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Artificial Intelligence as a Factor in Democratic Governance: Issues and Prospects with a Focus on India

Dr. Priyanka Singh

Assistant professor (Guest), Department of Political Science Mahila College, Khagaria, Munger University, Munger.

Corresponding Author: drpriyanka01@gmail.com

Abstract

Artificial intelligence is increasingly shaping the functioning of democratic governance by influencing public administration, citizen participation, and policy decision-making. This paper examines AI as a critical factor in democratic governance, with particular emphasis on the Indian context. It explores how AI-enabled systems are being integrated into public service delivery, data-driven governance, and participatory platforms to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability. At the same time, the study critically assesses the risks associated with algorithmic bias, data privacy, surveillance, and regulatory gaps that may undermine democratic values if left unaddressed. Drawing on India's evolving policy initiatives, including its national AI strategies and human-centric governance frameworks, the paper highlights the country's efforts to balance innovation with ethical safeguards and public trust. India's experience demonstrates how AI can support inclusive governance in a large and diverse democracy, while also revealing the structural and institutional challenges faced by developing nations. The analysis underscores that AI should not be viewed as a replacement for democratic processes, but as an enabling tool whose legitimacy depends on transparency, accountability, and citizen oversight. The paper concludes that responsible AI governance, supported by adaptive regulation and institutional capacity-building, is essential for aligning technological advancement with democratic principles.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Democratic Governance; India; Public Policy; Transparency; Ethics; Citizen Participation

1. Introduction

The emergence and widespread adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the political, social, and economic landscape across the world. From algorithmic content moderation on social media platforms to the auditing of electoral processes, the capacities of AI to understand, analyze, and generate natural language, as well as interpret images, audio, and video are pushing the boundaries of the democratic experience. While emerging and regulatory economies have initiated a variety of measures to manage and regulate AI systems, limited effort has focused on the intersections of AI and democratic governance. Strategies like the Global Partnership for AI and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Framework for the Governance of AI aim to strengthen AI governance to further democratic values, yet country-level efforts remain nascent. Within this context, the Government of India launched the National Programme on AI in 2018 a strategic framework that seeks to develop ethical and robust AI technologies, invest in R&D, and nurture skill development. The Indian strategy resonates with the Global Partnership for AI objective of building public trust in AI technologies. AI-enabled technologies, such as e-Sampark, e-District, and BharatNet, are already enhancing effective deliberative governance that is essential to a responsive

democracy. Efforts to apply the "AI for Democracy" lens across several use cases indicate how India can build on existing initiatives within the democratic context. (Skaug Sætra, 2020)

2. Conceptual Framework: AI, Governance, and Democracy

While the initial development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) was seen as contradictory to democracy, research increasingly acknowledges that AI could become a tool of democratic governance, enhancing government capacity, participation, and accountability. The proposal for a conceptual framework on AI, governance, and democracy stems from the recognition that technology has profound implications for the nature of governance, culture, and society. Changes in technological paradigms shape varying governance models—whether authoritarian, democratic, or hybrid—and directly determine the nature and extent of democracy. Historical and contemporary examples illustrate how authorities adjust policies and institutional arrangements in response to technological developments, such as the political culture of landline telephones, post-1990 Indira Gandhi-era television, and the emergence of social media (Choung et al., 2023). Furthermore, both digital and non-digital technology have significant influence in selecting electoral systems, modes of sequencing elections, and arrangements for conducting elections. This multiplex interaction between technology and governance opens pathways for using AI as a tool for democratic governance in developing economies. The institutional role and capacity of public governance in such nations, particularly where direct democracy remains limited, accentuate the importance of the inquiry (Schneider et al., 2020).

3. Historical and Contemporary Context of AI in India

The development and application of artificial intelligence (AI) can be traced back to India's early days in the area of computer science. The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur was among the pioneers of AI research and development in India. It established a control systems laboratory in the mid-1960s due to a project with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. The department witnessed the installation of the first digital computer followed by the acknowledgement that "It was impossible to find a suitable mathematical model for many of the prevailing phenomena of socially important systems." This spurred an attempt to apply computer sciences in the area of "social consciousness" and "artificial intelligence" (W. Torrance & Tomlinson, 2023).

The introduction of a Seventh Plan in 1985 also lent importance to the development of AI—a policy proposal aimed at basic infrastructural development. The set of national science and technology plans emphasized on a coordinated development of CSIR laboratories throughout India. These proposed policies had an impact on the newly formed Department of Electronics (DoE) 1999. At the time, computerized encyclopaedias, health statistics studies having connection to preliminary experiments in the area of automatic speech pattern recognition in progress in IIT Delhi and health service delivery predictions were of concern.

Currently, the field of AI finds considerable applications in many areas i.e. related to weather prediction. In addition to this research focus of AI, the pulse of information technology related to grass rooted development is being harvested and development is applied to further rural sustainable collection. These above mentioned past and present applications in the field of AI go on to show that AI finds an important place in the developmental governance of India (Skaug Sætra, 2020).

4. AI as a Tool for Democratic Governance

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a revolutionary technology that has the potential to transform democratic governance by making it more efficient and effective. AI can empower citizens by enhancing transparency, accountability, participation, deliberation, and engagement and by helping to simplify the task of design and implementation of public policies. AI can be applied to diverse problem domains, such as public service delivery, public safety, land management, urban planning, environment and climate, health and nutrition, education, and so on. Countries like India and Mexico acknowledge the potential of AI to foster democratic governance and seek to leverage it accordingly (Savaget et al., 2019).

4.1. Public Service Delivery and Administrative Efficiency

Democratic governance hinges on the effective and equitable delivery of public services. States, therefore, aspire to build efficient and citizen-oriented public service delivery systems that enhance citizen welfare and promote good governance. Given the range of services governments provide, a multitude of choices loom. Opting for administrative efficiency, the Indian government in 2014 began employing Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions to hasten service delivery and to track the progress of pending applications centrally. Speeding up government services enhances transparency and accountability while positively impacting citizens' lives (Rocco, 2022). AI also enables the government to ascertain where improvements in access and delivery are needed. Within a similar vein, engaging citizens in constructing public service delivery systems through participatory governance expedites citizens' access to services, encourages upward accountability, and curbs corruption (Busuioc, 2021).

4.2. Data Governance, Transparency, and Accountability

Data governance comprises a set of principles, policies, and practices that regulate how data are acquired, stored, processed, communicated, and shared within information systems. As the primary source, input, and fuel for artificial intelligence (AI) systems, data are crucial to algorithmic performance; they are also subject to many rights and restrictions (Schneider et al., 2020). Transparency and accountability in AI governance are therefore closely tied to data governance, especially in the context of discrimination and privacy violations. Fairness, accountability, and transparency (FAT) are increasingly recognised as vital to AI governance, particularly in mitigating social biases and prejudices that may be unintentionally endorsed by algorithms. Algorithmic discrimination, for example, has arisen in gender classification tasks on image datasets, where images of men and boys predominate and images of women and girls are scarce. Such skewed databases reinforce and amplify underlying societal stereotypes (Larsson, 2019). The use of algorithms in sentencing and pre-trial risk assessment raises similar concerns about fairness and social justice.

Transparency is fundamental for oversight and accountability in AI systems, enabling scrutiny of how data and algorithms determine societal outcomes. The public has a right to know how decisions affecting their lives, rights, or privileges are made, but many AI systems lack the required transparency. AI governance frameworks are evolving, but existing arrangements remain insufficient to fully comprehend the data and methodology underlying the decisions of many algorithmic systems.

4.3. Participation, Deliberation, and Public Engagement

Artificial intelligence (AI) can enhance citizen participation in various ways. For example, chatbots provide automated political assistance, help voters identify candidates who align with their interests, facilitate participation in public consultations, and provide information about the political process (Savaget et al., 2019). A sizable number of AI-based tools offer information and services related to elections, especially in situations where large proportions of the population lack knowledge about political issues or candidates. Automatic translation services can enable participation in the political process by overcoming language barriers in multilingual countries like India. Furthermore, AI technologies can foster undirected policy issues where users can freely propose solutions. Such tools allow citizens to engage in direct collaboration with governments and fellow citizens. These capabilities are especially valuable in regions where problems are clearly defined, but responses remain inadequate, and for groups otherwise underrepresented in the political economy.

AI technologies can facilitate deliberative engagement and policy advocacy by lowering the costs of information gathering, mobilizing citizens around issues, and automating the distribution of interactivity artifacts across groups. Individuals may have valuable ideas regarding scarce public resources, need to cooperate with others to pursue them, or desire to share experiences in various public domains. These engagements typically entail interactions with others, exchanging messages, coordinating actions, or creating artifacts to communicate the underlying ideas.

5. Challenges and Risks

AI can reproduce and amplify existing biases in society. The models trained on biased data can be biased, leading to discrimination against historically disadvantaged communities, as demonstrated by ongoing conversations surrounding tools like Twitter and face recognition. Questions arise about the fairness, explicability, reliability, and trustworthiness of AI. Bias arises from several sources throughout the lifecycle of AI systems. These include algorithm design choices, historical data used for training that reflect social biases and discrimination, and societal concerns about the credibility and accountability of certain sources of data. To avoid the reproduction of biases and discrimination, it is essential to develop and implement both technical and non-technical solutions at every stage of the life cycle of AI.

Surveillance and the misuse of personal information have become pressing concerns worldwide. The massive digitalization of data and information has created opportunities to understand human behaviour, and AI-based systems have emerged to exploit these new paradigms. The reliance on large-scale data for machine-learning models involves collecting, recording, and storing many people's data, with different constraints and regulations. Massive data collection also raises the danger of a high probability of information leak regarding what, when, and where individuals share information (Guan et al., 2022). While AI can provide substantial benefits for human society, its lack of regulation also poses significant threats. All requests regarding personal information, including but not limited to social media, email, and web requests, should follow a clear agreement specifying what will be recorded. They should also allow the user to delete any associated personal information confidently.

The gap between technology and legislation remains too wide. Over the past few years, AI has undergone rapid development, especially deep learning. Difficulties in the legal and regulatory environment have intensified. There is a need for an adaptive, gradual, and dynamic regulatory mechanism; many regulations depend on AI itself; and the existing cyber and data protection regulations may continue to evolve and remain indispensable (Walz & Firth-Butterfield, 2019).

5.1. Bias, Fairness, and Inclusion

AI has the potential to enhance transparency and accountability of governance, expedite service delivery, and promote citizen participation. Nonetheless, the same technologies can also yield undesired effects and exacerbate societal inequalities. During the design and implementation of AI tools, these negative impacts need to be thoroughly evaluated and mitigated if possible (Sambasivan et al., 2021). The government must be mindful of bias, representational inequities, and challenges to inclusion and fairness that may arise through AI applications.

5.2. Privacy, Surveillance, and Data Security

The digitalisation of governance and the application of AI in the public sector can lead to risk assessments being conducted on the basis of personal data that has been made available to the government. Consequently, the data can be collected from both private and public sector sources, opening up opportunities for surveillance and the mass collection and analysis of large quantities of data on citizen behaviour over time. The results of such practices—particularly where they are excessive, used routinely to control behaviour, lack adequate justification, or operate with inadequate oversight—are of particular concern in developing democracies, as they can erode and violate the fabric of citizens' freedoms and the integrity of democratic institutions and processes (Karpa et al., 2021) ; (Radanliev et al., 2024).

5.3. Legal and Regulatory Gaps

Alongside issues of bias and surveillance, legal and regulatory gaps form a major barrier to the effective and responsible use of AI in public governance. Flexible existing legal frameworks may cover AI applications under broader norms, but more specific updates to the law are likely required for larger, more autonomous systems. Such legal questions take on heightened significance in the public sector, where (Abhivardhan, 2020) the stakes, publicity, and potential harms tend to be greater, especially when AI interacts with sensitive topics such as gender, birth, and death, which Indian law regulates more narrowly than some other jurisdictions.

Discussion of regulatory approaches is often influenced by the assumption that modes of AI governance are pre-established, when in fact such frameworks — or, in some cases, policies that go beyond legislation — remain to be formed and implemented. Development of legislation, regulation, and AI specifications is not yet in an advanced stage, making it essential to consider the likely short- to medium-term trajectories. Multi-stakeholder governance frameworks for both public and private sectors are needed; although some jurisdictions focus overall responsibility on public agencies, alternative arrangements are likely to play a role in India.

Although the absence of a formal policy statement hampers the legislative effort, a variety of initiatives are underway. (Kalenzi, 2022) An earlier white paper sets out a detailed set of norms for the private sector that can provide a model for a more comprehensive document covering the public sector. Some elements, although defined in the context of enterprise, are nonetheless of considerable importance for public-sector applications; thus, before discussing complementary initiatives, it makes sense to note these elements.

5.4. Technological Sovereignty and Dependence

Access to systems of artificial intelligence (AI) and related technologies is crucial for effective public administration. Countries that control and govern access to these systems may gain excessive power and influence, particularly in a geopolitical context where AI capabilities are becoming a pivotal element of national prestige. Efforts are therefore underway to build systems in India and other democracies that are independent of foreign control, thereby enhancing technological sovereignty (Skaug Sætra, 2020). Apart from ensuring access to civil society and appropriate use by government, such efforts seek to reduce dependence on the few large private players that currently dominate many aspects of online communications.

6. Institutional and Policy Responses in India

An array of institutional and policy responses has emerged to manage the challenges and leverage the opportunities provided by AI in India. These responses have focused on four mutually reinforcing areas: the establishment of policy initiatives and strategic roadmaps; the development of institutional arrangements and governance mechanisms; the enhancement of the capacity-building, education, and research ecosystem; and the promotion of international collaboration and cooperation.

Recognizing the transformative potential of AI for socioeconomic progress and inclusive governance, India launched a National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence in 2018. This framework identifies five priority sectors—healthcare, agriculture, education, urbanization, and smart mobility—and highlights the safeguarding of privacy, security, and ethical use of AI as pivotal to fostering public trust (Stix, 2022). These imperatives are further addressed in the 2021 document, Human-Centric AI, which presents the vision of "a world where humans are not merely utilising AI technologies, but rather humans and AI are working together to better the socioeconomic conditions for all." Meanwhile, the Strategy on Trusted AI, released in 2020, elaborates specific principles aimed at steering AI development, deployment, and governance towards improving people's lives and ensuring well-being for individuals and communities (Skaug Sætra, 2020).

6.1. Policy Initiatives and Strategic Roadmaps

AI is increasingly recognized as a strategic priority in global competition to enhance socio-economic development, social welfare, and national security, including citizen welfare and involvement in decision-making, whether through data-driven feedback systems or crowdsourcing (Smith & Neupane, 2018). Public policies, services, and government programmes in various areas depend on the effective delivery of services and information. Government agencies are adopting AI systems, yet limited transparency restricts accountability and confidence, affecting building citizen engagement. Moreover, AI-fueled innovations in social media and other platforms provide opportunities to foster democratic debates but also threaten governance and democratic resurgence due to hate speech, misinformation, and damaging content.

6.2. Institutional Arrangements and Governance Mechanisms

Addressing the challenge of AI governance requires the establishment of institutional mechanisms with clearly defined mandates informed by AI's transformative impact on society. A system of checks and balances is also necessary to enable effective oversight. The establishment of robust institutional frameworks remains nascent in the context of AI, although rapidly evolving. Institutions must foster synergies across the foundational, sectoral, and interdisciplinary elements of AI governance while also engaging with a diversity of stakeholders outside government.

Globally, AI governance systems exhibit a range of institutional arrangements. These arrangements can be classified into two broad categories: centrally coordinated systems led by a dedicated agency or agency-led systems with horizontal coordination across ministries and regulators. The wider policy framework and ideological underpinnings – such as whether they lean towards laissez-faire or a strong state role – further differentiate national approaches. Drawing from AI governance experiences in a wide array of national contexts, four general principles can be isolated for the establishment of relevant institutional arrangements (Stix, 2022).

6.3. Capacity Building, Education, and Research Ecosystem

AI's impact on democratic governance highlights the need for upskilling and nurturing a capabilities development ecosystem, across the education-to-research continuum, centred on augmentation instead of replacement. Such an AI ecosystem requires significant institutional coordination and collaboration between government, academia, and industry. Over 350 higher education institutions offer AI-related courses and programs (AI in Education, n.d.), while a range of online platforms and players provide capabilities-building resources. Human-centric AI education transcends technical skills alone, also incorporating literacy in classical governance principles, constitutional provisions, and democratic citizenship relevant to rights, responsibilities, and agency (Smith & Neupane, 2018).

7. International Perspectives and Comparative Insights

All nations grapple to a greater or lesser extent with the democratic challenges connected with AI, yet the nature and priorities of the challenges vary greatly, as do the governance frameworks for addressing them. Within the G20, India is a member of the emerging economies group, whose shared position on global Internet governance matters provides a forum for articulating a distinctive approach to AI issues. There is an emphasis on promoting equitable development, a broad interpretation of security that integrates economic security and development considerations, opposition to unilateral coercive economic measures, and a critique of competition routed within a domestic regulatory focus and histories like colonialism and slavery. The United Nations (UN) 2030 Sustainable Development Goals represent a coordinated agenda that captures many of India's domestic priorities.

Such alternative perspectives are articulated both globally and regarding AI systems. By the end of 2021, forty-one countries, including most European Union (EU) members, had published national AI strategies, along with the EU and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Roche et al., 2022). These strategies address "AI governance," a trans-disciplinary issue at the intersection of ethical, economic, political, and societal dimensions. Analysis of the governance objectives reveals significant commonalities: the focus is on environmental sustainability, education, health, inclusion, inequality, security, and socio-economic empowerment; the protection of rights, personal data, and privacy; distributional concerns regarding access to technology and systems; and the use of AI for the public good.

8. Ethical Considerations and Public Trust

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a powerful tool for improving government services and ensuring the accountability of public officials. The ongoing challenge is to understand the impact of AI technologies on political and civil rights, democracy, and the ethical dimensions surrounding these issues. A high level of trust is often necessary for the effective use of AI applications to support public

decision-making. A systematic and user-friendly database of AI ethics guidelines and regulations has been compiled to help understand the rapidly growing national and international AI ethics initiatives (Kluge Corrêa et al., 2022). Various ethical concerns involving AI remain outstanding and need to be identified and addressed through appropriate frameworks in order to gain public trust in government implementations of AI technology. Applying AI is detrimental to public trust when it is perceived as a hidden agenda for spying, manipulation, coercion, discrimination, or exploitation (Choung et al., 2023). AI systems are thus introduced as a potential tool to help tackle the fear of AI being connected with authoritarianism by emphasising the need for openness, transparency, and involvement, thereby setting an opportunity to gain public trust instead of losing it (Zhang & Dafoe, 2019).

9. Prospects and Pathways for Democratic Governance

Digital technologies underpin a shift towards more networked and participatory democracies. Some open-data systems are already helping citizens co-create local policies and strategies alongside their elected representatives. AI-based technologies can take these approaches further, enabling new forms of diffused political participation in which citizens take more ownership of public administration (Savaget et al., 2019).

Although India already encourages citizen participation through a range of platforms—from deliberative initiatives like the MyGov portal (Skaug Sætra, 2020) and policies for participatory budgeting to constituency-level participatory efforts—the scale, diversity, and inequality of the Indian polity present distinctive challenges. AI can substantially improve data-driven engagement and uptake, especially in hard-to-reach areas. AI tools can digest voluminous unstructured data and extract actionable insights from state-collected data through comparative and trend analyses, opening up the policy space (Elkadi, 2020). Innovations like the Nowcast Lab 2.0 that draw from advances in AI for Language can actively extract and rank key themes and issues from both formal and informal channels, positioning citizens on-the-ground to share locally relevant observations. The participedia platform in public governance and SUAVE in urban planning have also adapted AI to assist in policy articulation (OECD, 2020). These systems both enable wider engagement and help underserved groups organise and articulate their concerns.

10. Conclusion

The overarching concern is well articulated by Skaug Sætra: “The types of algorithmic governance often discussed (i.e., rule-based systems) fail to capture the relevant regulatory aspects of algorithmic decision-making, and algorithmic governance of social choice is typically too dynamic for the captured preference orderings to endure” (Skaug Sætra, 2020). Policies must remain responsive to changing human wants, like the simulated tax model employed by an AI economist that enhances productivity and reduces inequality, or WeBuildAI, which increased efficiency and equity in food donation logistics (W. Torrance & Tomlinson, 2023). Such instances illustrate AI’s applicability to extensive, real-world scenarios. Analogies such as the mythical magic decision box clarify the dilemmas of AI: while superior to humans, its rationale defies comprehension. Akin to this “black box,” AI sometimes produces unpredictable outcomes. Yet serious flaws in human judgment nevertheless motivate the pursuit of AI-enhanced political decision-making, whether through guidance or complete delegation.

Politically, India remains stimulating as a multinational democracy at a crossroads. It contends with developmental challenges yet has formulated an ambitious national AI strategy dexterously accommodating democratic precepts. India’s deliberations on AI stem from a blend of aspirations and apprehensions regarding the technology. Legitimate motives include advancing public welfare, streamlining a colossal bureaucratic apparatus, fostering technological sovereignty, pre-empting authoritarianism, combating misinformation, and preserving civil liberties. Such issues extend beyond sovereignty or authoritarianism to the fundamental objectives of democratic governance, rendering India an instructive case for the nexus of AI and democracy.

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