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Research Article

Governance in New India: Emerging Trends in Administration and Leadership

Dr. Arsheed Ahmad Ganie ^{1*}, Dr. Mahender Singh ²

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana, India

² Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana, India

Corresponding Author: * Dr. Arsheed Ahmad Ganie

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Abstract

The administrative architecture of India is undergoing a major transformation, transitioning from the colonial "Steel Frame" of bureaucracy to a modern "Digital Backbone." This article analyses the emerging trends in Indian administration and leadership, specifically focusing on the shift from a regulatory, rule-bound model to a facilitative, outcome-oriented paradigm. Utilizing a qualitative research design based on secondary data from government reports (NITI Aayog, ARC) and international indices (UN E-Government Survey), the study identifies three critical pillars of change: the rise of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) like the JAM Trinity, the restructuring of the civil services through Mission Karmayogi, and the emergence of transformational, tech-driven leadership, all operating under the overarching philosophy of "Maximum Governance, Minimum Government." The findings suggest that while technology has successfully democratized access to services, infrastructure gaps remain a persistent challenge. Furthermore, the article explores recent 2026 policy shifts toward "Viksit Bharat" and Net Zero goals, concluding that the future of Indian governance lies in a hybrid model that combines digital efficiency with human empathy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian administrative system was long known as the "Steel Frame", a term used by Sardar Patel to describe the bureaucracy as the strong, rigid skeleton that held the country together. Its primary function was to maintain law and order and ensure strict adherence to rules. While this system provided stability, it simultaneously created a significant distance between the government and the common citizen, projecting an image of governance as "rule" rather than "service."

Contemporary India, however, is a fundamentally different nation from the India of 1947. As a young and aspirational democracy, citizens increasingly expect the state to deliver services with the speed and efficiency of modern digital applications. As a result, governance in New India is undergoing a massive transformation. The focus is shifting from process compliance to outcome delivery from "ruling" citizens to "serving" them. This transformation is largely driven by technology. With instruments such as the JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile), the government can now deliver financial assistance directly to a farmer's bank account, bypassing intermediaries entirely. Leadership styles are also

evolving; today's administrators are expected to be proactive problem - solvers and data-driven decision-makers rather than mere custodians of files. This article explores these transformations, examining how the old Steel Frame is gradually becoming a modern Digital Backbone, while also critically examining the challenges that remain.

1.1 CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

Governance is not merely about the government; it is defined by the quality of interaction between the state and its citizens. The United Nations E-Government Survey 2024 offers a nuanced picture of India's position. While India has secured a high E-Participation Index rank of 61 (value: 0.6575), its overall E-Government Development Index (EGDI) stands at 97th (value: 0.6678). This disparity highlights a critical trend: while citizen engagement and digital adoption are surging, physical infrastructure gaps continue to persist. Nevertheless, the high participation rank signals that the relationship between the Indian citizen and the state is undergoing a fundamental rewrite. (see Figure 1 for a breakdown of these metrics).

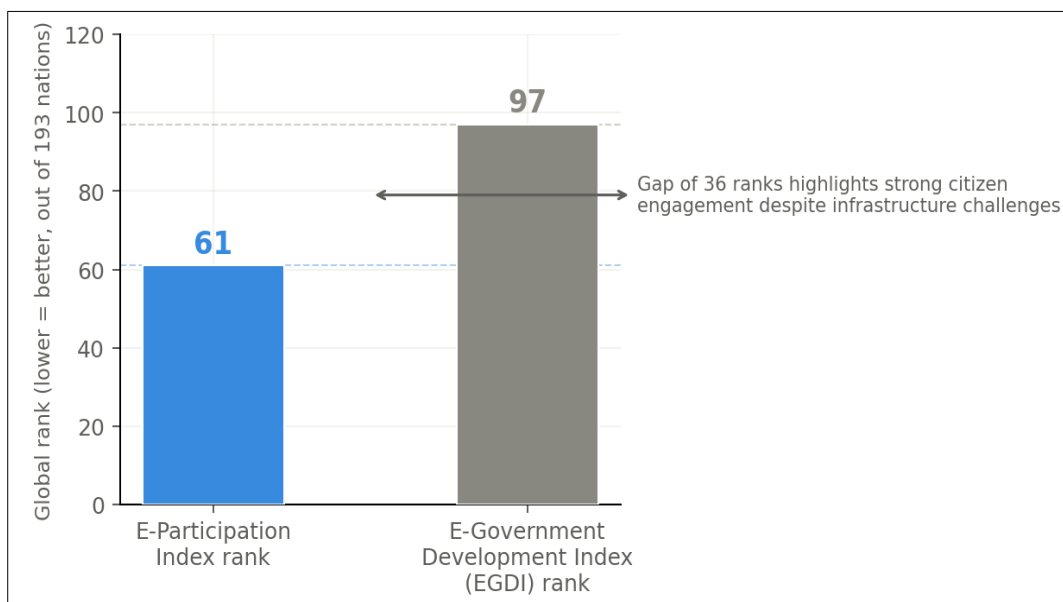


Fig 1: India's E-Government Performance - UN E-Government Survey 2024

In the context of this article, "New India" is not treated as a political slogan but as a genuine shift in administrative culture, a transition from ruling to serving. It envisions a governance model where a farmer in a remote village receives a subsidy directly in his or her bank account without the mediation of a local official, and where a student applies for a scholarship on a mobile phone rather than standing in queues at a government office. The focus has moved from the process of the file to the ease of living for the citizen.

1.2 Historical Evolution: From Control to Facilitation

To appreciate the contemporary transformation, it is necessary to look back at the origins of the Indian administrative system.

The British colonial administration created the Steel Frame of bureaucracy primarily to maintain control, collect revenue, and keep the government institutionally distant from the people. For several decades after independence, this model evolved into the License Raj, an administrative regime defined by red tape, procedural delays, and a heavy emphasis on rules over results. The administrator was cast as a Mai-Baap (guardian), and the citizen was merely a beneficiary with limited agency.

The last decade, however, has witnessed a decisive pivot toward the philosophy of "Minimum Government, Maximum Governance." The rise of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) such as the JAM Trinity has enabled the state to bypass traditional intermediaries. The modern administrator is no

longer simply a custodian of files but is expected to function as a Chief Executive Officer of their district, driven by data

dashboards and real-time monitoring systems. (see Figure 2 for a timeline of this shift from 1947 to 2047).

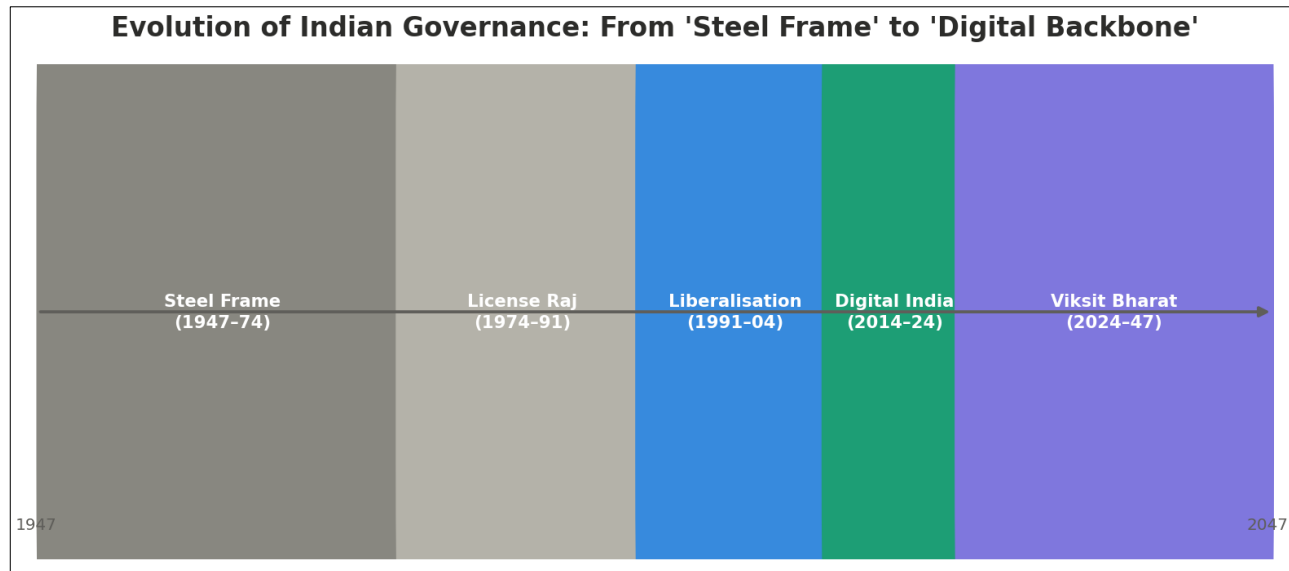


Fig 2: Evolution of Indian Governance 1947–2047

1.3 RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

The urgency of exploring these trends was dramatically accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. When the world locked down, India's Steel Frame had to become flexible overnight. The success of digital platforms such as CoWIN demonstrated that the Indian state possesses the capacity to be agile, fast, and modern when political will is aligned with administrative capacity. This article, therefore, aims to analyze the reality of this transition beyond the headlines, seeking to answer three core questions: first, how has administrative leadership adapted to new digital trends; second, whether the shift to digital governance has truly democratized access or has instead created a new divide for the unconnected; and third, what challenges face the modern administrator who must balance traditional rules with the imperatives of the twenty-first century.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the changing dynamics of Indian administration, this article situates itself within the broader theoretical discourse of public administration reform. The existing scholarship can be categorized into three dominant themes: the transition from colonial bureaucracy to development administration, the adoption of New Public Management (NPM), and the emerging discourse on digital leadership.

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks: From Weber to Good Governance

Classical scholarship on Indian administration has largely been grounded in the Weberian model of bureaucracy. Arora and Goyal (2019) argue that the Steel Frame was essential for national integration but created a rigid, rule-bound culture that prioritized procedure over performance, consistent with

Weber's original theory, wherein impersonality and hierarchy were conceived as virtues. Mathur (2013) [13], however, critiques this legacy, suggesting that the colonial hangover created a "deficit of trust" between the administrator and the citizen.

In contrast, the post-1990s literature shifts toward the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm. Scholars such as Chakrabarty (2017) [4] highlight how economic liberalization forced the Indian state to adopt private-sector efficiencies, measuring outcomes rather than inputs. This transition is further explored through the lens of "Good Governance," which emphasizes a citizen-centric approach to public administration.

2.2 Administrative Reforms and Structural Changes

A significant body of work focuses on structural attempts to reform the Indian administrative state. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2009) [22] reports remain the seminal texts in this domain. Kapur (2010) [8] and Pritchett (2009), in their influential work on the "Flailing State," argue that while India possesses a strong top-level policy framework, it suffers from weak implementation capability at the grassroots level. More recent studies by Saxena (2019) [21] critique the generalist nature of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), arguing that in an era of specialized challenges, from climate finance to cybersecurity, the absence of domain expertise constitutes a critical bottleneck. This critique supports the rationale for lateral entry reforms, as discussed by Vaishnav (2019) [27].

2.3 Leadership Styles and Digital Disruption

The most recent, yet still relatively thin, slice of literature concerns digital leadership. Nilekani and Virmani (2015) [16], in *Rebooting India*, provide an optimistic techno-centric view,

arguing that Digital Public Infrastructure, such as Aadhaar, can leapfrog traditional administrative hurdles. Critical voices such as Drèze and Khera (2017) ^[6], however, offer a counter-narrative, warning that over-reliance on technology without adequate human support leads to exclusion errors among the most vulnerable populations. Shadrach (2018) ^[23] further identifies a significant gap in the literature regarding artificial intelligence in leadership, noting the scarcity of scholarship examining how AI impacts decision-making ethics within the civil services.

In synthesis, while ample literature exists on the history and structure of Indian administration (Maheshwari, 2002) ^[12], there is a distinct gap in analyses of the behavioral shift of leadership in the New India context. Most existing studies treat technology as a tool of administration rather than as a driver of administrative culture. This article aims to address that gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative research design to analyze the shifting paradigms of administration and leadership in India. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature, with a specific focus on the transition from traditional bureaucracy to digital governance.

3.1 DATA SOURCES

The research relies primarily on secondary data, triangulated across three categories of sources. The first category comprises government reports, including the Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2nd ARC), the NITI Aayog Strategy for New India @ 75, and MeitY annual reports. The second category consists of international indices, specifically the United Nations E-Government Survey (2024) ^[26] and the World Bank Governance Indicators. The third category encompasses academic literature drawn from peer-reviewed journals, including the Indian Journal of Public Administration and Economic and Political Weekly, covering the period 2014 to 2026.

3.2 ANALYSIS AND LIMITATIONS

Data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify key trends such as de-bureaucratization and last-mile delivery. Themes were developed inductively from the literature and deductively from the theoretical frameworks discussed in Section 2. This method was chosen because governance transformation involves complex, context-dependent processes that resist quantification. The principal limitation of this study is its reliance on publicly available documents; it did not involve primary field interviews with serving officers. Future research employing mixed methods with direct fieldwork would significantly strengthen the empirical foundation of these findings.

4. Emerging Trends in Administration: Analysis and Evidence

The central argument of this article is that Indian administration is pivoting from a regulatory model focused on process compliance to a facilitative model oriented toward outcome delivery. Four major trends are identified and analyzed below.

4.1 Digital Governance: The Technocratic Pivot

The most visible trend in contemporary Indian governance is the integration of technology into its core administrative functions.

4.1.1 The JAM Trinity and Direct Benefit Transfer

The linking of Jan Dhan accounts, Aadhaar, and Mobile numbers has created a direct fiscal pipeline between the state and its citizens. Nilekani and Virmani (2015) ^[16] argue that this technocratic intervention effectively reduces the leakage that was estimated to be as high as 40 per cent in the old Public Distribution System. By eliminating intermediaries, the Direct Benefit Transfer mechanism has fundamentally altered the political economy of welfare delivery in India. (See Figure 3 for an illustration of leakage before and after JAM Trinity implementation.)

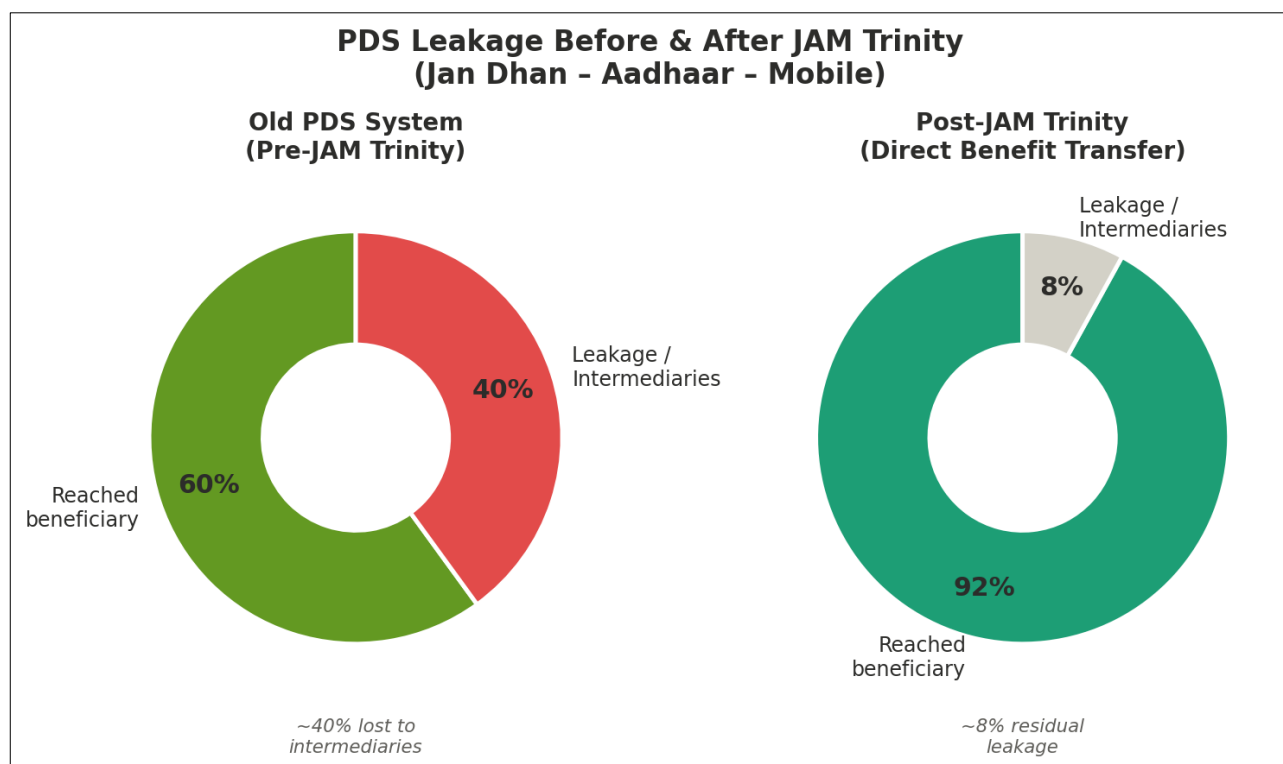


Fig 3: PDS Leakage Before and After JAM Trinity Implementation

4.1.2 Data-Driven Decision Making

Platforms such as PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation) allow the Prime Minister to directly monitor state-level projects, creating a new layer of accountability.

Aiyar (2019) ^[1] critiques this development as a form of "centralised decentralisation," wherein the District Magistrate becomes directly accountable to the Prime Minister's Office, potentially bypassing intermediate tiers of government. While this enhances visibility and responsiveness, it also raises questions about the autonomy of district-level administration.

4.2 Decentralisation and Cooperative Federalism

4.2.1 GST and Fiscal Federalism

The Goods and Services Tax represents a landmark shift in India's fiscal architecture. Kelkar (2019) describes the GST Council as a prime example of cooperative federalism in practice a platform where the Union and state governments negotiate tax policy on an equal footing. This represents a significant departure from the command-and-control model of fiscal governance that characterised earlier decades.

4.2.2 Competitive Federalism and the Aspirational Districts Programme

The Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) creates a framework of virtuous competition among district administrations, compelling bureaucrats to innovate rather than stagnate. By publishing district-level rankings on key development indicators, the programme harnesses the competitive instincts of administrators and creates positive incentives for performance. This represents a shift from compliance-based to performance-based public management.

4.3 Bureaucratic Reforms: From Rule to Role

The traditional Steel Frame is being systematically re-engineered to become more agile and outcome-oriented.

4.3.1 Mission Karmayogi

Mission Karmayogi marks a significant departure from the twentieth-century training model for civil servants. By early 2026, the iGOT Karmayogi platform had on boarded over 1.49 crore (14.9 million) users and hosted more than 4,342 courses. Innovations such as the iGOT Marketplace, launched in December 2025, provide access to global university content, aiming to create what Mathur (2021) ^[14] calls the "specialized generalist", a civil servant who combines broad administrative competence with deep domain expertise. (See Figure 4 for the platform's growth trajectory.)

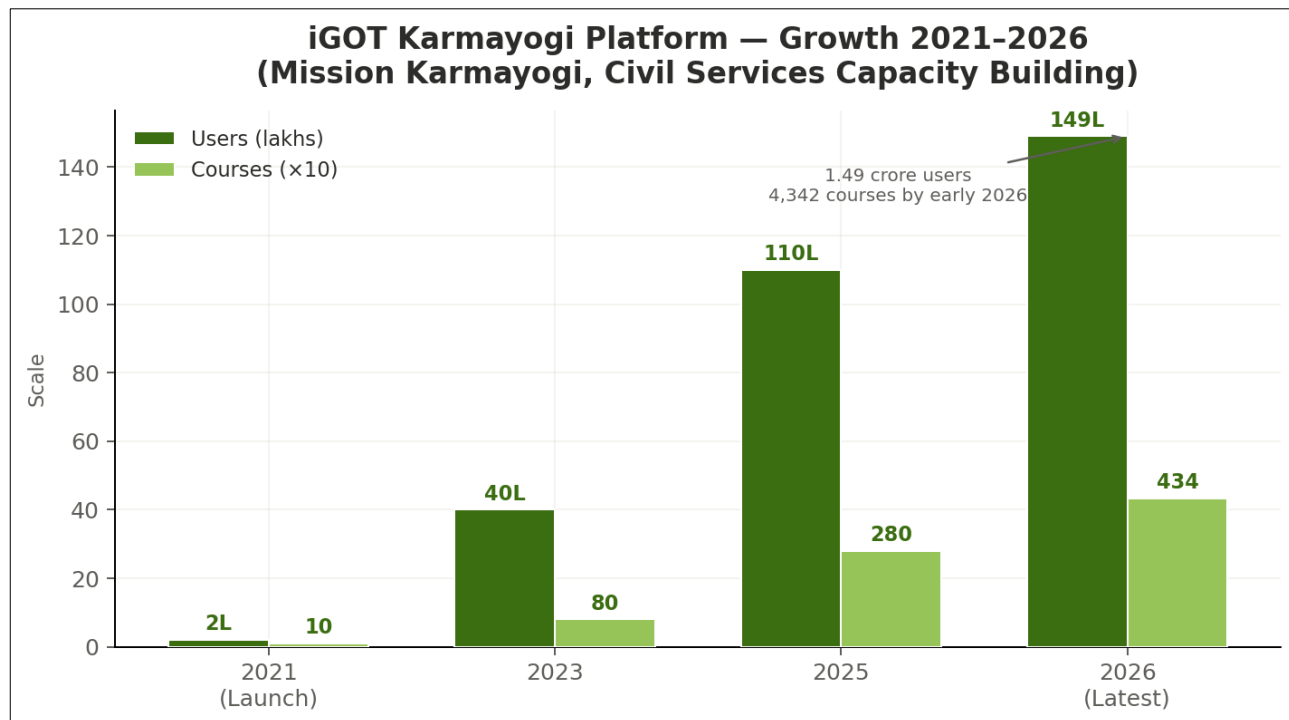


Fig 4: iGOT Karmayogi Platform Growth 2021–2026

4.3.2 Lateral Entry

The decision to induct private sector experts at the Joint Secretary level directly addresses the generalist monopoly of the IAS. While this reform remains contested, with critics arguing it undermines the service's institutional culture — proponents contend that specialized knowledge is indispensable in an era of complex governance challenges such as climate policy, artificial intelligence regulation, and public health.

4.4 Inclusive Administration: Sustainability and Gender

4.4.1 Gender-Responsive Budgeting

Lahiri (2020) notes that while Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) has been institutionalized within India's fiscal framework, true transformative leadership requires a shift from a discourse of women's welfare to one of women-led development. The distinction is significant: the former treats women as passive recipients of state benevolence, while the latter recognizes them as active agents of economic and social change.

4.4.2 Tribal Governance and the Forest Rights Act

The implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) remains a critical test of inclusive administration. Xaxa (2019) highlights

that bureaucratic apathy continues to delay the processing of land title claims, demonstrating that technology alone cannot resolve deep-seated social biases and institutional inertia. This finding underscores the limits of the technocratic pivot and the continued importance of human capacity and administrative will.

4.5 Case Study: The Administrative Turnaround in Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh provides a compelling case study of how political will and administrative innovation can produce measurable governance outcomes. The Nivesh Mitra portal integrated over 70 business services into a single digital window, cited by NITI Aayog (2020) as a key factor in the state's dramatic improvement in Ease of Doing Business rankings. More remarkably, the administration of the Kumbh Mela 2019 managed a congregation of 240 million people using AI-driven crowd analytics — one of the largest logistical undertakings in human history. This achievement demonstrated exceptional state capacity when political will is aligned with administrative autonomy and technological capability. (See Figure 5 for a comparative scale of this event.).

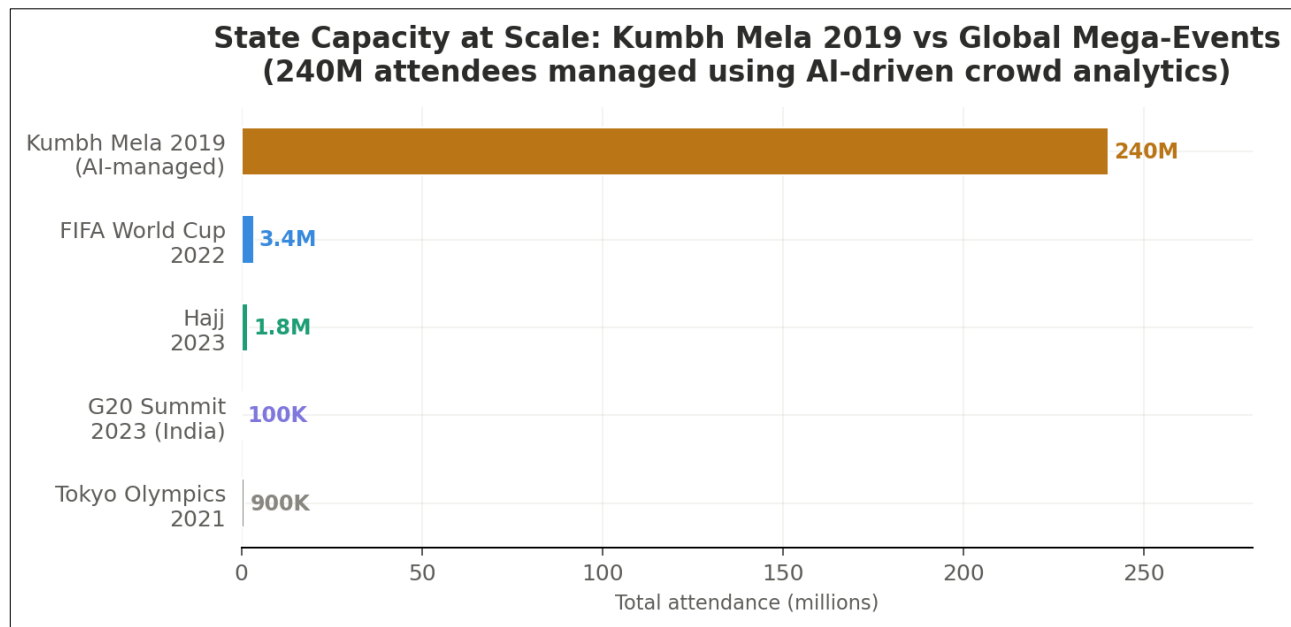


Fig 5: Kumbh Mela 2019 - Scale Compared to Global Mega-Events

5. Emerging Trends in Leadership Dynamics

The transformation of administrative systems described in Section 4 is inseparable from a parallel transformation in leadership styles and structures. This section analyses five major trends in Indian leadership dynamics.

5.1 Transformational and Centralised Leadership

The contemporary era is characterised by what scholars term Transformational Leadership — a style that seeks to inspire behavioral change at scale rather than simply manage administrative processes. The Swachh Bharat Mission exemplifies this approach. Driven directly by the Prime Minister's personal political capital and public communication, it functioned primarily as a behavioral change campaign rather than a conventional administrative program. Sinha (2017) argues that this represents a "presidentialization" of the parliamentary system, wherein the concentration of political authority at the apex enables both speed and scale of implementation, though it simultaneously raises concerns about institutional checks and balances.

5.2 Think Tank Leadership: The Role of NITI Aayog

The replacement of the Planning Commission with NITI Aayog in 2015 signalled a fundamental shift from directive planning to collaborative and visionary leadership. Rather than allocating resources to states through a top-down planning process, NITI Aayog functions as a policy think tank, providing strategic direction and facilitating competitive federalism. In February 2026, NITI Aayog released the Scenarios Towards Viksit Bharat and Net Zero reports, providing integrated pathways for sustainable governance aligned with the net-zero target by 2070. The establishment of the Governance and Reforms Division in April 2025 further cements this focus on structural reform for the next twenty-five years. However, Aiyar (2019) [1]

observes that while NITI Aayog provides excellent technocratic vision, it lacks the financial authority to enforce implementation, a critical limitation.

5.3 Ethical Leadership and Accountability

The contemporary governance framework has placed significant emphasis on ethical leadership and anti-corruption mechanisms. The operational autonomy of agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) has been enhanced, alongside the introduction of the Lokpal as a statutory anti-corruption ombudsman. In the domain of digital accountability, the Government e-Marketplace (GeM) has substantially reduced corruption in public procurement by creating a transparent, competitive, and auditable digital platform. However, Khaitan (2020) [10] warns that accountability mechanisms risk being weaponized for political purposes, a danger that must be guarded against through robust institutional safeguards.

5.4 Youth and Diverse Leadership

A significant emerging trend is the deliberate integration of youth and diversity into governance structures. The National Startup Advisory Council exemplifies this by embedding private sector youth voices into public policy decision-making processes. At the grassroots level, the evidence on women's leadership is particularly compelling: the landmark study by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) [5] demonstrated that women Gram Panchayat leaders (Pradhans) systematically invest more in public goods such as drinking water and roads, underscoring the governance dividends of diverse and inclusive leadership.

5.5 Challenges: Populism versus Technocracy

A critical and unresolved tension in contemporary Indian governance lies between populist political demands and

technocratic rationality. Elected leaders face constant pressure to deliver visible, short-term benefits to constituencies, while technocrats advocate for longer-term structural investments. Bhatia (2019) [3] argues that contemporary political leadership frequently views civil society activism and critical public discourse as obstacles to development rather than as legitimate components of democratic governance. Resolving this tension is essential for sustainable and inclusive governance in the Viksit Bharat era.

6. DISCUSSION:

Intersections, Comparisons, and Future Trajectories

6.1 The Intersection: How Artificial Intelligence Empowers High Command Leadership

The proliferation of AI-powered governance tools such as the PRAGATI platform has fundamentally altered the information

asymmetry between political leaders and field administrators. Leaders can now directly observe ground-level realities without relying on the filtering and interpretation of intermediate bureaucratic layers. While this empowers political leadership with unprecedented situational awareness, it simultaneously risks hollowing out the role of middle management and weakening the federal administrative structure by concentrating oversight at the apex of government.

6.2 Comparative Analysis: India, China, and Singapore

India's Digital Public Infrastructure model offers a distinctive third way between the surveillance capitalism of China and the efficiency-optimised Smart Nation model of Singapore. The following table provides a structured comparison of these three governance approaches.

Table 1: Comparative Governance Frameworks of Digital Infrastructures.

Feature	China (Surveillance State)	Singapore (Smart Nation)	India (Digital Public Good)
Core Philosophy	Control & Social Credit	Efficiency & Optimization	Empowerment & Access
Data Ownership	State-owned	Corporate/State Partnership	DEPA (User-owned)
Scale	Homogeneous / Autocratic	Small City-State	Continental Scale / Democratic
Key Tool	Facial Recognition	IoT Sensors	Aadhaar / UPI (Open APIs)

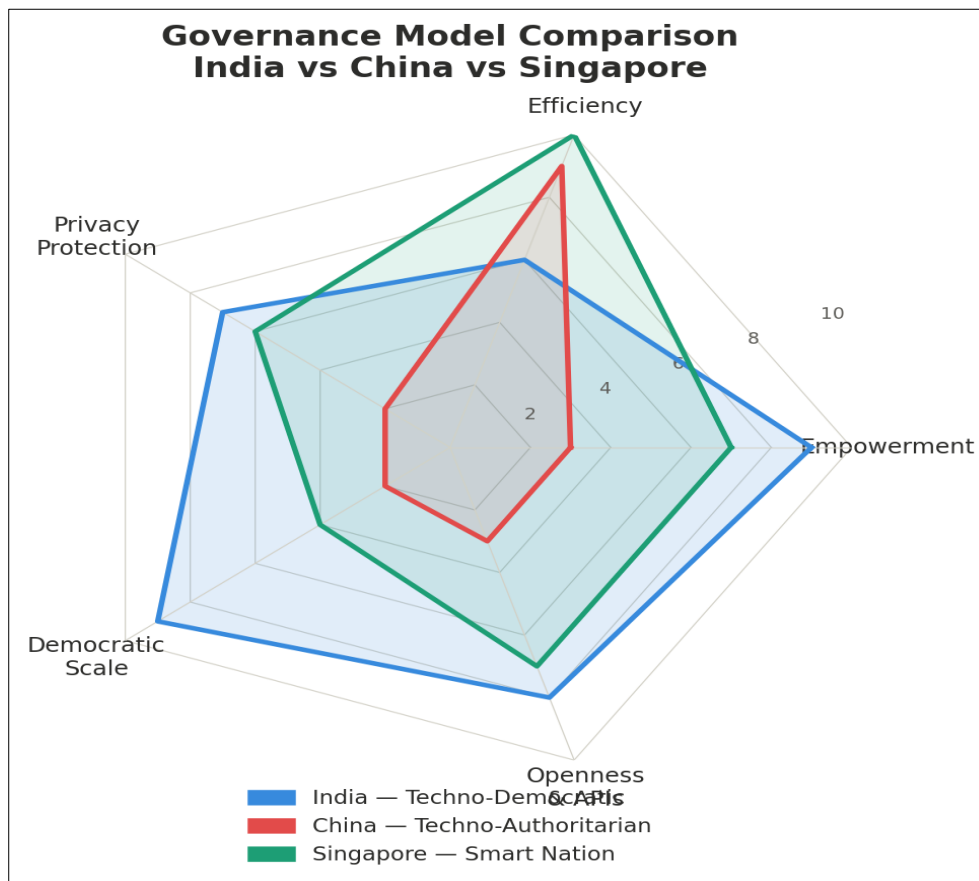


Fig 6: Governance Model Comparison - India, China, Singapore (illustrative)

Unlike China's social control model, India's India Stack ecosystem is built on open application programming interfaces (APIs), enabling private innovation on top of public infrastructure. Unlike Singapore's top-down Smart Nation initiative, India's approach is designed for continental scale and democratic accountability. This suggests that India is constructing what might be termed a Techno-Democratic model one that seeks to harness the power of technology for empowerment rather than surveillance.

6.3 Future Trajectories: The Ethical Frontier of Artificial Intelligence

As Indian administration increasingly incorporates artificial intelligence into decision-making processes, from welfare targeting to policing, profound ethical concerns emerge. Eubanks (2018) ^[7] warns of "automating inequality," a phenomenon wherein AI tools inherit and amplify the historical biases embedded in the data on which they are trained. For a society as diverse and stratified as India, this risk is particularly acute. The development of ethical AI governance frameworks must therefore be treated as an urgent priority, not an afterthought.

6.4 Addressing Counterarguments: The Centralization Critique

Critics of the New India governance model argue that initiatives such as the One Nation, One Ration Card scheme represent a creeping centralization that undermines India's federal character. However, proponents offer a compelling counter-argument: in a highly fragmented and mobile society, the centralization of data infrastructure is a prerequisite for the portability of citizen rights. A migrant worker moving from Bihar to Maharashtra must be able to access entitlements anywhere, and that portability requires a national data architecture. The debate, therefore, is not about whether to centralize data, but about how to do so with adequate privacy protections and institutional safeguards.

7. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

7.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This article has traced the evolution of Indian administration from the colonial Steel Frame to the contemporary Digital Backbone. The analysis confirms a fundamental shift from a regulatory entity focused on process compliance to a facilitative platform oriented toward outcome delivery. Driven by the JAM Trinity, Mission Karmayogi, and transformational political leadership, the governance model has made significant progress in democratizing access to public services. The comparative analysis demonstrates that India's Digital Public Infrastructure model represents a distinctive and potentially replicable approach that balances technological ambition with democratic accountability.

7.2 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis presented, three principal policy recommendations are advanced. First, bridging the digital divide requires a Phygital approach that combines physical

service delivery touchpoints with digital backend infrastructure to ensure that the benefits of digital governance reach the last-mile citizen who lacks reliable internet connectivity or digital literacy. This is not merely a technical challenge but a question of administrative design and political commitment.

Second, institutionalizing federalism requires moving beyond the current model of competitive federalism toward a more structured framework of cooperative federalism, in which states are genuine partners in policy design rather than merely implementers of centrally determined programs. The NITI Aayog model should be strengthened with greater financial authority to translate vision into enforceable action.

Third, continuous capacity building demands that the momentum of the iGOT Karmayogi platform be sustained and deepened, ensuring that the civil service remains intellectually agile and domain-competent as India navigates the complex governance challenges of the Viksit Bharat era. Special emphasis should be placed on emerging areas such as climate governance, digital regulation, and public health administration.

7.3 The Way Forward

In conclusion, the administration of contemporary India is a hybrid entity in flux, neither the rigid Steel Frame of the past nor a purely digital technocracy. The Steel Frame is not being dismantled; it is being re-alloyed with silicon. The future of Indian leadership lies in empowering citizens through governance that is simultaneously invisible in its efficiency, robust in its equity commitments, and empathetic in its human interactions. As India marches toward its centenary vision in 2047, its administration must complete the journey from being a Regulator of Obstacles to becoming a Facilitator of Opportunities.

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About the Corresponding Author



Dr. Arsheed Ahmad Ganie is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, School of Social Science and Humanities at NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana – India. He has authored over 21+ research papers in prestigious national and international journals, published 10+ book chapters, and 2+ edited books. Beyond his research, he is a dedicated mentor who has successfully guided 3+ PhD scholars to completion. Known for his technical proficiency and exceptional communication skills, he blends academic rigour with a self-motivated drive for continuous growth.