SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIAN DEMOCRACY: PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND POLITICAL DEBATES ON RURAL HOUSING SCHEMES

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

Social media plays a transformative role in India's democratic processes, significantly influencing public opinion and political debates. This study examines the influence of social media on rural housing schemes, emphasizing the role of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp in fostering citizen participation and enhancing governmental transparency. Social media has become a tool for citizens to voice their concerns and for policymakers to communicate initiatives effectively. However, it also amplifies political narratives, with parties strategically using these platforms to shape public perceptions and electoral outcomes. The implementation of rural housing schemes, such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G), has been extensively debated across digital platforms. While social media amplifies policy awareness and mobilizes support, it also propagates misinformation and politicization of government initiatives. This paper examines the dual role of social media in shaping public perception of rural housing schemes, analysing both its advantages and challenges. By exploring key debates, policy implications, and social media narratives, the study highlights the need for responsible digital engagement in democratic governance, incorporating both neoliberal and Marxist perspectives to assess the ideological dimensions of these debates. This study emphasizes the importance of balanced digital strategies to ensure inclusivity and transparency in governance.

Keywords: *Social Media, Indian Democracy, Rural Housing, Public Perception, Political Debates, PMAY-G, Digital Governance, Neoliberalism, Marxism*

Introduction

Social media has transformed political discourse in India, influencing public perception, electoral strategies, and governance narratives. In the realm of policy debates, digital platforms serve as spaces for both state communication and grassroots mobilization. Among government initiatives, rural housing schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) exemplify how social media shapes democratic engagement by amplifying success stories, exposing governance failures, and facilitating political contestation. While digital platforms enhance citizen participation, they also contribute to misinformation cycles, algorithmic biases, and ideological polarization. This paper analyses how social media influences public narratives surrounding rural housing schemes, particularly PMAY-G, and situates these discussions within broader ideological debates between neoliberal governance models and Marxist critiques of welfare policy.

India's democratic framework has evolved alongside rapid digital expansion. With more than 800 million internet users, the country's political landscape is now deeply intertwined with social media dynamics. Politicians and policymakers increasingly rely on digital tools to frame policy narratives, while opposition groups and civil society actors leverage the same platforms to challenge state messaging. The expansion of digital governance has further embedded technology in welfare distribution and policy communication. PMAY-G, launched in 2016 as a replacement for the Indira Awas Yojana, aims to provide permanent housing for rural beneficiaries and uses digital systems such as AwaasSoft for real-time tracking and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) for fund disbursement. As such, the scheme represents a case study of how governance intersects with digital infrastructures.

Social media serves as both an amplifier of government messaging and a site of contestation. Official government handles showcase PMAY-G's achievements through infographics, data visualization, and success narratives, often emphasizing the role of political leadership. At the same time, opposition leaders and activists highlight instances of exclusion, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies through viral posts, testimonies, and investigative reports. The debates around PMAY-G reflect

broader issues of welfare accountability, as social media intensifies scrutiny of governance while also reinforcing partisan divides. The strategic use of hashtags such as *Housing for All* and *Modi Ka Ghar* by ruling parties illustrates the electoral significance of policy communication, whereas opposition campaigns emphasize governance gaps using viral critiques and visual counter-narratives.

The intersection of gender and housing policy in social media discourse highlights how digital platforms shape narratives of empowerment. Women-led homeownership, an emerging focus within PMAY-G, is discussed widely across social platforms, with beneficiary testimonials illustrating both successes and systemic barriers. Activist-driven conversations advocate financial inclusivity and gender-sensitive policy implementation, while digital campaigns provide visibility to issues like land ownership rights, loan accessibility, and bureaucratic hurdles faced by female beneficiaries. However, these discussions also encounter algorithmic biases that shape the visibility of certain narratives over others, reinforcing social media's role in constructing governance discourse.

Despite the democratizing potential of social media, several challenges hinder its role in political discourse. Misinformation campaigns distort policy awareness, with fabricated success stories and manipulated data influencing public sentiment. Algorithm-driven echo chambers limit the exposure of citizens to diverse viewpoints, further polarizing digital discussions. The digital divide between urban and rural populations exacerbates inequalities in social media engagement, restricting many rural citizens from participating in governance debates meaningfully. These limitations underscore the need for fact-checking frameworks, enhanced digital literacy programs, and equitable access to online political discourse.

The ideological framing of PMAY-G within neoliberal governance models and Marxist critiques further complicates digital policy discussions. Neoliberal perspectives emphasize performance metrics, data-driven governance, and market-oriented welfare policies, aligning with the efficiency-driven architecture of PMAY-G's digital tracking and beneficiary registration systems. Conversely, Marxist analyses highlight the contradictions within welfare commodification, arguing that social housing remains embedded in hierarchical structures that reinforce economic dependency rather than structural empowerment. Social media platforms mediate these ideological tensions, serving as battlegrounds where state legitimacy and grassroots resistance collide.

Empirical data suggests significant variations in how PMAY-G is perceived across different states. In Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal, social media interactions reflect localized grievances, such as delays in fund disbursement and inequities in housing allocation. Political debates in West Bengal, particularly the rebranding of PMAY-G houses as "*Banglar Bari*" by the state government, illustrate how digital narratives are shaped by regional electoral dynamics. In Bihar, WhatsApp networks facilitate citizen complaints and transparency demands, showcasing the platform's role in mobilizing rural advocacy. These case studies underscore the complex interplay between digital participation, governance structures, and electoral contestation.

Policy recommendations for improving digital governance must address the misinformation crisis, algorithmic bias, and digital literacy deficits in rural areas. Strengthening fact-checking collaborations between tech companies and policy institutions can mitigate misinformation risks. Expanding government-led digital awareness programs can ensure better access to housing scheme resources for rural citizens. Moreover, fostering inclusive online engagement frameworks that enhance grassroots policy participation will contribute to democratic equity in digital governance. Future research should explore comparative analyses with other digital welfare models, integrating insights from international governance systems.

In conclusion, social media plays a pivotal role in shaping governance discourse in Indian democracy, particularly in debates surrounding rural housing policies such as PMAY-G. While digital platforms facilitate grassroots mobilization and political engagement, they also reinforce ideological divides, misinformation cycles, and access disparities. Addressing these challenges requires multifaceted digital governance reforms, ensuring equitable, transparent, and inclusive policymaking processes. As India navigates the future of digital democracy, integrating critical perspectives from governance studies, cybernetics, and political theory will be essential for refining social media-driven governance models.

The Intersection of Social Media and Democratic Discourse

Social media has emerged as a critical platform for public discourse, enabling diverse voices to engage with governance and policy debates. Social media is often celebrated as a democratizing force that facilitates horizontal communication, bypasses traditional gatekeepers, and allows for citizen-led agenda-setting. As argued by Castells (2012), the network society enables a new form of political expression wherein citizens act as "mass self-communicators." In India, this dynamic has materialized through a proliferation of digital campaigns, protest movements, and the virality of political content. In the Indian political landscape, the digital ecosystem has reshaped electoral campaigning, governance accountability, and civic engagement, particularly in rural development policies. Among various policy interventions, rural housing schemes such as PMAY represent an integral part of India's social welfare agenda, promoting homeownership for marginalized groups, particularly women.

The increasing digitization of governance highlights the importance of analysing public discourse on social media, where political actors, civil society organizations, and citizens shape narratives on policy successes and failures. As digital activism and cybernetic governance models redefine policymaking, this study examines how social media discourse influences perceptions and policy debates on rural housing schemes in India.

However, scholars also warn of the dark side of digital democracy. Social media can amplify misinformation, reinforce echo chambers, and facilitate surveillance and propaganda. In the Indian context, these contradictions are magnified by socio-

economic disparities and infrastructural unevenness (Udupa, 2018). The convergence of political communication and social media strategy has made digital platforms arenas of ideological struggle, especially during elections and policy rollouts.

The Role of Social Media in Political Discourse

Social media platforms have become informational battlegrounds, where political narratives are constructed, challenged, and disseminated. The accessibility and immediacy of these platforms allow citizens, policymakers, and political parties to engage in discussions that were once confined to traditional media outlets.

1. Political Narratives and Public Perception: The digitization of political communication has significantly reshaped the ways in which governments, opposition parties, and citizens construct and contest policy narratives. Through digital platforms, governments are able to project policy achievements and disseminate official progress reports, thereby framing public policy outcomes in a favourable manner. At the same time, opposition parties and civil society organizations utilize the same digital spaces to question these claims by presenting alternative data, highlighting implementation gaps, and amplifying grassroots experiences. Housing initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) have become prominent subjects of discussion on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, where government accounts often emphasize program achievements and targets fulfilled, while opposition leaders critique administrative shortcomings and uneven implementation. Simultaneously, citizens contribute to these discussions by sharing their lived experiences, thereby shaping broader public perceptions of the scheme and creating a dynamic arena where official narratives, political contestation, and everyday realities intersect.

2. Public Opinion Formation on Rural Housing Schemes: Public opinion regarding rural housing schemes is increasingly shaped by the circulation of information and narratives within digital communication spaces. In this context, misinformation, propaganda, and politically motivated messaging play a significant role in influencing how citizens perceive the effectiveness of such welfare initiatives. Competing narratives often emerge around issues such as the efficiency of scheme implementation, concerns related to corruption, and questions of accessibility for marginalized beneficiaries. Social media platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of both supportive and critical perspectives, thereby creating a contested arena of policy interpretation. Furthermore, the intersection of gender and digital engagement is particularly visible in discussions surrounding women-led homeownership under housing initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). Activists, policy advocates, and civil society actors frequently highlight stories of women beneficiaries to underscore the scheme's potential for enhancing women's empowerment and property rights. At the same time, these discussions are accompanied by critical evaluations that question the depth of empowerment achieved and examine structural barriers that continue to affect women's access to housing benefits. Consequently, digital discourse plays a crucial role in shaping collective perceptions of rural housing policies and their broader social implications.

3. Social media as a Tool for Grassroots Mobilization: social media has increasingly emerged as an important instrument for grassroots mobilization in the context of rural welfare programs. Digital communication platforms, particularly WhatsApp, are widely used within rural communities to exchange practical information related to housing schemes, including application procedures, eligibility requirements, and the functioning of local administrative mechanisms. These informal digital networks often help bridge information gaps between government institutions and potential beneficiaries, enabling villagers to share experiences, clarify bureaucratic processes, and collectively navigate institutional procedures. At the same time, social media has facilitated forms of digital activism surrounding housing initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). Civil society groups, local activists, and community members use these platforms to advocate greater transparency in the allocation of housing benefits, promote financial inclusion for marginalized populations, and demand policy frameworks that recognize gender-sensitive housing rights. Consequently, social media functions not only as a medium of information exchange but also as a participatory space where citizens mobilize support, articulate grievances, and influence public discourse on rural housing governance.

4. The Mechanisms of Online Political Engagement: Social media platforms have increasingly become important arenas for policy debate and public discourse, particularly in relation to welfare programs such as rural housing schemes. These digital spaces often function as informational battlegrounds where different political and social actors attempt to shape public understanding of policy outcomes. Government agencies and official accounts frequently use social media to disseminate updates regarding the implementation and progress of housing initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), thereby projecting narratives of policy success and administrative efficiency. In contrast, opposition parties and political actors utilize the same platforms to question the effectiveness of these programs, drawing attention to governance deficiencies, delays in implementation, and gaps in service delivery. Alongside these political exchanges, citizens and grassroots organizations actively engage in online discussions, using social media to share personal experiences, raise concerns about accessibility, and debate the fairness of housing allocation processes. As a result, social media serves not only as a channel for information dissemination but also as a dynamic space where competing narratives influence public perceptions and shape broader policy conversations. The feedback mechanisms facilitated by digital platforms align with cybernetic governance principles, where policy communication adapts based on public sentiment and digital interactions.

5. Misinformation, Political Propaganda, and Echo Chambers: While social media provides a space for discourse, it also fosters misinformation campaigns and partisan propaganda, leading to: Distorted narratives on rural housing policy implementation; Biased portrayals of PMAY's effectiveness in political messaging; Echo chambers reinforcing ideological

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positions on governance. Algorithmic biases in digital platforms create segmented political discourse, influencing electoral behaviour and policy perceptions.

Social Media as a Tool for Digital Governance

Social media has become a key facilitator of governance communication, transforming how policymakers engage with citizens. Government bodies increasingly rely on Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp networks to circulate policy announcements, implementation progress, and beneficiary updates. In the case of PMAY-G, official government handles frequently post state-wise housing completion rates, success stories of beneficiaries, and infographics promoting housing accessibility. This digital dissemination strategy aligns with neoliberal governance models, where performance metrics and digital outreach reinforce government legitimacy.

However, the strategic use of social media for governance communication also fosters political propaganda and selective framing. Government agencies often emphasize quantitative achievements, while ground-level challenges—such as beneficiary exclusions, delays in fund disbursement, and regional disparities—remain underrepresented in official narratives. Opposition leaders and civil society activists leverage counter-discourse, utilizing viral posts, investigative reports, and citizen testimonies to challenge state narratives and advocate policy reforms.

The Indian Context: Democracy in a Digital Age India's democratic framework is built on participatory governance, periodic elections, and institutional pluralism. The past decade has seen a rapid digital transformation, supported by government initiatives like Digital India, which aims to enhance digital infrastructure and promote digital literacy. With over 800 million internet users as of 2024, India has one of the largest online populations globally, and a significant portion of new users come from rural areas (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India [TRAI], 2023).

This digital expansion has enabled a new mode of political participation. Politicians use social media for campaign outreach, policy announcements, and image-building, while citizens use it to voice grievances, mobilize support, or contest state action. Digital technologies are also embedded in governance processes, including welfare distribution and beneficiary tracking, as exemplified by PMAY-G. The role of social media in Indian democracy is evolving, shaping policy discourse and public engagement on rural housing schemes. As cybernetic governance models become increasingly relevant, policy frameworks must: Address digital misinformation challenges; Enhance participatory mechanisms for marginalized voices; Leverage real-time social media discourse to refine governance models. Harnessing social media's potential for democratic transparency requires a balance between digital engagement and responsible information governance, ensuring equitable and inclusive policy communication in Indian democracy.

PMAY-G: A Digital Welfare Initiative: The Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G), launched in 2016, replaced the earlier Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) with the objective of providing pucca houses to all homeless and inadequately housed rural families. By 2023, the scheme had sanctioned over 25 million houses, with significant use of digital tools such as AwaasSoft for real-time monitoring and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) for financial disbursal (Ministry of Rural Development [MoRD], 2023).

PMAY-G incorporates principles of digital governance, including geo-tagging, biometric authentication, and mobile-based monitoring. These mechanisms are intended to enhance transparency, minimize leakage, and ensure accountability. However, the actual impact on rural beneficiaries often depends on how these tools are operationalized on the ground and how narratives surrounding the scheme are constructed and disseminated.

Public Perception and Political Debates on PMAY-G

The public discourse surrounding PMAY-G on social media platforms reveals significant variation in narratives, influenced by political affiliations, media representation, and localized experiences. Beneficiaries often use Facebook groups and WhatsApp networks to discuss housing scheme eligibility, bureaucratic hurdles, and application procedures, creating informal knowledge-sharing spaces that enhance citizen participation. However, electoral framing of PMAY-G policy often distorts discussions, with political campaigns amplifying selective narratives to mobilize voter sentiment.

The **gendered discourse surrounding PMAY-G** on social media underscores broader socio-political trends. Women-led homeownership, a key component of the scheme's objectives, has been highlighted through digital campaigns advocating financial inclusivity and gender-sensitive policy adjustments. Activists utilize hashtags such as #WomenHomeownership and #HousingForAll to amplify success stories of female beneficiaries, while critiques focus on structural barriers limiting women's access to housing loans and land rights. The interplay between progress narratives and digital critiques illustrates the role of social media in fostering policy transparency while also reinforcing governance contestation.

Social Media Narratives and Public Perception: The perception of PMAY-G among rural beneficiaries is not solely shaped by policy design or implementation efficiency. Increasingly, it is mediated by social media narratives. Government agencies and political parties use platforms to circulate success stories, progress data, and promotional content, often with an emphasis on the Prime Minister's leadership.

Conversely, opposition parties, civil society groups, and affected citizens use the same platforms to highlight corruption, exclusion errors, and implementation delays. Viral posts and videos showing dilapidated houses, unfulfilled promises, or

exclusion of eligible families often receive traction, contributing to public discontent and political mobilization. Such dynamics underscore the dual role of social media as both a tool for state legitimation and a medium for resistance.

Political Debates and Electoral Rhetoric: PMAY-G has become a focal point in electoral campaigns and political debates, especially in state assembly and national elections. Ruling parties present the scheme as evidence of pro-poor governance, often showcasing model houses and beneficiary testimonies. Hashtags like #HousingForAll and #ModiKaGhar are strategically promoted to enhance the visibility of government initiatives.

Opposition leaders, on the other hand, critique the scheme for favouring certain regions or caste groups, ignoring local needs, and implementing top-down targets without adequate ground-level consultation. These debates unfold vigorously on social media, where partisan accounts disseminate infographics, testimonials, and accusations, contributing to a polarized digital discourse.

Such political framing often aligns with neoliberal governance models, which commodify welfare and emphasize managerial efficiency (Harvey, 2005). Simultaneously, from a Marxist viewpoint, the contradictions between policy claims and structural inequalities are laid bare through digital testimonies and counter-narratives (Chatterjee, 2004).

Theoretical Perspectives: Neoliberalism and Marxism Neoliberal theory views social media as a tool that integrates market logic into public life, emphasizing individual responsibility, data-driven governance, and competitive performance (Brown, 2015). PMAY-G's emphasis on digital tracking, self-registration, and transparency dashboards reflects this ideology.

Marxist critique, however, foregrounds the class contradictions inherent in such schemes. The framing of housing as a state gift rather than a right reproduces dependency rather than empowerment. Social media, while offering a platform for critique, often becomes a battleground where corporate interests and state propaganda override organic voices of the proletariat.

These perspectives offer critical insights into the ideological underpinnings of digital governance. While neoliberalism celebrates technological innovation and performance metrics, Marxism compels us to ask who benefits and who remains excluded in such models.

Case Studies and Field Insights: In states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal, field reports and digital ethnographies reveal mixed experiences. While some beneficiaries express satisfaction with timely assistance and improved housing, others report issues with corruption, bribes, and favouritism in beneficiary selection. Facebook groups and WhatsApp communities have emerged as local platforms where citizens share their experiences, lodge complaints, or organize protests.

For instance, in West Bengal, the rebranding of PMAY-G houses as "Banglar Bari" by the state government sparked digital confrontations between Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and Trinamool Congress (TMC) supporters, illustrating how rural housing becomes entangled in regional power struggles. In Bihar, local YouTube channels have documented delays in construction and payment, offering a grassroots view of state functioning that often contradicts official narratives.

Misinformation, Algorithmic Bias, and Digital Advocacy

While social media enhances governance engagement, it also poses structural risks, including misinformation cycles, algorithm-driven political biases, and digital exclusion disparities. The misrepresentation of PMAY-G implementation statistics, selective framing of policy effectiveness, and viral misinformation campaigns distort public understanding of the scheme. Political actors strategically shape social media discourse through targeted digital ads, influencer networks, and curated narratives, reinforcing ideological polarization.

Algorithmic biases in social media platforms filter which policy narratives gain traction, often favouring mainstream governmental perspectives over grassroots critiques. Digital exclusion further limits equitable access to governance discourse, with rural communities experiencing disproportionate barriers to online political participation. These challenges underscore the urgent need for strengthened fact-checking mechanisms, digital literacy programs, and governance frameworks that enhance responsible policy discussions online.

Limitations and Challenges of Digital Engagement: Despite the apparent reach of social media, several limitations impede its democratic potential. Digital literacy remains low among rural populations, and many users rely on intermediaries to access information. Gender disparities further limit women's participation in digital governance. Algorithmic filtering and echo chambers often restrict exposure to diverse viewpoints, reinforcing ideological silos.

1. Algorithmic Biases and the Role of Tech Corporations: Social media algorithms influence which policy narratives gain traction, often favouring dominant political interests. This reinforces: Selective exposure to government messaging or opposition critiques; Marginalization of alternative discourse from rural voices

2. Political Misinformation and Electoral Manipulation: The manipulation of digital narratives can impact electoral outcomes, as misinformation campaigns often exaggerate policy failures or successes for strategic electoral gains.

3. Digital Divide and Rural Participation Gaps: Despite increased digital penetration, rural communities remain disproportionately excluded due to: Limited internet accessibility; Low digital literacy affecting social media engagement; Unequal representation of rural concerns in mainstream political discourse.

Moreover, the state's growing surveillance capacity, coupled with the criminalization of dissenting voices online, raises concerns about freedom of expression. While digital platforms enable public scrutiny, they also risk becoming instruments of control, where data surveillance substitutes genuine accountability.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Social media plays a transformative role in Indian democracy, particularly in shaping public perception and political debates on PMAY-G. While digital platforms enable grassroots mobilization, governance transparency, and electoral engagement, they also reinforce misinformation cycles, algorithmic biases, and selective political framing. Addressing these challenges requires multifaceted policy interventions, including enhanced digital governance literacy, algorithmic accountability in political discourse, and institutionalized fact-checking collaborations.

Moving forward, policymakers must integrate interdisciplinary approaches – including cybernetic governance frameworks and comparative political analyses – to refine digital democracy models. A balanced digital engagement strategy must ensure equitable, transparent, and inclusive policy discourse, strengthening Indian democracy's responsiveness to citizen concerns.

Conclusion: Social media has undeniably reshaped Indian democracy, providing new spaces for political engagement, public debate, and governance. The case of PMAY-G reveals both the promises and perils of digital welfare governance. While social media enables beneficiaries to voice concerns and access information, it also serves as a platform for political spectacle, ideological polarization, and technocratic depoliticization.

To harness the democratic potential of social media, there must be a conscious effort to bridge digital divides, promote media literacy, and safeguard the autonomy of digital spaces. A critical engagement with both neoliberal and Marxist frameworks can enrich our understanding of how digital technologies intersect with class, power, and democratic participation in contemporary India.

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