

**SURVEILLANCE DEMOCRACY AND CITIZEN POWER
IN DIGITAL INDIA**

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ABSTRACT:

The expansion of digital governance in India has transformed the relationship between the state and citizens, creating new configurations of democratic participation, accountability, and control. Initiatives such as Aadhaar, Digital India, and digital payment infrastructures have enhanced administrative efficiency, transparency, and service delivery, integrating citizens into data-driven governance systems. However, these developments have simultaneously expanded the state's capacity for surveillance, reshaping the nature of citizen power and democratic autonomy. Drawing on political theory, particularly Michel Foucault's concepts of surveillance and governmentality, this paper examines the emergence of surveillance democracy in Digital India. It argues that digital governance produces a paradoxical condition in which citizens are both empowered through improved access to services and subjected to continuous monitoring through technological infrastructures. This dual transformation alters traditional democratic relationships by creating asymmetrical informational power between the state and citizens. The paper reconceptualizes citizen power in the context of surveillance-based governance, emphasizing the need to critically evaluate the democratic implications of digital transformation. By situating India within broader theoretical debates on surveillance and democracy, the study contributes to understanding how digital governance redefines democratic agency, civil society autonomy, and state authority in contemporary political systems.

KEYWORDS:

Surveillance Democracy, Digital Governance, Citizen Power, Civil Society, Digital India



Introduction

The expansion of digital governance has fundamentally transformed the relationship between the state and citizens in contemporary democracies, raising critical questions about power, autonomy, and accountability. In India, the rapid integration of digital technologies into governance through initiatives such as Aadhaar, Digital India, and digital payment infrastructures has created new forms of interaction between citizens and the state, mediated through data and technological systems (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2023; UIDAI, 2024). While these developments promise improved efficiency, transparency, and service delivery, they also expand the capacity of the state to monitor, categorize, and regulate populations, thereby reshaping the foundations of democratic citizenship (Lyon, 2007; Amooore, 2020). This transformation reflects a broader global shift toward what scholars describe as surveillance-based governance, where data becomes central to the exercise of political power (Zuboff, 2019).

Democratic theory traditionally conceptualizes governance as grounded in citizen participation, institutional accountability, and the protection of individual rights (Dahl, 1989; Marshall, 1950). Transparency, in particular, has been viewed as a mechanism that strengthens democracy by enabling citizens to monitor state actions and hold governments accountable (Florini, 2007). However, the expansion of digital governance introduces a paradox in which mechanisms designed to enhance transparency and efficiency also increase the state's capacity for surveillance (Greenwald, 2014). This paradox challenges conventional assumptions about democratic empowerment, suggesting that digital governance may simultaneously enable and constrain citizen agency.

Theoretical perspectives on surveillance provide important insights into this transformation. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power demonstrates how surveillance operates as a mechanism of governance by shaping individual behavior through continuous observation and normalization (Foucault, 1977). His later concept of governmentality further explains how modern states exercise power through administrative and technological systems that regulate populations indirectly (Foucault, 1991). In digital societies, surveillance becomes embedded within governance infrastructure itself, transforming citizens into data subjects whose activities are continuously recorded and analyzed (Lyon, 2007).

Deleuze (1992) argues that contemporary societies have evolved into “societies of control,” where power operates through decentralized and continuous technological monitoring rather than through visible institutional authority.

At the same time, the expansion of surveillance raises important concerns about privacy, autonomy, and democratic accountability. The Supreme Court of India’s recognition of privacy as a fundamental right reflects the growing significance of these issues in digital governance (Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, 2017).

This paper examines the theoretical implications of surveillance democracy in Digital India, focusing on how digital governance reshapes citizen power, participation, and autonomy. By integrating political theory with contemporary developments in digital governance, the study seeks to reconceptualize democratic citizenship in an era where surveillance has become a structural feature of governance. Understanding this transformation is essential for evaluating the future of democratic governance in India and ensuring that technological advancement strengthens rather than undermines democratic accountability and citizen agency.

Objectives

- To examine the theoretical relationship between surveillance and democracy in the context of digital governance in India.
- To analyze how digital governance technologies transform the nature of citizen agency, participation, and autonomy.
- To reconceptualize citizen power in India’s digital state using contemporary political theory.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a theoretical and qualitative research methodology, grounded in political theory and supported by secondary sources.

Theoretical Approach

The research employs a conceptual and interpretive approach drawing on key political theorists including Michel Foucault’s theory of surveillance and governmentality, which explains how modern states exercise power through subtle systems of observation and regulation. It

also incorporates democratic theory, particularly deliberative democracy and critical theories of power, to analyze the implications of surveillance for citizen participation and autonomy. The study uses theory–building and theory–application methods to reinterpret democratic governance within the context of India’s expanding digital infrastructure.

Sources of Secondary Data

The analysis is based on secondary data including:

- Academic journal articles on digital governance, surveillance, and democracy
- Scholarly books on political theory, surveillance studies, and democratic governance
- Government policy documents related to Digital India and digital governance initiatives
- Reports from research institutions, civil society organizations, and policy think tanks
- Existing theoretical and conceptual literature on civil society and democratic power

These sources are critically analyzed to develop a theoretical understanding of the relationship between surveillance and democratic governance in India.

Theoretical Foundations of Surveillance and Democratic Power

The relationship between surveillance and democratic governance has been a central concern in modern political theory, particularly in understanding how power operates within contemporary states. Traditional democratic theory conceptualizes power as deriving from the consent and participation of citizens, mediated through institutions of accountability, transparency, and representation (Dahl, 1989). However, modern forms of governance increasingly rely on surveillance mechanisms that subtly restructure the relationship between the state and citizens, raising critical questions about autonomy, participation, and democratic control.

Michel Foucault’s theory of surveillance provides a foundational framework for understanding this transformation. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) introduced the concept of the panopticon as a model of modern power, where individuals regulate their own behavior due to the possibility of constant observation. Unlike traditional sovereign power,

which operates through visible coercion, disciplinary power functions through surveillance, normalization, and internalized control (Foucault, 1977). This shift represents a transition from overt domination to subtle governance through observation and knowledge production. Surveillance, in this context, is not merely a technical tool but a political mechanism that produces compliant and governable subjects.

Foucault later expanded this analysis through the concept of governmentality, which describes how modern states exercise power through the management of populations using administrative, statistical, and technological tools (Foucault, 1991). Governmentality operates through data collection, categorization, and monitoring, enabling the state to regulate populations efficiently while maintaining the appearance of democratic legitimacy. Surveillance thus becomes embedded within governance itself, rather than functioning as an external instrument of repression.

Habermas's theory of the public sphere provides additional insight into the democratic implications of surveillance. Habermas (1989) conceptualized the public sphere as a space for rational deliberation, where citizens engage in free and open debate. However, surveillance can distort this process by creating chilling effects, where individuals modify their behavior due to fear of observation (Penney, 2017). This undermines the conditions necessary for democratic participation and free expression.

Surveillance also reshapes the concept of citizenship itself. Traditionally, citizenship involves rights, participation, and political agency (Marshall, 1950). However, digital surveillance transforms citizens into objects of administrative management, reducing their autonomy and political influence (Amoore, 2020). This transformation reflects what Foucault described as biopolitics, where governance focuses on regulating populations through technological and administrative systems (Foucault, 2008).

The theoretical tension between surveillance and democracy reflects a fundamental paradox. Surveillance can enhance governance efficiency and transparency while simultaneously undermining citizen autonomy and democratic equality. Understanding this paradox requires reconceptualizing democratic power in the context of digital governance, where surveillance becomes a central mechanism of political control.

Digital Governance and the Expansion of Surveillance in India

India provides a critical case for examining the relationship between digital governance and surveillance democracy due to its rapid expansion of digital infrastructure and governance technologies. Over the past decade, the Indian state has implemented extensive digital governance initiatives under programs such as Digital India, Aadhaar, and e-governance platforms, fundamentally transforming state-citizen relations. The Aadhaar system represents the world's largest biometric identification program. As of 2024, over 1.3 billion Indian residents have been enrolled, covering more than 99 percent of the adult population (Unique Identification Authority of India [UIDAI], 2024). Aadhaar collects biometric data, including fingerprints and iris scans, linking individuals to a centralized database. This system enables the state to verify identities, distribute welfare benefits, and monitor service delivery. While Aadhaar has improved administrative efficiency, it has also expanded the state's surveillance capacity. The Supreme Court of India acknowledged both the benefits and risks of Aadhaar in its landmark judgment, recognizing its role in improving welfare delivery while emphasizing privacy as a fundamental right (Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, 2017). The Court noted that digital identity systems create new forms of state power that require constitutional safeguards.

The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) provides a significant example of digital governance infrastructure. In January 2024 alone, UPI processed over 12 billion transactions worth ₹18 trillion, demonstrating the scale of digital integration in everyday economic activity (National Payments Corporation of India, 2024). While digital payment systems enhance financial inclusion and transparency, they also generate extensive behavioral data, enabling the monitoring of economic activity. India has also expanded digital surveillance through cybersecurity and law enforcement mechanisms. Additionally, India has implemented facial recognition technologies in public spaces, further expanding surveillance capabilities (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2021). These developments reflect what Lyon (2007) describes as the emergence of "surveillance societies," where governance increasingly relies on data collection and monitoring. Digital governance systems produce detailed information about citizens, enabling the state to regulate behavior and manage populations more effectively.

Civil society organizations have expressed concerns about the implications of digital surveillance for democratic rights. Reports by Freedom House (2023) and Human Rights Watch (2022) highlight issues related to digital privacy, surveillance, and civil liberties in India. These reports emphasize that digital surveillance can undermine democratic accountability by concentrating informational power in state institutions. However, digital governance also provides opportunities for citizen empowerment. E-governance platforms improve access to services, reduce corruption, and increase transparency (Bhatnagar, 2014). Digital systems enable citizens to interact with the state more efficiently, enhancing administrative responsiveness.

The expansion of digital governance in India thus reflects a dual process of empowerment and control. While digital technologies improve governance efficiency and accessibility, they also expand surveillance capabilities, reshaping democratic power relations.

Reconceptualizing Citizen Power in India's Surveillance Democracy

The expansion of digital governance in India requires a reconceptualization of citizen power within democratic systems. Traditional democratic theory assumes that citizens exercise power through participation, representation, and accountability mechanisms (Dahl, 1989). However, digital surveillance transforms these relationships, creating new forms of power asymmetry between the state and citizens.

Surveillance democracy represents a political system where governance relies on continuous monitoring and data collection. In such systems, power operates not only through laws and institutions but also through data infrastructure and surveillance technologies (Zuboff, 2019). Citizens become both participants in democratic processes and subjects of surveillance, creating a paradoxical relationship between empowerment and control.

In India, digital governance systems such as Aadhaar and UPI integrate citizens into data-driven administrative networks. These systems improve service delivery but also increase the state's capacity to monitor citizens' activities (UIDAI, 2024; NPCI, 2024). This transformation reflects what Foucault (2008) described as biopolitical governance, where states regulate populations through technological systems. Digital surveillance also alters civil society's role in democratic governance. Civil

society traditionally functions as a mechanism for holding the state accountable (Putnam, 1993). However, surveillance can weaken civil society by creating chilling effects that discourage political participation (Penney, 2017). When citizens perceive that their activities are monitored, they may limit political engagement, reducing democratic participation.

Reconceptualizing citizen power requires recognizing that surveillance reshapes democratic agency. Citizens are no longer solely political actors but also data subjects embedded within surveillance systems. Democratic governance must therefore address the challenges posed by digital surveillance to ensure accountability, transparency, and citizen autonomy.

Suggestions

Democratic governance in Digital India must evolve toward what may be termed “reciprocal transparency,” where surveillance capabilities are matched by equally robust mechanisms of institutional accountability. Legal safeguards should shift from procedural compliance to substantive citizen control over data, including enforceable rights to data access, correction, and meaningful consent. Institutional innovations such as independent data oversight authorities with constitutional autonomy can reduce asymmetries of informational power. Technological governance must also incorporate privacy-by-design principles that limit excessive data extraction while preserving administrative efficiency. Civil society participation in digital policy design should be institutionalized to ensure democratic legitimacy. Finally, digital literacy must be reframed as civic literacy, enabling citizens to understand and critically engage with surveillance systems. These measures would help reorient digital governance from a model of passive data extraction toward a framework where citizens remain active and autonomous political agents.

Implications The emergence of surveillance democracy in India has profound implications for the nature of citizenship, civil society, and democratic power. As governance becomes increasingly data-driven, political authority is exercised not only through institutions but through informational infrastructures that shape citizen behavior. This transformation risks producing what may be termed “asymmetrical citizenship,” where the state possesses extensive knowledge of citizens while citizens lack equivalent transparency into state operations. Such asymmetry can weaken

democratic accountability and shift the balance of power toward administrative and technological systems. At the same time, digital governance enhances efficiency, service delivery, and inclusion, creating new forms of mediated citizenship. Civil society must therefore adapt to operate within digital environments where political agency is shaped by algorithmic and informational constraints. The long-term implication is the restructuring of democratic participation itself, where the control of data becomes a central determinant of political power.

Conclusion Surveillance democracy in Digital India represents a fundamental transformation in the relationship between the state and citizens, where governance increasingly operates through data collection, monitoring, and digital infrastructure. While digital governance enhances administrative efficiency, transparency, and accessibility, it simultaneously introduces new forms of power that reshape democratic agency and autonomy. Citizens are no longer only participants in democratic processes but are also subjects of continuous observation embedded within technological systems. This dual position creates a paradox where empowerment and control coexist within the same governance framework. Reconceptualizing democracy in this context requires recognizing surveillance as a structural feature of modern governance rather than an exceptional practice. The future of democratic governance in India will depend on its ability to balance technological efficiency with the preservation of citizen autonomy, accountability, and civil society independence, ensuring that digital transformation strengthens rather than diminishes democratic power.

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The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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