 2011).

Digital democracy is therefore a wider democratic framework within which e-government, e-governance, digital citizenship and online activism can take place. In this study, digital democracy is the use of digital

technologies and platforms to enable political information, communication, participation and mobilisation.

5.2 Concept of Political Participation

Political participation is traditionally understood as activities through which citizens try to influence the making of political decisions and the running of public affairs. Verba et al. (1995) define political participation as activities undertaken by citizens in an effort to influence the selection of government personnel and governmental policies. Voting, participating in political campaigns, joining political parties, political discussion, demonstrations and contacting political representatives are conventional forms (Verba et al., 1995).

The advent of digital technologies has transformed these traditional forms into new modes of participation. Today, citizens can engage in online political discussion, social-media interactions, digital campaigns, online petitions, hashtag activism and digitally mediated political mobilisation. Theocharis and van Deth (2018) argue that contemporary political participation is increasingly incorporating technology-enabled activities that complement, transform or extend established forms of civic and political engagement. Digital participation can therefore be understood not as a replacement of traditional participation but as an addition to the repertoire of political action (Theocharis & van Deth, 2017).

5.3 Theoretical Perspective: Participatory Democracy

The main theoretical basis of this study is Participatory Democracy Theory. The theory highlights the active participation of citizens in political decision-making and regards participation as an important means of strengthening democratic legitimacy and political citizenship. Participation has an instrumental and developmental value as active participation in decision-making can reinforce citizens' political competence and democratic consciousness. (Pateman, 1970).

In the digital context, participatory democracy implies that digital technologies may provide more opportunities for citizens to access political information, communicate with political actors, deliberate on public issues and engage in collective political action. In this sense, digital platform growth can lead to increased democratic participation by lowering some of the traditional barriers of time, distance and access.

The Digital Divide perspective, however, adds an important qualification to this assumption. Van Dijk (2020) argues that disparities in access to digital technologies, digital skills and effective usage can perpetuate existing social inequalities. Therefore, digitalisation does not necessarily imply equal political participation. Those lacking access to adequate internet or the right devices or digital skills may be excluded from new forms of digital political participation.

6. Digital Democracy and Political Participation in India:

Digital technologies have changed the context of political communication and participation in India. This transformation is seen not only in the increased availability of internet and mobile connectivity, but also in the expanding use of digital platforms for electoral communication, voter services, political mobilisation and citizen–government interaction. The decade from 2014 to 2024 is very crucial as it saw multiple Lok Sabha elections and fast expansion of the digital world.

6.1 Growth of Digital Connectivity:

The technological basis for digital democracy is the spread of Internet connectivity. According to Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), India had 267.40 million internet subscribers in December 2014 including 85.74 million broadband and 181.66 million narrowband subscribers. The internet subscriptions were mostly on mobile wireless connections and there were 248.07 million mobile-wireless internet subscribers (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2015). Broadband subscriptions alone had reached 944.96 million by December 2024, comprising of 898.57 million mobile broadband subscriptions, 41.19 million fixed wired broadband subscriptions and 5.21 million fixed wireless broadband subscriptions (TRAI, 2025). The contrast is an example of the tremendous growth in the digital infrastructure available to the Indian citizens over the period of the study.

The expansion of internet use has increasingly reached rural India. The IAMAI–Kantar *Internet in India 2024* report estimated 886 million active internet users, of whom approximately 488 million were in rural India and 398 million in urban India. Rural internet users grew faster than urban users, indicating a gradual shift in the geography of India's digital population (IAMAI & Kantar, 2024). However, there are still digital divides in access, affordability, devices and digital skills, and an increase in the number of internet users does not necessarily mean equal digital participation.

6.2 Expansion of Digital Political Communication:

Digital connectivity has also led to a transformation of political communication. The Indian political communication system has evolved from a print and broadcast dominated communication system to a hybrid environment involving television, websites, social media, messaging applications and direct digital communication slowly. Political parties and leaders can now easily communicate messages to citizens through digital platforms, and citizens can react to, share, comment on and reinterpret political content. The same transformation is reflected in the activities of the public institutions. For example, the Election Commission of India (ECI) is increasingly utilising online platforms to disseminate electoral information and to counter misinformation. Its Myth vs Reality initiative monitors false claims circulating on social media and shares verified information with voters (Election Commission of India, 2024). Digital political communication is thus not just confined to political parties and candidates; electoral institutions have themselves become active players in the digital information environment.

6.3 Digitalisation of Electoral Politics: 2014–2024

The three Lok Sabha elections 2014, 2019 and 2024 give a significant time frame to study the changing electoral environment. Overall voter turnout increased from 66.44% in 2014 to 67.40% in 2019 and then decreased slightly to 66.10% in 2024. The number of votes polled, however, rose from 55.42 crore in 2014 to 61.47 crore in 2019 and 64.64 crore in 2024 (ECI, 2025). These figures cannot be explained as a direct consequence of digitalisation, but they provide the electoral context in which digital political communication and mobilisation increased.

Table 2. Changing Electoral Participation during the Digital Transformation

Election	Total Electorate	Total Votes Polled	Voter Turnout
2014 Lok Sabha	83.41 crore	55.42 crore	66.44%

2019 Lok Sabha	91.19 crore	61.47 crore	67.40%
2024 Lok Sabha	97.98 crore	64.64 crore	66.10%

Source: Election Commission of India, *Atlas 2024*.

The figures are presented as electoral-context indicators rather than evidence of a causal relationship between digitalisation and voter turnout. By 2024, electronic devices had been integrated into various elements of electoral participation. Citizens can find their names in the electoral rolls, register or update their voter details, download their digital voter slips, lodge complaints and obtain information pertaining to elections through the ECI's Voter Helpline App (ECI, 2026). Likewise, the Know Your Candidate (KYC) application provides voters with information such as candidates' educational qualifications, assets, liabilities and criminal antecedents, thus enabling more informed electoral choices (ECI, 2026).

Digitalisation has also enabled participatory monitoring of elections. Citizens can report alleged violations of the Model Code of Conduct through the cVIGIL application by submitting information, photographs or videos and can track the progress of complaints (ECI, 2026). The ECI also ran a massive social-media-based voter-awareness campaign during the 2024 election, including the "I am Election Ambassador" initiative that urged content creators, influencers and citizens to promote voter participation through reels, memes and the hashtag #MainBhiElectionAmbassador (Election Commission of India, 2024).

6.4 Digital Platforms and Citizen Engagement:

Therefore, digital platforms have multiplied the channels through which citizens interact with political and governmental institutions. Almost instantly political information is available and online discussions, social media engagement and digital campaigning allow citizens to participate in ways beyond the traditional electoral activities. Digital government platforms have further institutionalised citizen engagement. For instance, the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) allows citizens to file grievances online, track their status and, where applicable, appeal against unsatisfactory resolution (Government of India, 2026).

Therefore, digital democracy in India should not be understood merely as social media campaigning. It increasingly incorporates a wider ecosystem of digital political communication, voter information, electoral transparency, citizen reporting, grievance redressal and government–citizen interaction. But the growth of these opportunities also creates new issues around misinformation and unequal access. In 2024, the same digital ecosystem that supports political participation can be used to spread disinformation, as shown by the ECI's wide-ranging efforts to counteract misleading election-related content (ECI, 2024). (Election Commission of India) Thus, India's digital transformation has expanded the reach of political participation, while at the same time the quality, credibility and inclusiveness of digital political engagement have become increasingly important for democratic practice.

7. Emerging Trends in Digital Political Participation:

The fast-paced development of digital technologies has changed the ways in which citizens receive political information, interact with political actors and engage in democratic processes. This shift is particularly evident in the growing use of social-media platforms, mobile apps and digital government services in India. The digital space saw a big boom between 2014 and 2024, along with the 2014, 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The emerging trends below demonstrate that digital political participation

is not limited to online talk anymore, but extends to political mobilisation, electoral campaigning, citizen reporting, and interaction with public institutions.

7.1 Social Media as a Political Space:

Social media have become an important arena for political information, debate, opinion formation and political expression. Unlike mass media, digital platforms enable users to consume political information, to produce, to circulate, to comment on and to respond to political content. The interaction between political actors and citizens has thus become more and more interactive.

Evidence from India suggests that use of social-media can shape online political participation. (Ahmed, 2024) used survey data from India and found that people with higher political interest and more frequent consumption of political news through social media were more likely to participate in online political activities. The researchers also found that social-media use could have a particular mobilisation effect among politically interested members of religious minority groups.

Digital platforms have also given a voice to groups that have traditionally faced barriers to political expression. Raj (2023) shows how Indian women have used digital platforms for political mobilisation, creating communities and feminist counter-publics. Campaigns like the Pink Chaddi campaign and #MeToo demonstrate how digital spaces can facilitate collective political expression outside of traditional institutional means. At the same time, Raj says these spaces can be made less inclusive through trolling and online harassment (Raj, 2023).

So social media has expanded the political public sphere by enabling citizens to move from being passive consumers of political information to active producers and distributors of it.

7.2 Youth and Digital Political Participation:

Young citizens are a big group in India's digital political environment. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has especially acknowledged the importance of reaching out to young and first-time voters through digital means. ECI launched the "Turning 18" campaign to connect with young and urban voters via social media in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. The strategy involved content targeting youth, messaging on social media, and campaigns specifically designed to encourage first-time voters to participate in elections (Election Commission of India [ECI], 2024).

The ECI has also partnered with influencers and public figures to connect electoral messages with younger audiences. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, four national icons and about 113 state icons took part in voter-awareness activities through social media, advertisements and other communication channels. The ECI also worked with Twitter on the #PowerOf18 campaign, which claimed videos received more than five million views (ECI, 2022).

Research on youth more generally also supports the growing importance of political influencers. Although international research suggests that political influencers can facilitate access to political information for young audiences and may even assist in immediate political mobilisation, but their role in long-term political participation is more complex (Harff, 2023).

7.3 Online Political Mobilisation:

Digital platforms have also enabled new modes of political mobilisation such as hashtags, online campaigns, digital petitions and networked movements. Hashtags can create a common political or social

issue for people living in different countries, and videos, memes and content created by users can rapidly disseminate political messages.

The Indian experience offers several examples of such networked mobilisation. Raj (2023) documents the use of digital platforms in women's movements, including the Pink Chaddi campaign and #MeToo, to demonstrate how online communication can facilitate collective political expression and mobilisation (Raj, 2023).

The ECI itself has adopted similar mechanisms for electoral mobilisation. In the 2024 election, it launched the "I am Election Ambassador" campaign, inviting content creators, influencers and citizens to make reels and memes to promote electoral participation using #MainBhiElectionAmbassador (ECI, 2024). The evolution shows how hashtag-based communication has shifted from informal activism to institutional voter-engagement strategies.

7.4 Direct Communication Between Political Actors and Citizens:

The distance between political actors and citizens has been greatly shortened by digital platforms. Political leaders and parties can now send messages directly to followers, without depending entirely on newspapers, television channels or other traditional intermediaries. Citizens, in turn, can react immediately, through comments, shares, messages and other forms of digital interaction.

The change is apparent in electoral politics. Comparing the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Shivaraju (2025) argues that social media shifted from being a supplementary campaign tool to a significant mechanism of voter outreach, political communication and mobilisation. The study shows a shift from fairly broad digital communication in 2019 to more personalised, data-driven and influencer-driven engagement in 2024 (Shivaraju, 2025).

Perhaps it has made politics more visible and accessible. But it also raises questions about the quality and reliability of political information delivered directly through digital platforms.

7.5 Digital Electoral Campaigning:

Nowhere is the increasing importance of digital platforms more evident than during elections. Political campaigns are increasingly mixing social media posts, short-form videos, online ads, influencers, messaging apps and data-driven voter outreach. According to Shivaraju (2025), Facebook, X/Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube were important platforms used by major political parties for voter outreach, targeted messaging and mobilisation during the 2019 and 2024 elections (Shivaraju, 2025).

At the same time, the ECI has built its own digital communication infrastructure for voter education. Its SVEEP program aims to promote electoral literacy and participation through social media and digital platforms in addition to television, radio, print and interpersonal communication (ECI, 2026). (Election Commission of India) The 2024 election campaign included influencers, celebrities, reels, memes and online voter-awareness content as well, suggesting that electoral communication has become more multimedia and digitally integrated (ECI, 2024).

7.6 E-Governance and Participatory Opportunities

Digital democracy has expanded citizen-government interaction beyond conventional electoral participation. Although not every digital interaction constitutes political participation in the strict sense, platforms for grievance redressal, information access and electoral monitoring have broadened the repertoire of civic engagement.

One of the most notable examples is the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS). The Grievance Redressal Platform provides citizens the facility to lodge grievances through an online portal, track the status of their grievances, send reminders and provide feedback on the resolution of their grievances (Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances [DARPG], 2026). The number of participations is huge. In December 2024, for example, 117,061 grievances were filed with Central Ministries/Departments and 113,131 were disposed, and at the same time 56,490 new users registered on the system (DARPG, 2024).

Similarly, electoral platforms like Voter Helpline and cVIGIL have given citizens access to electoral information, lodging of complaints were received. As of 29 March 2024, the ECI reported that more than 79,000 complaints had been received through the cVIGIL application since the announcement of the General Election, with more than 99% resolved (Election Commission of India, 2025).

CPGRAMS demonstrates the expansion of digitally mediated citizen–government interaction. Although grievance redressal should not automatically be equated with political participation, it represents an important dimension of digital civic engagement and institutional interaction. The emerging pattern thus lends support for the argument that digitalisation has broadened the repertoire of political participation. The extent to which these opportunities are translated into sustained and inclusive democratic participation remains an important question for further analysis.

8. Democratic Challenges of Digital Political Participation:

The reviewed evidence suggests that digitalisation has created new opportunities for political communication and participation but also major problems for democratic inclusion, informed choice and public trust. These challenges are particularly pertinent in the Indian context, where the digital divide still exists and political communication is increasingly taking place through online platforms.

8.1 Digital Divide:

However, the digital divide is one of the most important limitations for digital political participation. Internet access varies by rural and urban location, gender, income, education and region. The geographical gap remains, as per the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) data, the internet density in urban regions was 112.74% in September 2024, whereas it was just 44.85% in rural areas, indicating a considerable urban–rural gap (TRAI, 2025).

And also, by gender this divide is crossed. A consultation paper on digital inclusion has indicated that mobile-internet usage is around 62% for urban men, 42% for urban women, 47% for rural men and only 26% for rural women (TRAI, 2024). These inequalities indicate that the expansion of digital democracy does not lead to equal political participation. People with low connectivity, fewer digital skills or limited financial resources may have substantially fewer opportunities to engage in digitally mediated political processes.

8.2 Misinformation and Fake News

Misinformation being circulated is another major challenge to digital democracy. Social-media platforms facilitate the rapid spread of political information, but those same features can also allow inaccurate or intentionally misleading information to spread. Such content can affect people’s perceptions of political actors, distort public debate and undermine informed electoral decision-making.

During the 2024 general election, the Election Commission of India (ECI) recognised the severity of this problem and advised political parties to stop spreading misinformation and content that was patently false, misleading or deceptive. The Commission also directed the parties to remove the contents on being notified immediately (Election Commission of India, 2024). So, the problem is not only that false information exists, but that it can spread at a speed that can outrun citizens' and institutions' ability to verify it. This can undermine confidence in electoral institutions and the larger democratic information environment.

8.3 Political Polarisation

Digital platforms have the capacity to both expand political expression and exacerbate political divisions. Algorithmic mediation of information environments can repeatedly expose users to politically similar content, and highly emotional or confrontational material can gain more attention and circulation. At the broader international level, (UNDP, 2024) identifies disinformation as one factor associated with declining social attitudes and deeper political polarisation.

This concern is especially pertinent in the Indian context, as political communication is increasingly occurring in highly networked social-media environments. Polarised digital discourse can reduce the space for reasoned disagreement, disincentivise engagement with opposing views, and potentially turn political competition into antagonistic communication based on identity. Therefore, the democratic value of digital participation is not about how much participation, but rather about the quality of political deliberation.

8.4 Privacy and Data Concerns

Digital political participation also calls into question the collection, processing and use of personal data. Political actors and digital platforms may potentially use information about users' interests, behaviour and online interactions to develop targeted communication strategies. This raises concerns about data security, the possibility of manipulation of citizens through highly personalised political messages, and for informed consent.

India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (Government of India, 2023) provides a legal framework for the processing of digital personal data, while recognising the rights of individuals to protect their personal data. The Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025 were notified by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology on 13 November 2025, with different provisions scheduled to come into force in phases (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2025). For a digital democracy, effective data protection is important as citizens may be reluctant to participate politically if they perceive that their personal information can be collected, profiled or misused.

8.5 Hate Speech and Online Political Abuse

Online political abuse and hate speech threaten inclusive democratic participation. Social-media platforms can be used to spread hostile content against people or groups because of their religion, gender, ethnicity or other identities. Such communication may discourage people, particularly members of vulnerable groups, from expressing political views or participating publicly.

Online hate speech can undermine social cohesion, silence voices and discourage participation in public

life, and thus poses a wider threat to democratic governance (UNDP, 2026). The role of social-media platforms in disseminating and amplifying hate speech has also been significant, as evidenced by India. According to India Hate Lab's 2024 report documented 1,165 instances of in-person hate speech events targeting Muslim and Christian minorities, and noted that 995 videos associated with these events were traced to social media sources where they initially were uploaded or livestreamed (India Hate Lab, 2025). Such patterns raise doubts about the possibility of online political spaces being genuinely inclusive and accessible to heterogeneous social groups.

8.6 AI, Deepfakes and Political Manipulation

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has added a new dimension to digital political participation. Artificial intelligence is able to create realistic images, audio and video that could deceive viewers about political leaders, candidates or public figures. Deepfake videos of Bollywood actors Aamir Khan and Ranveer Singh were viral on the internet in India's 2024 general elections, falsely showing them criticising the Prime Minister and favouring the opposition. Reuters reported that the two AI-generated videos had collectively been viewed more than half a million times; both actors subsequently confirmed that the videos were fake (Aditya et al., 2024).

In response, the ECI's 6 May 2024 advisory specifically directed political parties to remove fake content within three hours of becoming aware of it (ECI, 2024). Content produced by AI can therefore generate what has been termed a "authenticity crisis", in which citizens have increasing difficulty in distinguishing authentic political communication from synthetic or manipulated content. Beyond deepfakes, automated messaging, synthetic voices, and AI-generated campaign material could also enable political communication to be produced and distributed at unprecedented scale.

In sum, these problems highlight a fundamental tension in digital democracy: the same technologies that amplify the opportunities for political participation can also generate new forms of exclusion, manipulation and democratic vulnerability. Therefore, for better digital political participation in India, we need more connectivity, digital proficiency, responsible platform governance, data protection, safeguards against AI-based manipulation, and an inclusive online political environment.

9. Major Findings of the Study:

Based on the analysis of secondary data, official reports, electoral documents, and relevant academic literature, the study identifies the following major findings in relation to its two objectives:

9.1 Findings Related to Objective 1

To examine the emerging trends in digital political participation in India:

Rapid growth of digital connectivity: India experienced a significant proliferation of internet and broadband connectivity in the period 2014-2024. The number of internet subscriptions increased from 267.40 million in December 2014 to 970.16 million in December 2024; thus, a much bigger technological base was created for digitally mediated political engagement (TRAI, 2015, 2025).

Social media have emerged as an important political space: digital platforms are increasingly used to access political information, express political opinions, discuss public issues and form political perceptions. The study found an association between social-media news use, political interest and online political participation (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Growth of digital electoral campaigning: The period 2014-2024 saw an increasing use of social media, online videos, messaging platforms, influencers and digital ads in electoral campaigns. The growing importance of digitally mediated voter outreach is most evident in the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections (Shivaraju, 2025).

Young people have become an important digital political constituency: electoral institutions are increasingly using social-media campaigns, influencers, and youth-oriented digital content to reach first-time and young voters.

Political mobilisation has become increasingly networked. Hashtag campaigns, online movements, digital content and social-media networks allow citizens to engage in collective political expression beyond traditional party structures.

Citizen-government interaction has expanded: Digital platforms like CPGRAMS, Voter Helpline and eVIGIL have allowed citizens to ask for information, register grievances, report electoral violations and interact with public institutions.

9.2 Findings Related to Objective 2

To analyse the major democratic challenges associated with digital political participation in India:

According to TRAI, internet density in September 2024 was 112.74 subscriptions per 100 population in urban areas, compared with 44.85 per 100 population in rural areas. The urban figure exceeding 100 should not be interpreted as more than 100% of individuals being internet users, since subscription density can exceed population because individuals may hold multiple connections (TRAI, 2025).

Misinformation undermines informed participation: The rapid spread of false and misleading political information can influence voters' perceptions, distort political debate and erode public trust. It is not a matter to take lightly, as evident from the interventions of the ECI in the 2024 election (ECI, 2024).

Digital platforms can worsen political polarisation as strongly partisan and emotionally charged content can reinforce existing political divisions and limit opportunities for constructive democratic deliberation (UNDP, 2024).

Privacy and data protection are important democratic concerns: The increasing digital political communication entails risks of personal-data collection, profiling, targeting and data security.

Online hate speech and abuse can also serve to restrict inclusive participation: Gendered, communal and identity-based online abuse can act as a deterrent for vulnerable groups to participate openly in digital political spaces.

Emerging electoral threat: AI and deepfakes: AI-generated political content can make it increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish authentic political communication from manipulated or synthetic content, creating new possibilities for political deception and electoral manipulation (ECI, 2024; (Aditya et al., 2024)).

The reviewed secondary evidence indicates that digitalisation has expanded the channels and repertoire of political participation, but unequal access, misinformation, polarisation, privacy risks, online abuse and AI-enabled manipulation can thwart digital democracy to reach its full potential for inclusion and deliberation.

10. Conclusions:

The period between 2014 and 2024 has witnessed the emergence of digital democracy as an important dimension of India's democratic transformation. The study reveals that the rapid development of internet connectivity and social media platforms has significantly widened the channels through which citizens receive political information, express their views, communicate with political actors, participate in electoral campaigns and interact with public institutions. The expansion of digital connectivity occurred alongside sustained electoral participation, but the available data do not establish that digitalisation caused changes in voter turnout.

However, the results also show that digitalisation does not necessarily mean a more democratic or inclusive democracy. Segments of the rural population, women and the socio-economically disadvantaged continue to be excluded by the digital divide. At the same time, misinformation, political polarisation, hate speech, privacy concerns, and the advent of content produced by AI and deepfakes present serious challenges to informed and meaningful participation. In this way, digital democracy has a basic two-fold character: it can democratise political communication and create at the same time new forms of exclusion and manipulation.

The study concludes that we need to go beyond digital access to include digital inclusion, digital proficiency, access to trustworthy political information, responsible platform governance and greater protection of citizens' data and democratic rights, if we are to secure a democratic future for India. Only such an inclusive and accountable digital ecosystem can turn technological connectivity into meaningful democratic participation.

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