

# Reimagining Citizen-Government Interactions: An RCT Proposal for Digital Grievance Redressals in Odisha, India

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## Abstract

In a democracy, there are two key aspects to political accountability: first, the people's ability to question the government; and second, documentation of answers from the government available to the general audience. In India, aside from a few state-level attempts, the only national-level means of grievance redressal is the Right to Information Act<sup>i</sup> (RTI). The portal created under the RTI Act requires payment for processing requests, has no feedback mechanism, and needs a significant amount of identifying information, making it inaccessible to a large part of the population. Moreover, the responses are provided through physical mail and email, neglecting any provision for public access. Other mediums at the state level have high personal costs; in-person submissions at government offices take time and lack anonymity, thus actively discourage reporting. Additional challenges arise due to the one-sided data collection, a lack of feedback mechanisms to assess resolution quality, and public analytics to enhance accountability. A potential solution is to make these discourses digitally available through an independent platform that is accessible, centralized, and public. Building an anonymous way to register grievances, facilitate accountability for governments, and provide them insight into the needs and wants of the citizens. This opens a channel to resolve information asymmetry between citizens and their local government through data and digitization. Voters need space to raise questions on everyday concerns, act on them, and choose candidates that both better represent them and pursue their desired outcomes. My hypothesis is that, if citizens better understand the day-to-day operations of their local government, they will be more empowered to make more informed voting decisions. Furthermore, if local governments have insights into what areas of a citizen's welfare require greater attention, they will be able to address these issues more efficiently.

## Background

The story begins in 2022 in rural Odisha, in eastern India, where self-coined 'Hashtag warriors'<sup>ii</sup> stormed Twitter – now X – for 12 minutes every day at noon to call attention to local issues. The campaign, called *12baje12minute*,<sup>iii</sup> highlights how Twitter emerged as the preferred digital platform in Odisha for grievance redressal after the outbreak of COVID-19. Currently there are approximately 70,000 families in rural areas who are using the platform to raise their issues to the government. This intervention became a starting point in my research to visualize how community-sourced data, politicians and civil society can use digital engagement to strengthen India's democracy and address the people's concerns.

India is celebrated for its organization of the largest democratic elections in the world for over the past 75 years. However, democracy involves much more than simply holding elections. The ‘by the people’ mentality of strategically choosing one’s respective representative that characterizes democracy is fading away<sup>iv</sup>. Recent farmer protests, the abrupt introduction of the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA, 2019),<sup>v</sup> and police-led attacks on university campuses raise doubts<sup>vi</sup> around whether citizens feel represented by elected officials or are losing trust in their government. This trend is not unique to India: a 2021 Ipsos survey<sup>vii</sup> in 28 countries found that government officials and politicians are the least trusted people globally. This disconnect may be a result of mere narrative<sup>viii</sup> or based on credible information about governments' failure to deliver on promises<sup>ix</sup>.

In 2021, the US-based non-profit, Freedom House downgraded India from a ‘free’ to a ‘partially free’ democracy with its Global Freedom score<sup>x</sup>. In 2021, India was also labeled as an electoral autocracy<sup>xi</sup> by Sweden-based Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Institute,<sup>xii</sup> which evaluates various democratic factors where India ranks lower on account of reduced representation and accountability, particularly in the Egalitarian Component Index and Participatory Component Index. Moreover, other literature demonstrates the presence of elected representatives with criminal charges diminishes public trust and highlights accountability concerns, while the prevalent failure of elected officials to attend parliamentary sessions and engage in debates leads to ineffective governance.<sup>xiii</sup>

Productivity is missing from these indices, as it is difficult to measure in large hierarchical systems, but it remains a critical aspect of Democracy. There is still data available to make inferences, as per *The Economist*,<sup>xiv</sup> the number of days per year that the Indian Parliament met fell from more than 100 in the 1950s to 66 in the 2014-19 term. The United States Congress, by comparison, is typically in session for more than 160 days a year during the same time period.<sup>xv</sup> The erosion of democracy in India’s legislative branch is no secret. In fact, during the winter session of 2023, 143 MPs (Member of Parliament) from the opposition were suspended for raising questions on a security breach incident in the Parliament.<sup>xvi</sup> Upon the incident, a prominent Congress (opposition) MP Shashi Tharoor proclaimed in response to the lack of freedom of speech, “Unfortunately, we have to start writing obituaries for parliamentary democracy in India”. These labels reflect a broader trend of democratic erosion and highlight the need for reforms to strengthen democratic institutions and processes in India, ensuring accountability, enhancing public participation, and safeguarding freedoms.

## **Intervention**

A potential solution is to make discourses between citizens and governments on public welfare and services available through a digital, accessible, and public platform. This involves building an anonymous way to register grievances to facilitate government accountability and provide them

with insights into the needs and wants of the citizens. It also means opening up a channel to resolve information asymmetry between citizens and their local government through data and digitization. Voters need space to voice their concerns, to build on action taken on their concerns, and to choose candidates that best represent them. The public can visualize a national-level digital platform beyond existing social media that allows citizens to raise tickets for local government bodies to be resolved with credible action. Creating a digital repository of information on the measurable impact of the representative's tenure would provide room for more intentional voting <sup>xvii</sup>during elections and higher turnouts to elect more effective and representative politicians. Through a crowd-sourcing mechanism, there is space for higher accountability<sup>xviii</sup> as local representation is under the eye of their voting group. For politicians, the portal acts as documentation of progress made on their goals, which they can cite in future elections. For new politicians, this can be the space where they build credibility through community involvement, commenting on concerns raised and gathering insights on true concerns.

Current research<sup>xix</sup> demonstrates that political communication in forums, such as candidate debates, enhances political knowledge and participation of voters and improves government responsiveness. In Brazil, increased political participation of poorer voters leads to more redistributive policies,<sup>xx</sup> which is a key challenge for growing economic disparity in India. In rural India, field experiments<sup>xxi</sup> found that knowledge interventions, such as political report cards,<sup>xxii</sup> radio campaigns,<sup>xxiii</sup> and messenger applications,<sup>xxiv</sup> are effective instruments for holding politicians accountable.

## **Experiment Design**

This analysis led to the beginning of my work on building a citizen-government discourse platform in India, which features digital grievance redressal on a national scale. While designing the pilot as a Graduate Affiliate at the Centre for Democracy at University of Chicago, I designed a randomized control trial (RCT) proposal to verify the effectiveness of this platform. Through my experiment, my team focuses on the two primary hypotheses to address information asymmetry between citizens and their local government. I first hypothesize that a better understanding of local government operations by citizens leads to more informed voting and stronger government accountability. Simultaneously, when local governments gain insights into the welfare needs of their citizens, they can address these issues more effectively. These citizen-government dynamics guide my research question: **Does the provision of digital grievance redressal to the government enhance accountability through a shift to welfare spending and strategic voting?**

I plan to conduct this experiment along with a team in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha state in eastern India, which is among the largest in the state. The Mayurbhanj district has 26 Blocks, 3,966 Villages, and 404 Gram Panchayats, with a district sex ratio of 1,006 females for every 1,000 males

and a literacy rate of 63.98%. Its present local government is a national leader in the provision of e-government services, providing an ideal context for our experiment.

I am developing the beta version of a grievance redressal platform which will be the key intervention in this research design, where citizens can anonymously raise issues <sup>xxv</sup> to the local government body in the form of tickets and offer ratings on their responses. This platform enables citizens to react to and comment on other citizens' complaints, view government responses and ratings provided by other citizens, and connect to social media platforms to build network effects. The crowdsourced data from the platform will populate data visualizations within the application regarding the number of complaints addressed by the local government body. In the proposed experiment, we will randomly select half of the 404 Gram Panchayats to receive the treatment. The treatment will involve encouraging the installation and use of this platform at the community and individual levels to enable network effects and guidance to the local panchayats to respond to grievances raised on the platforms. The control group will have placebo access to the platform with limited marketing and no responses to grievances raised.

At the Gram Panchayat (GP) level, we will measure four outcomes related to strategic voting and welfare responses. Under strategic responses, we examine the difference in trust perception of the local government and the decision-making process of voting for their Sarpanch (Gram Panchayat Head). We will determine the motivations for voting for a particular candidate in elections, which can be influenced by bribes, self-identity, party politics through the decision-making process of voting for their Sarpanch (Head of Local Government). We will also look at the trust levels for the local government by measuring the endorsement effect between the two groups by posing similar questions with different endorsements. We expect that our trust and strategic voting data will inform the theory of change — that if citizens better understand the day-to-day progress of their local government, they will be empowered to make more informed voting decisions. To avoid social desirability bias, we will offer a simple survey on digital devices which citizens can fill out without the enumerator observing their inputs.

Under welfare response, we will examine the Gram Panchayat's understanding of citizens' concerns in correlation with the grievance data collected from both control and treatment groups. The data will be collected through a Gram Panchayat member survey to get an understanding of what they treat as priority concerns and compare them with the data collected on the platform about key citizen grievances. This will help our team map the gap between the two stakeholders. We will also assess the improvement in the service delivery of five prime state-level government schemes in the domains of employment, health, and education. This data is collected by the state government for each GP and is also reflected in the budget allocation.

## **Limitations**

The experiment is to be implemented with the beta version of the application, which is under development and should be ready by December 2024. We will be conducting power calculations for given outcomes through self-reported pilot data to determine the minimum detectable effect.

This digital platform faces several barriers to implementation. While people are becoming more accepting of digital tools, deploying a national resource like this would require increased investment in digital literacy training. Digital platforms have also been used as tools of polarization,<sup>xxvi</sup> and models must be resilient against digital fraud and protect anonymity to allow freedom of expression. The Indian government will also need to invest more in its digital infrastructure, which lags behind compared to that of the private sector. One promising move in this direction is the Odisha government adopting a “5T model”<sup>xxvii</sup> to ensure a tech-enabled governance reform system. The 5T guidelines — teamwork, technology, transparency, transformation, and time limit — mandate that the relevant government agency act on issues within 24 hours of a tweet.<sup>xxviii</sup> While anonymity is required for the platform to provide equitable access without fear, we are working with the technology to make sure only credible profiles created through the Indian electoral ID can be registered. Given the vast disparity in digital literacy and regional context, user-friendly is a key priority, and we are looking into Natural Language Processing (NLP) for ease of filing complaints while also reducing the chances for unfavorable content on the platform. Finally, this experiment and use of such a digital tool requires on-the-ground implementation partners in different regions to contextually expand its across India.

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<sup>ii</sup> Channel Atmashakti | How I Became A Warrior, YouTube video, posted by Channel Atmashakti, Feb 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6rPfcPb75w>.

<sup>iii</sup> Business Standard, “Rural Odisha uses 'power of Twitter' to resolve governance issues” Jul 20 2022 [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/rural-odisha-uses-power-of-twitter-to-resolve-governance-issues-122072000295\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/rural-odisha-uses-power-of-twitter-to-resolve-governance-issues-122072000295_1.html)

<sup>iv</sup> The Economist, The organs of India’s democracy are decaying, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2022 <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/02/12/the-organs-of-indias-democracy-are-decaying>

<sup>v</sup> BBC, “Citizenship Amendment Bill: India's new 'anti-Muslim' law explained” 11<sup>th</sup> December 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50670393>

<sup>vi</sup> JNU: Students across India protest against campus attack, 6 January 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-51004204>

<sup>vii</sup> Ipsos, Global Trustworthiness Index 2021, 12 October 2021 <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-10/Global-trustworthiness-index-2021-ipsos.pdf>

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<sup>ix</sup> Edelman. 2023 *Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report*. Edelman, January 2023. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023-trust-barometer>

<sup>x</sup> Freedom House. "Countries and Territories." *Freedom in the World*. Accessed August 14, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

<sup>xi</sup> Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). "Varieties of Autocratization." V-Dem Institute accessed Jan 31 2024 <https://www.v-dem.net/our-work/research-programs/varieties-of-autocratization/>.

<sup>xii</sup> Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). “Democracy Report 2023” [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem\\_democracyreport2023\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf)

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