



Transparency towards strengthening democratic fabric: Governance and accountability in India

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Abstract

Transparency is an essential foundation of democratic governance as it enables citizens to access information, scrutinize governmental actions, participate in public decision-making, and hold public authorities accountable. In India, the evolution of transparency reflects a gradual transition from administrative secrecy towards greater openness through constitutional principles, legislative reforms, judicial interventions, civil society activism, and technological innovations. The present study examines the role of transparency in strengthening the democratic fabric of India, with particular emphasis on governance, public accountability, citizen participation, the Right to Information Act, 2005, and digital governance initiatives. The study analyses how mechanisms such as the Right to Information, e-Governance, Direct Benefit Transfer, Government e-Marketplace, Public Financial Management System, open government data, social audits, and online grievance redressal have enhanced access to information, administrative efficiency, and institutional accountability. Transparency has also contributed to reducing corruption by increasing public scrutiny, improving financial accountability, reducing discretionary decision-making, and strengthening audit and monitoring mechanisms. However, the realization of transparent governance continues to face challenges, including bureaucratic resistance, delays in information disclosure, misuse of exemptions, political interference, weak whistle-blower protection, digital inequality, cybersecurity and privacy concerns, inadequate institutional capacity, and limited public awareness. The study argues that transparency should be viewed not merely as an administrative requirement but as a fundamental democratic value that strengthens the relationship between citizens and the state. It recommends proactive disclosure, effective implementation of transparency laws, stronger accountability institutions, improved digital inclusion, enhanced citizen participation, protection of whistle-blowers, and greater use of emerging technologies for evidence-based governance. The study concludes that embedding transparency across public institutions can contribute significantly to building a more inclusive, responsive, accountable, and participatory democracy in India.

Keywords: Transparency, democratic governance, public accountability, citizen participation

Introduction

Democracy is sustained not merely by periodic elections but by the continuous accountability of public institutions to the people. Transparency constitutes one of the essential pillars of democratic governance because it enables citizens to access information, scrutinize governmental actions, participate in public decision-making, and hold public officials accountable. In the absence of transparency, democratic institutions become vulnerable to corruption, abuse of authority, administrative inefficiency, and declining public trust. India, the world's largest democracy, has experienced significant political, administrative, and technological transformations since independence. The Constitution of India established democratic governance based on justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity while emphasizing responsible government and the rule of law. However, for several decades, administrative secrecy inherited from the colonial bureaucracy limited citizens' access to governmental information. Decision-making remained largely centralized, and public accountability mechanisms were relatively weak.

Economic liberalization during the 1990s, increasing civil society activism, judicial interventions, media expansion, and technological innovations generated growing demands for transparent governance. These developments culminated in landmark reforms such as the Right to Information Act, 2005, expansion of e-Governance, Digital India initiatives, Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), Government e-Marketplace (GeM), Public Financial Management System (PFMS), and Open Government Data platforms. Collectively, these

reforms have transformed governance by making public administration more accessible, responsive, and accountable. Transparency today extends beyond disclosure of government records. It encompasses openness in policy formulation, financial management, public procurement, electoral governance, judicial functioning, public service delivery, and citizen participation. Consequently, transparency has become an indispensable instrument for strengthening India's democratic fabric and promoting good governance.

Background of the Study

The evolution of transparency in India reflects the country's transition from a culture of administrative secrecy to one of democratic openness. During the colonial period, governance primarily served imperial interests, and official information was protected under laws such as the Official Secrets Act, 1923. Even after independence, many administrative practices continued to emphasize confidentiality rather than public disclosure. The demand for transparency gained momentum during the 1980s and 1990s through grassroots movements led by civil society organizations. Public campaigns highlighted corruption, misuse of public funds, irregularities in development programmes, and the denial of citizens' access to information. The movement for the Right to Information became a turning point in India's democratic evolution. The enactment of the Right to Information Act, 2005, institutionalized citizens' legal right to obtain information from public authorities. This legislation fundamentally

transformed the relationship between the state and citizens by shifting governance from secrecy toward openness and accountability. Simultaneously, technological advancements accelerated transparency reforms. The Digital India Programme, launched in 2015, encouraged digitization of public services, online grievance redressal, electronic procurement, digital payments, and open access to government information. Digital governance reduced bureaucratic discretion, minimized delays, enhanced service efficiency, and improved accountability.

Judicial activism further strengthened transparency by expanding citizens' right to information under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. The Election Commission introduced electoral transparency measures requiring candidates to disclose criminal records, educational qualifications, and financial assets. Audit institutions such as the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC), and the Lokpal have contributed to institutional accountability. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. Bureaucratic resistance, corruption, weak implementation of transparency laws, misuse of exemptions under the RTI Act, delays in information disclosure, digital divides, and political interference continue to limit the full realization of transparent governance. Therefore, strengthening transparency remains central to deepening democracy and ensuring accountable governance in India.

Transparency as the Foundation of Democratic Governance

Transparency enables citizens to understand how governmental decisions are made, how public resources are allocated, and how policies are implemented. Democratic governance depends upon informed citizens capable of evaluating governmental performance and participating meaningfully in public affairs. Transparent governance promotes legitimacy because decisions are taken openly rather than secretly. Public confidence increases when governments proactively disclose information regarding budgets, development programmes, procurement processes, environmental clearances, welfare schemes, and policy implementation. Transparency also reduces opportunities for corruption by exposing administrative processes to public scrutiny. When government decisions become accessible to citizens, media, civil society organizations, and oversight institutions, opportunities for arbitrary decision-making decline significantly.

Transparency and Accountability in Public Administration

Transparency and accountability are mutually reinforcing principles. Transparency provides citizens with information, while accountability ensures that public officials answer for their actions and decisions. Accountability operates through multiple mechanisms, including legislative oversight, judicial review, independent auditing, anti-corruption institutions, parliamentary committees, media investigations, and citizen participation. These mechanisms function effectively only when relevant information is publicly available. Public disclosure of budgets, expenditures, procurement contracts, policy documents, administrative decisions, and performance reports enables citizens to evaluate governmental efficiency and integrity.

Right to Information and Democratic Empowerment

The Right to Information Act, 2005, represents one of India's most significant democratic reforms. The Act empowers every citizen to seek information from public authorities, thereby transforming citizens from passive recipients of governance into active participants. RTI has exposed corruption in welfare programmes, irregularities in recruitment, misuse of development funds, procurement scams, and administrative inefficiencies. It has strengthened social accountability by enabling citizens, journalists, researchers, and civil society organizations to scrutinize governmental functioning. The Act has also encouraged proactive disclosure of information, reducing the need for individual information requests and improving administrative transparency.

Digital Governance and Transparency

Digital governance has significantly expanded transparency by reducing bureaucratic discretion and increasing public access to government services.

Initiatives such as:

- Digital India
- Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)
- Government e-Marketplace (GeM)
- Public Financial Management System (PFMS)
- UMANG Portal
- DigiLocker
- Open Government Data Platform
- MyGov
- e-Procurement Systems have improved transparency in service delivery, procurement, financial management, and citizen engagement. Digital platforms enable real-time monitoring, online grievance redressal, digital payments, electronic documentation, and public disclosure of governmental information, thereby reducing opportunities for corruption and administrative delays.

Transparency and Citizen Participation

Transparency strengthens democracy by encouraging informed citizen participation. Public consultations, social audits, Gram Sabha meetings, participatory budgeting, public hearings, online consultations, and grievance redressal mechanisms enable citizens to influence policy decisions.

Civil society organizations, media institutions, academic researchers, and community organizations utilize publicly available information to monitor governmental performance and advocate policy reforms. Citizen participation transforms transparency from a passive disclosure mechanism into an active democratic process.

Transparency and Anti-Corruption

Corruption undermines democratic legitimacy by diverting public resources, weakening institutions, and reducing citizens' confidence in government.

Transparency reduces corruption by:

- Increasing public scrutiny.
- Improving financial accountability.
- Reducing discretionary decision-making.
- Enhancing audit effectiveness.
- Encouraging ethical administration.
- Facilitating investigative journalism.

Open procurement systems, digital payments, electronic record management, and online public services significantly reduce opportunities for bribery and administrative manipulation.

Challenges to Transparency in India

Despite considerable progress, transparency continues to face several challenges:

- Bureaucratic resistance to information disclosure.
- Delays in responding to RTI applications.
- Misuse of exemption provisions.
- Weak protection for whistle-blowers.
- Political interference.
- Digital divide affecting rural populations.
- Cybersecurity and privacy concerns.
- Inadequate institutional capacity.
- Poor record management.
- Limited awareness among citizens regarding transparency rights.

Addressing these challenges requires institutional reforms, technological innovation, legal strengthening, and continuous civic engagement.

Conclusion with Recommendations

Transparency has become one of the defining characteristics of modern democratic governance and serves as the foundation for accountability, citizen participation, and public trust. In the Indian context, transparency has significantly evolved through constitutional principles, legislative reforms, judicial interventions, and digital governance initiatives. Instruments such as the Right to Information Act, e-Governance platforms, digital public services, and open government initiatives have strengthened democratic institutions by making governance more open, responsive, and accountable. These reforms have empowered citizens to access information, monitor public expenditure, participate in policy processes, and hold public officials accountable for their decisions. However, transparency remains an ongoing democratic process rather than a completed achievement. Persistent challenges—including bureaucratic opacity, corruption, delays in information disclosure, political interference, weak institutional coordination, digital inequality, and inadequate enforcement of transparency laws—continue to limit the full realization of accountable governance. Unless these structural challenges are effectively addressed, the benefits of transparency may remain unevenly distributed across different regions and social groups.

To further strengthen India's democratic fabric, transparency should be institutionalized across all levels of governance through proactive disclosure of public information, timely implementation of the Right to Information Act, and wider adoption of digital governance systems. Government institutions should enhance accountability by strengthening audit mechanisms, social audits, public consultations, and grievance redressal systems. Capacity-building programmes should be organized to improve record management and ensure effective implementation of transparency laws. Whistle-blower protection should be strengthened to encourage the reporting of corruption and maladministration. Digital inclusion initiatives should be expanded to bridge the digital divide and ensure that rural and marginalized communities can equally benefit from

transparent governance. Greater collaboration among government agencies, civil society organizations, academic institutions, the media, and citizens should be encouraged to promote participatory governance and democratic oversight. Furthermore, emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), blockchain, big data analytics, and open-data platforms should be integrated into public administration to improve transparency, efficiency, and evidence-based decision-making. In conclusion, transparency should not be viewed merely as an administrative requirement but as a democratic value that strengthens the relationship between the state and its citizens. A transparent governance system enhances public confidence, reduces corruption, promotes informed citizen participation, and reinforces the principles of justice, accountability, and the rule of law. By embedding transparency into governance practices and public institutions, India can further consolidate its democratic foundations and build a more inclusive, responsive, and accountable democracy capable of meeting the aspirations of its citizens.

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