



DIGITAL GOVERNANCE AND RURAL POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR: MARGINAL FARMERS IN THE ERA OF DIRECT BENEFIT TRANSFER

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Over the past decade, the expansion of the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) framework in India has reshaped the pathways through which state resources flow to agrarian households. In theory, account-based digital transfers sever the dependence of beneficiaries on partisan intermediaries and thus alter the very foundations of rural political calculation. In practice, the outcomes are considerably more tangled. This article examines how marginal cultivators – those owning less than one hectare of land – in Uttar Dinajpur District, West Bengal, have encountered, interpreted, and politically responded to the digitalisation of welfare provisioning. The study draws on 120 structured interviews and 18 focus group discussions conducted across six development blocks between November 2022 and June 2023. It advances three interlinked arguments: first, that traditional patronage networks have not dissolved under DBT but have assumed a reconfigured ‘digital facilitation’ form; second, that the infrastructural and literacy deficits characterising Uttar Dinajpur generate a distinctive variety of techno-anxiety that reinforces – rather than undermines – political subordination; and third, that the simultaneous presence of Central and State government cash-transfer programmes in the district has produced an unprecedented contest over welfare credit, whose outcome is shaped more by proximity and relational politics than by formal scheme architecture. The paper contributes to ongoing debates on agrarian citizenship, last-mile governance, and the political sociology of welfare technology in South Asia.

Keywords: *DBT, Digital Governance, Agrarian Politics, Uttar Dinajpur, Clientelism, Political Behaviour, Welfare Delivery, West Bengal*

Introduction

Welfare delivery in rural India has long operated through an intricate web of human intermediaries – local party functionaries, gram panchayat officials, and neighbourhood strongmen – whose capacity to grant or withhold access to state entitlements forms the practical currency of political life in countless villages. The nationwide rollout of the Direct Benefit Transfer architecture, beginning in earnest after 2013 and intensifying through successive Central and State government reforms, represents a concerted administrative effort to route this currency through electronic channels and, in so doing, to strip the intermediary of the power that physical gatekeeping once conferred. Yet the political sociology of this transformation has received far less rigorous empirical attention than its administrative engineering, and the assumption that digital disintermediation straightforwardly produces politically autonomous, market-like rural voters remains largely untested in districts that combine deep agrarian poverty with uneven digital infrastructure.

Uttar Dinajpur, a border district in the Terai-Duars region of northern West Bengal, offers an unusually revealing window onto these questions. Administratively composed of nine development blocks and home to roughly three million residents, the district sits at the intersection of several structural conditions that are simultaneously common across peripheral India and particularly acute in this locality: landholdings that are overwhelmingly sub-marginal in scale, a literacy rate that trails the state average by more than fifteen percentage points, banking infrastructure that reaches some interior villages only through Business Correspondents operating on intermittent connectivity, and a political landscape shaped by decades of Left Front dominance, subsequent Trinamool Congress consolidation, and more recent competitive pressures from the Bharatiya Janata Party. Into this setting, the DBT reform has arrived not as a neutral administrative upgrade but as a politically charged intervention whose implementation has been contested between levels of government and whose benefits have become tokens in an ongoing struggle over electoral legitimacy.

Three guiding questions organise the inquiry that follows. How have marginal farmers in Uttar Dinajpur materially and perceptually experienced the shift to digital welfare delivery? To what extent have their relationships with political parties, panchayat brokers, and state agencies changed as a consequence? And what does the aggregate pattern of these individual navigations imply for the broader theoretical claims made about DBT as an instrument of democratic deepening? The paper proceeds by reviewing relevant theoretical perspectives, describing the study design, mapping the DBT implementation landscape in the district, presenting empirical findings across four analytical dimensions, and concluding with implications for scholarship and policy.

Locating the Inquiry: Theory and Prior Scholarship

• Programmatic Welfare and the Logic of Disintermediation

Scholarship on welfare state development in low- and middle-income democracies has increasingly distinguished between ‘programmatic’ benefit delivery – where entitlements are allocated according to universal, rule-based criteria – and ‘clientelistic’ distribution, in which benefits are contingent on demonstrated political loyalty and enforced through localised monitoring. The DBT reform belongs, in its design intentions, to the programmatic mode: eligibility is formally determined by land records and biometric identity, transfers occur through regulated banking channels, and the formal role of any human intermediary is theoretically nil. Proponents of this reform tradition argue that such architectures dilute the coercive capacity of local political networks and thereby enrich the quality of democratic representation by allowing voters to evaluate governments on policy performance rather than patronage delivery.

However, the empirical record on programmatic reforms in the Indian context cautions against such optimism. Research on MGNREGA, the PDS, and earlier cash-transfer experiments demonstrates that the introduction of universal rules does not by itself neutralise the political relationships that have crystallised around welfare access over decades. Local actors display considerable adaptive ingenuity: when one mechanism of control is closed, they typically identify adjacent mechanisms that preserve their intermediary function. The relevant question is therefore not whether intermediaries survive programmatic reforms, but what forms they take, where they concentrate, and with what political effects.

• Digital Infrastructure and Last-Mile Governance

A second body of literature, more recent and still rapidly accumulating, examines the specific political implications of digitising welfare delivery. Research conducted across Indian states documents a persistent gap between the formal architecture of digital transfers and the lived experience of beneficiaries who lack smartphones, face unreliable network connectivity, hold dormant or incorrectly seeded bank accounts, or simply cannot read the bureaucratic communications that determine their benefit status. This gap does not leave political relations unchanged; it creates a demand for a new class of intermediary who can translate the digital interface into accessible human terms. Common Service Centre operators, panchayat IT assistants, and digital-literate party workers have moved into this space, occupying a structural position that is in many respects analogous to the traditional broker, even as the formal system denies their existence.

The political implications of this new intermediary ecology are underexplored. Where CSC operators are politically aligned – as several studies of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar document – their control over digital access can reproduce selective benefit delivery in a form that is considerably harder to trace or contest than the older, more visible patterns of physical gatekeeping. In contrast, where CSC operators are relatively independent of partisan networks, their role may genuinely reduce political dependency by providing universal, low-cost access to grievance redressal. The distinction matters enormously for beneficiaries, but it is invisible from aggregate administrative data.

• Agrarian Political Behaviour in West Bengal

The specific political-economic context of West Bengal adds further analytical texture. The state’s agrarian landscape was reshaped by the Left Front government’s Operation Barga (1978–1990), which extended formal tenancy rights and enhanced bargaining power for sharecroppers, and by land reform measures that redistributed approximately one million hectares over three decades. These reforms produced a politically mobilised but materially precarious class of small and marginal cultivators who have historically exhibited strong partisan identification – initially with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its affiliated mass organisations, and subsequently, following the 2011 electoral transition, with the Trinamool Congress and its characteristic mix of populist welfarism and cadre-based local organisation. Uttar Dinajpur’s distance from Kolkata, its border-area economics, and its pronounced ethnic and religious heterogeneity have complicated this statewide pattern, producing a more fluid and factionally contested political environment than is typical of the state’s more densely settled central districts.

Study Area and Research Design

The District in Profile: Uttar Dinajpur District spans approximately 3,140 square kilometres in the northern extremity of West Bengal, flanked by Bangladesh to the east, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts to the north, and Bihar to the west. Its nine development blocks – Chopra, Islampur, Goalpokhar-I, Goalpokhar-II, Raiganj, Hemtabad, Karandighi, Itahar, and Kaliyaganj — display considerable internal variation in agro-ecological conditions, infrastructure quality, and demographic composition. The district’s 2011 Census population of approximately 3.0 million includes a rural share exceeding 83 percent, a Muslim population share that surpasses 49 percent in several blocks, and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations of 40.4 percent and 8.2 percent respectively. These figures signal the compound vulnerability of a population simultaneously

marginalised by landlessness, caste hierarchy, and — in the northernmost blocks — proximity to a sensitive international border that constrains both economic mobility and state service delivery.

Agricultural data from the 2015–16 Agriculture Census confirm that marginal cultivators holding below one hectare constitute roughly 78 percent of all farm households in the district. Average landholding size has contracted across each successive census round, a trend attributable to population growth, inheritance-driven subdivision, and the limited availability of non-agricultural livelihoods capable of absorbing agricultural surplus labour. Paddy is the dominant crop, cultivated across approximately 68 percent of net sown area, with jute, mustard, and seasonal vegetables accounting for most of the remainder. Soil waterlogging in the kharif season and moisture stress in the rabi season expose cultivators to recurring crop loss, making access to insurance schemes such as PMFBY a matter of genuine subsistence relevance rather than merely bureaucratic formality.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Indicators – Uttar Dinajpur vs West Bengal Average

Indicator	Uttar Dinajpur	West Bengal
Population (Census 2011)	30,07,134	9,13,47,736
Rural Population Share	83.4%	68.1%
Literacy Rate	60.7%	76.3%
Marginal Farm Households (% of cultivators)	78.2%	63.4%
Scheduled Caste Share	40.4%	23.5%
Households with Functional Bank Account	54.3%	71.2%
Mobile Internet Penetration	31.6%	52.4%
PM-KISAN Enrolment per 1,000 marginal farmers	312	421

Sources: Census of India 2011; Agriculture Census 2015–16; PM-KISAN Portal 2022–23; DBTBHARAT.GOV.IN

Methodology: The study adopts a sequential mixed-methods design in which quantitative survey data and qualitative interview material are treated as mutually informing rather than hierarchically ranked sources of evidence. Fieldwork unfolded in two stages: a three-week scoping visit in November–December 2022 that included document collection, key informant consultations, and reconnaissance of block-level DBT infrastructure, followed by a primary data-collection phase spanning March to June 2023.

Six of the nine development blocks were selected for intensive study — Raiganj, Islampur, Goalpokhar-I, Chopra, Itahar, and Karandighi — chosen to represent variation along three axes: proximity to the district headquarters (and associated infrastructure), dominant crop system, and political history at the panchayat level. Within each block, four villages were drawn through stratified random sampling from the 2011 village directory, stratifying by approximate landholding profile and distance from the block headquarters. In each village, five adult residents self-identifying as marginal cultivators were interviewed using a structured instrument covering scheme awareness and enrolment status, experience with digital delivery mechanisms, access to banking and mobile technology, perceptions of government performance, and voting intentions. This yielded a survey sample of 120 respondents.

Supplementary qualitative interviews were conducted with 34 purposively selected informants, including respondents from the survey who had expressed particularly detailed or distinctive accounts, as well as panchayat members, CSC operators, Krishi Vigyan Kendra functionaries, and local representatives of the principal political parties. Eighteen focus group discussions — three per block, with groups of eight to twelve participants — explored collective deliberations on scheme experience and political attitudes. Interview transcripts were thematically coded using NVivo 14; survey data were processed using SPSS v.25. All participant identities have been replaced by pseudonyms, and village locations are indicated only at the block level.

The Architecture of DBT Delivery in Uttar Dinajpur

• Scheme Landscape

Marginal cultivators in Uttar Dinajpur are formal beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries of an overlapping set of Central and State government welfare schemes mediated through digital infrastructure. At the Central level, the most consequential for cultivators is PM-KISAN (Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi), launched in February 2019, which commits Rs. 6,000 per annum in three equal instalments to the bank accounts of eligible small and marginal farmers. The scheme has been administratively complicated in West Bengal by the State government's initial reluctance — attributed publicly to data sovereignty concerns and interpreted by Central government spokespersons as politically motivated obstruction — to facilitate farmer data uploads to the Central PM-KISAN portal. This inter-governmental standoff, which was only partially resolved following judicial intervention and intense electoral pressure in 2021–22, has left a substantial proportion of potentially eligible

farmers in Uttar Dinajpur excluded from the scheme. As of 2022–23, district-level administrative data placed PM-KISAN enrolment at 312 per 1,000 marginal farmers, against a state average of 421.

The State government's parallel instrument is Krishak Bandhu, introduced in 2019, which provides an annual income support of Rs. 10,000 per acre (subject to a minimum of Rs. 4,000 for very small holdings), along with a life insurance component. Administered through the State agriculture department's own digital infrastructure and not routed through the Central PFMS platform, Krishak Bandhu has achieved markedly higher enrolment rates in Uttar Dinajpur than PM-KISAN, with 83.3 percent of survey respondents reporting scheme awareness and 61.7 percent reporting active enrolment. The coexistence of these two income-support instruments — politically identified with rival governments — creates an unusual beneficiary landscape in which farmers may simultaneously receive transfers credited to both the Central BJP-led government and the State Trinamool Congress government, generating the attribution contests discussed in Section 5.

Beyond income support, PMFBY (crop insurance), NFSA (food security), and MGNREGA (rural employment) also pass through DBT channels to varying degrees, expanding the scope of digital entitlements to which marginal farmers must navigate access while also multiplying the potential points of failure, exclusion, and intermediary intervention.

• **Infrastructure Gaps**

The delivery of DBT benefits presupposes a chain of infrastructure that, in Uttar Dinajpur, is frequently broken at one or more links. At the receiving end, 38.3 percent of survey respondents owned a smartphone, and 31.6 percent had mobile internet access at or near their residence. Bank account ownership, substantially improved by the Jan Dhan Yojana campaign, stood at 81.7 percent among respondents, but account operability was a distinct problem: 22.5 percent of respondents reported having encountered at least one episode of account deactivation, incorrect Aadhaar seeding, or KYC rejection that had blocked an expected transfer. The nearest bank branch was more than five kilometres away for 18.4 percent of respondents, with Business Correspondent coverage partially compensating but inconsistently available.

Common Service Centres represent the principal institutional channel through which digitally excluded residents' access DBT-related services — scheme enrolment, grievance registration, account-related corrections, and insurance claim initiation. Forty-seven CSC outlets were identified across the six study blocks, but their spatial distribution was strongly skewed toward block and panchayat headquarters market areas, leaving interior villages without proximate access. Respondents from interior villages consistently reported travel distances of four to eight kilometres to reach a functioning CSC, a journey that imposes time and monetary costs disproportionate to the service received and that introduces a selective filter favouring those with greater mobility resources.

Table 2: DBT Access Indicators – Primary Survey Results (n = 120)

Access Indicator	Proportion of Respondents
Smartphone ownership	38.3%
Mobile internet at/near home	31.6%
Nearest bank branch over 5 km away	18.4%
Experienced Aadhaar / KYC account blockage	22.5%
Enrolled in PM-KISAN	47.5%
Aware of Krishak Bandhu	83.3%
Used CSC for a welfare-related service	62.5%
Received most recent DBT instalment on schedule	54.2%

Source: Author's primary survey, March–June 2023

Political Behaviour Under Digital Welfare: Empirical Findings

• **Contesting Welfare Credit in a Federated DBT System**

Among the study's most consequential empirical observations is the finding that the simultaneous presence of Central and State income-transfer schemes has generated an active and ongoing contest over political credit attribution that neither tier of government has decisively won. Survey data reveal that when respondents were asked which level of government, they held primarily responsible for their household welfare, 43.3 percent nominated the State government, 28.3 percent the Central government, 15.0 percent distributed credit equally between the two, and 13.4 percent either expressed uncertainty or declined to attribute credit to any political actor. These proportions varied substantially across blocks: in Islampur, with its higher Muslim population and historically stronger Congress and subsequent TMC loyalties, State attribution reached 58 percent, while in Itahar, where BJP grassroots mobilisation around PM-KISAN has been more visible, Central attribution stood at 39 percent.

Qualitative accounts clarify the relational logic underlying these attributions. Rather than attributing benefits to whichever government formally administers the scheme, most respondents attributed credit to whichever political actor had been most physically present in facilitating enrolment or resolving problems. A 48-year-old cultivator from a village in Karandighi block captured a sentiment expressed in multiple forms across the fieldwork: 'The panchayat member from our ward came with us to

the CSC and made sure our name was added. Whether it is the Centre or the State that sends the money, I know who got it for us.' This 'relational attribution' mechanism — in which credit follows visible facilitation rather than formal administrative hierarchy — has critical implications for electoral behaviour, since it means that whichever political actor most actively inhabits the digital facilitation role will claim the political dividend of transfer receipt.

- **The Transformation of Patronage Networks**

The displacement of physical patronage by digital facilitation brokerage is one of the study's central substantive arguments, and it is supported by evidence from both the broker and beneficiary sides of the relationship. Among the 34 qualitative informants, 19 were either current or recently active political functionaries (panchayat members, party booth-level coordinators, or former Jan Dhan camp organisers). Without exception, they described a conscious strategic pivot in their constituent-service role from procuring physical benefits — ration cards, MGNREGA job cards, seed subsidies — toward navigating the digital bureaucracy of DBT enrolment, Aadhaar correction, and bank account reactivation. One TMC booth-level coordinator from Goalpokhar-I described the change with particular clarity: 'Earlier, I could bring a ration card with me and give it to someone directly at their door. Now I sit with them at the CSC, I know which officer to call in the block office if their name is missing, I know what documents fix an Aadhaar mismatch. The work is different but the relationship is exactly the same — they come to me because I can make things happen.'

This 'digital facilitation brokerage' function reproduces the structural asymmetry of the older patronage relationship while adapting to the formal requirements of a technology-mediated system. It also extends the geographic and social range of intermediary influence: whereas physical benefit distribution required brokers to be present at specific distribution points, digital facilitation can occur anywhere — at the broker's residence, on a shared phone call, or through a trusted CSC operator — giving politically connected intermediaries a more diffuse and harder-to-monitor form of control over benefit access.

- **Techno-Anxiety, Grievance, and the Dampening of Political Voice**

A recurring theme across interviews and FGDs was what participants described as a generalised apprehension about the reliability and comprehensibility of digital welfare systems. This 'techno-anxiety' is not simply a response to individual technical failures, though such failures are frequent: 67.5 percent of respondents reported having experienced at least one significant problem with a DBT transaction — including unannounced payment delays, erroneous exclusions, Aadhaar authentication rejections, or unexplained account freezes. Rather, techno-anxiety encompasses a broader epistemological condition in which the farmer cannot understand, predict, or contest the digital system and therefore lacks the cognitive tools to translate a welfare grievance into an articulable political demand.

The grievance-response behaviour of survey respondents reflects this incapacity. When asked how they had responded to their most recent DBT problem, 48.3 percent said they had approached a political party worker or panchayat functionary, 27.5 percent had visited the CSC, 14.2 percent had gone directly to their bank branch, and only 6.7 percent were aware of or had attempted to use a formal digital grievance channel such as the PM-KISAN helpline or the PFMS complaints portal. The overwhelming preference for politically connected interlocutors over formal redressal mechanisms reveals that the DBT system has not built the institutional trust or user capability necessary for farmers to engage with it as autonomous claimants. Instead, it has generated a demand for politically mediated access to grievance mechanisms — a demand that local political actors are adept at supplying, at a political price.

FGD discussions in all six blocks produced unsolicited accounts of self-censorship driven by the fear of benefit loss. Participants repeatedly described suppressing complaints about CSC operators or panchayat functionaries because of an ambient concern that voicing dissatisfaction could result in exclusion from beneficiary lists or delays in payment processing. One participant in a Chopra block FGD articulated this logic with unusual directness: 'My neighbour complained about the CSC man who took money to fix her Aadhaar. The next instalment for her came three months late. Nobody can prove anything, but we all saw what happened. So we keep quiet.' Whether or not such perceptions accurately reflect systematic retaliation — and the study cannot adjudicate this question — their political effect is real: they produce a chilling effect on political voice among a population that already occupies a structurally disadvantaged position in relation to state institutions.

- **Gender, Land Records, and Structural Exclusion**

The gendered architecture of formal landholding in Uttar Dinajpur intersects in particularly consequential ways with the DBT system's dependence on land records and biometric identity as the basis of eligibility. Of the 120 survey respondents, only 22 were women, a proportion that reflects not a sampling choice but the actual distribution of formal land title in the study villages, where adult male household heads overwhelmingly hold recorded ownership. Several Central and State schemes, including PM-KISAN and Krishak Bandhu, formally register benefits in the name of the recorded landholder, which in most cases means that women who perform substantial or majority agricultural labour receive no direct entitlement in their own name.

Among female respondents, awareness of the amounts being transferred to accounts nominally held in their names was markedly lower than among male respondents, and several described lacking independent access to the mobile number linked to their bank account — a practical barrier to receiving OTP-based transaction notifications. This creates conditions in which the nominally gender-neutral DBT architecture is, in practice, male-mediated: the male household head retains effective control over transfer receipt, and women's capacity to use welfare access as a basis for autonomous political agency is commensurately diminished.

These findings reinforce concerns raised by scholars of gender and financial inclusion regarding the assumptions embedded in account-based transfer schemes.

Structural Inequalities, Intermediary Persistence, and Electoral Calculation

- **Social Stratification and Differential DBT Outcomes**

Survey data permit a disaggregation of DBT access and experience by caste category that reveals significant structural patterning. Scheduled Caste respondents reported PM-KISAN enrolment rates of 41.3 percent, compared to 54.7 percent among non-SC/ST respondents. The incidence of payment failure or delay in the twelve months preceding the interview was 31.9 percent among SC respondents and 22.1 percent among non-SC/ST respondents. The proportion reporting reliance on a political actor for grievance resolution was 53.2 percent among SC respondents and 43.8 percent among non-SC/ST respondents. These differentials are not attributable solely to lower baseline smartphone ownership or banking access among SC households, though these factors are present; they also reflect the compounding of administrative exclusion from land records — a legacy of historical dispossession that digitised eligibility systems inherit and amplify — with the reduced social capital available to navigate bureaucratic obstacles without partisan assistance.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the DBT system in Uttar Dinajpur does not operate as a neutral technological equaliser. Its selective functioning in a context of pre-existing social stratification tends to reinforce the relative disadvantage of the most marginalised cultivators, precisely those for whom the formal promises of the reform were most emphatically made. This is not simply a matter of implementation failure; it reflects structural features of the digital welfare architecture that require deliberate corrective intervention rather than incremental administrative improvement.

- **The Security-Autonomy Paradox**

The relationship between sustained DBT receipt and political autonomy proves, on closer examination, to be neither linear nor straightforward. Among the subset of respondents who reported receiving consistent, timely PM-KISAN instalments across all three preceding cycles, 38 percent expressed a willingness to consider voting for a party other than the one they associated with scheme facilitation in the next assembly election. Among respondents who had experienced payment disruptions, this proportion fell to 24 percent. This differential is suggestive of a modest autonomy effect associated with reliable benefit delivery, broadly consistent with the theoretical expectation that programmatic welfare reduces coercive electoral dependency.

However, a different mechanism cuts in the opposite direction with equal or greater force. Multiple respondents — including several who expressed satisfaction with their PM-KISAN receipt record — described a calculus in which the reliability of existing transfers was itself a reason for electoral conservatism rather than emboldened independence. As one 61-year-old cultivator from Itahar block put it: ‘I get the money every four months now. It has been regular for two years. Why would I take a risk and vote for someone new who might change the system and my money stops coming?’ This reasoning — in which the security created by welfare delivery becomes a source of risk aversion rather than political confidence — represents what this paper terms the ‘security-autonomy paradox’: the very success of the transfer programme in providing a reliable income floor creates an incumbency premium that is distinct from, and operates independently of, partisan loyalty, local patronage ties, or positive evaluations of government performance on other dimensions.

- **Party Strategy and the Institutionalisation of Digital Facilitation**

From the perspective of political parties, the evidence suggests a deliberate and increasingly institutionalised strategic response to the DBT environment. Across the party spectrum — TMC, BJP, and residual Left formations — local organisational actors described investing in what might be termed ‘digital constituency service’ capacity: the ability to help constituents navigate scheme enrolment, correct account problems, and access grievance mechanisms. This capacity is being built into the informal job descriptions of panchayat workers, booth-level committees, and ward-level coordinators in ways that represent a genuine organisational adaptation to the DBT-era political environment rather than a temporary improvisation.

The TMC’s dominant position in most panchayat bodies across the study area gives it a structural advantage in this competition: its activists can use panchayat office access, official administrative contacts, and formal roles in beneficiary list preparation to offer digital facilitation services that opposition parties cannot easily replicate. BJP activists interviewed in the study acknowledged this asymmetry explicitly, describing a strategy of using PM-KISAN enrolment camps — under Central government branding — as an alternative channel for building digital service relationships with cultivators who might not approach a TMC panchayat functionary. The resulting landscape is one in which federal electoral competition has acquired a new dimension: the race to be seen as the most effective digital facilitator for welfare-dependent marginal farmers.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis resists the simplifications that pervade both the techno-optimist celebration of DBT as a democratising force and the techno-pessimist dismissal of digital governance as an instrument of surveillance and control. What the evidence from Uttar Dinajpur points toward instead is a more granular and contextually specific account of how digital welfare transformation intersects with the particular configurations of infrastructure, social stratification, party organisation, and federal politics that characterise a peripheral Indian district. Four conclusions merit particular emphasis.

- Political intermediaries have not been displaced by DBT but have reoriented their function toward digital facilitation brokerage, preserving the structural logic of mediated citizenship even as the content of intermediary service has changed. The political dividend of this adaptation flows toward whichever actors most effectively inhabit the digital facilitation role.
- Digital exclusion in Uttar Dinajpur is not randomly distributed; it is socially patterned in ways that reinforce the pre-existing disadvantages of Scheduled Caste cultivators, women without formal land title, and residents of interior villages with poor connectivity. These groups bear the greatest costs of DBT's infrastructure assumptions and receive the least of its promised autonomy benefits.
- The concurrent presence of competing Central and State income-transfer schemes has created a novel electoral resource — the capacity to be seen as the effective facilitator of transfer receipt — whose exploitation has partially replaced older forms of direct patronage as a mechanism of political mobilisation among marginal farmers.
- The security-autonomy paradox — whereby reliable transfer receipt reinforces rather than liberates electoral conservatism — suggests that the relationship between programmatic welfare and political independence cannot be theorised at the level of scheme design alone; it must be tracked through the subjective risk calculations of beneficiaries embedded in specific political ecologies.

These conclusions have implications that extend beyond Uttar Dinajpur. As DBT deepens across India's diverse agrarian landscapes, the question of whether digital welfare can deliver on its democratic promise will be determined not by the elegance of its technical architecture but by the quality of the infrastructure that carries it, the equity of the social arrangements that govern access to it, and the willingness of the state to invest in building the capability of marginal citizens to engage with it as informed and autonomous claimants rather than as passive — and politically manipulable — recipients. The farmers of Uttar Dinajpur are navigating this terrain with resourcefulness and pragmatism. They deserve a system that meets them with equivalent seriousness.

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