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Dharma and Digital Democracy: An Indian Perspective on Participatory Governance

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Abstract:

This paper examines the synergy between the ancient Indian philosophical concept of Dharma and the emerging phenomenon of digital democracy. Dharma is a fundamental aspect of Indian philosophy which imparts values like duty, righteousness and cosmic order, thereby serving as an invaluable moral compass for individuals and societies in general. This study argues that Dharma offers a valuable framework for understanding and guiding the ethical and responsible use of digital technologies in democratic governance. By studying the core values of Dharma, such as satya (truth), ahimsa (non-violence), aparigraha (non-possessiveness) and brahmacharya (self-control), this paper identifies key principles for ethical digital citizenship and participatory governance. This study is primarily based on the secondary data sources. Through a literature review and content analysis this paper examines how these principles can be applied to address challenges like digital inequality, fake news, cyberbullying and the erosion of privacy in the digital age. This study also emphasizes the potential of digital technologies to enhance democratic participation, promote transparency and foster accountability in governance. By drawing on India's rich philosophical heritage, this study contributes to global discussions on creating an ethical framework for digital governance and also seeks to promote responsible digital conduct that upholds human dignity, privacy and truth in this age of technology.

Keywords: Dharma, digital democracy, Indian philosophy, digital citizenship, participatory governance

Introduction:

Dharma is an enduring and foundational concept in Indian philosophy which refers to the universal principles that guide moral behavior and social order. It is essentially a manual for leading a moral life that includes concepts of duty, ethics, justice and cosmic harmony. In traditional Indian thought, Dharma is not only a personal guide for spiritual growth but also a social compass that ensures justice, equality and the well-being of society. Over the centuries, it has influenced Indian political thought, social organization and legal systems.

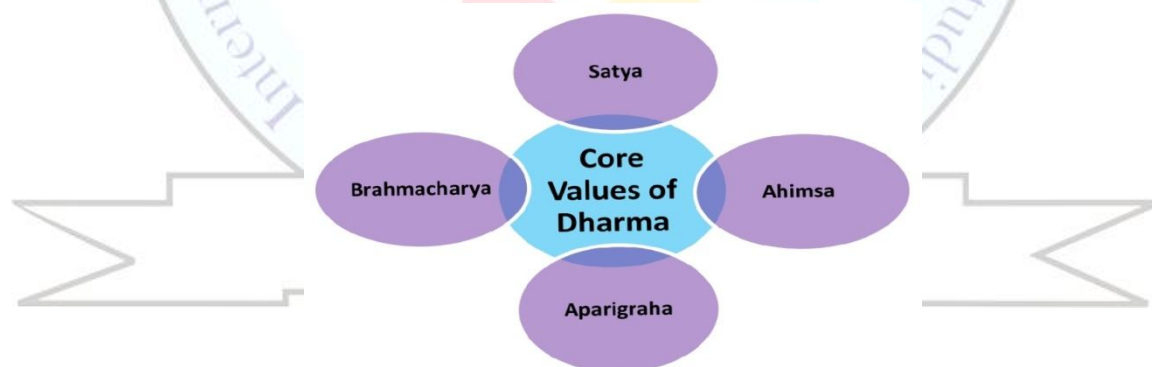
With the rapid advent of digital technologies, governance models worldwide are developing toward more inclusive forms of democracy often termed “digital democracy”. This shift emphasizes citizen engagement, transparency and accountability, offering new opportunities to improve governance. However, the digital age is also fraught with ethical challenges ranging from digital inequality and misinformation to privacy breaches and cyberbullying. In this context, the intersection of Dharma with digital democracy opens up a unique lens through which to view and address these challenges.

This study examines how the timeless values embodied in Dharma can guide the ethical use of digital technologies in participatory governance. It also analyses how Dharmic principles can be applied to contemporary governance models, especially in mitigating issues like the digital divide, safeguarding privacy and promoting responsible digital behavior. By integrating these principles with digital governance, this study aims to foster a more ethical, inclusive and democratic society.

Theoretical Framework: The Concept of Dharma:

Dharma is the very foundation of Indian philosophy. It originates from the Sanskrit root "dhr," meaning to uphold, sustain or support. It may be defined as “duty”, “righteousness” or “cosmic order”. It is a multifaceted principle that guides individual behavior, social interactions and the overall functioning of society. It is deeply intertwined with the Indian cultural and religious traditions, shaping the values and beliefs of its people.

At its core, Dharma is about fulfilling one's duties and responsibilities according to their station in life. It is a principle that promotes harmony, balance and justice in society and it is often understood as a cosmic law that governs the universe ensuring that everything operates according to its natural order.



1. **Satya** (Truthfulness and honesty) is considered a fundamental virtue in Indian philosophy and it is essential for maintaining trust and integrity in relationships.
2. **Ahimsa** (Non-violence) is the principle of non-harm and it is central to Indian ethics. It extends to all living beings and promotes compassion and empathy.
3. **Aparigraha** (Non-possessiveness) is the technique of detachment from material possessions. It underlines the value of leading a simple and contented life, free from greed and desire.

4. **Brahmacharya** (Self-control and celibacy) is the method of self-discipline and moderation. It encourages the mastery of the senses and the pursuit of spiritual knowledge.

Understanding Digital Democracy:

Digital democracy often referred to as e-democracy or internet democracy, is a form of governance that leverages digital technologies to enhance citizen participation, transparency and accountability. The essential characteristics of digital democracy include:

- **Increased citizen participation:** Digital democracy provide opportunities for citizens to engage in political processes such as voting, commenting on policy proposals and participating in online forums and discussions.
- **Enhanced transparency:** It can improve transparency by providing access to government information, decision-making processes and public records.
- **Improved accountability:** It can hold governments and public officials accountable by enabling citizens to monitor their actions and report any wrongdoing.
- **Decentralized decision-making:** It can empower citizens to participate in decision-making processes at various levels from local to national.
- **Cross-border collaboration:** It promotes global citizenship and international cooperation by allowing citizens from many countries to collaborate and exchange ideas.

Major Challenges of Digital Democracy:

Despite its potential benefits, digital democracy faces several challenges:

1. **Digital Inequality:** Access to digital technologies is not evenly distributed leading to a digital divide. This can result in marginalized groups being excluded from political participation and decision-making processes.
2. **Fake News and Disinformation:** The dissemination of incorrect or misleading information online can undermine trust in democratic institutions and manipulate public opinion.
3. **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment:** The anonymity and accessibility of the internet can facilitate cyberbullying and online harassment which can deter citizens from participating in online discussions and debates.
4. **Privacy Concerns:** The collection and use of personal data by governments and private actors raise concerns about privacy and surveillance.
5. **Security Threats:** Digital infrastructure is vulnerable to cyberattacks, which can disrupt democratic processes and undermine trust in digital governance.
6. **Lack of Digital Literacy:** Many citizens may lack the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively participate in digital democracy.

Research Questions:

1. Is Dharma relevant in guiding ethical behavior in digital spaces?

2. Is there a Dharmic approach to overcoming challenges like digital inequality and misinformation?
3. Is Dharma a viable framework for promoting participatory governance in the digital era?

Review of Literature:

Kaundinya (2024) explores the connection between the Bhagavad Gita's principles and the Indian Constitution. He emphasizes how ancient values like Nishkama Karma and Sthitaprajna can guide governance structures, proposing a harmonious relationship between spiritual principles and modern legal frameworks.

Bi (2024) examines how digital innovations can improve democratic participation and transparency. The paper emphasizes innovations such as digital voting and online citizen platforms that enhance voter access and civic engagement. However, it also covers issues like security risks and misinformation. The study advocates for robust security and inclusive access strategies to fully realize the positive aspects of digital democracy.

Sondhi (2023) investigates the role of Dharma in shaping legal and ethical systems in India. The paper emphasizes that Dharma serves as both a legal and moral framework, rooted in Indian cultural traditions. Sondhi argues that legal systems disconnected from societal and cultural sensitivities lack legitimacy and cannot foster genuine moral and legal obligations.

Sinha (2022) asserts that Dharma, particularly Ahimsa (non-violence) has shaped India's democracy. He argues that these ancient values continue to influence India's democratic framework, supporting the country's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and social harmony.

Tiwari (2022) challenges the view that democracy originated in Greece, arguing that India's ancient texts like the Rigveda and Mahabharata reflect democratic ideals. He traces the roots of collective decision-making in Indian society, linking these principles to India's contemporary governance practices.

Singh (2020) explores how ancient Indian political philosophers like Manu and Kautilya integrated Dharma into governance. The study emphasizes Rajdharma, which guided rulers toward just governance and ethical conduct, showcasing the role of Dharma as a foundational principle in Indian political thought. Souza (2019) examines the contradiction between Dharma and Adharma in Indian democracy. Building on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's concerns about post-independence contradictions, Souza critiques the gap between the ideals upheld by the Supreme Court and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. He highlights the tension between philosophical justice and the realities of social inequality.

Helbing and Klauser (2019) evaluate the dual aspects of digital democracy, noting both its potential to increase transparency and its challenges like misinformation and privacy erosion. They argue that digital democracy can enhance societal well-being if aligned with ethical frameworks like

Dharma.

Choi (2016) defines digital citizenship as a multidimensional concept shaped by ethics, media literacy, participation, and critical resistance. The study emphasizes the complexity of digital citizenship, noting its deep connections to offline civic life. Choi argues for the promotion of socially responsible citizenship in the digital era, where digital platforms increasingly mediate public engagement.

Sarda, M. (2010). Concept of Dharma, Justice, and Law: A Study Sarda (2010) explores how Dharma forms the ethical foundation of India's legal system. He argues that the breakdown of Dharma leads to governance failures and oppression. The study stresses the importance of ethical oversight in law enforcement to ensure justice and fairness in governance.

Research Gaps:

- Limited research on the application of **Dharma** to contemporary digital challenges.
- Lack of empirical studies examining **Dharma** in digital contexts.
- Insufficient focus on the role of **Dharma** in fostering participatory governance.
- Lack of research on the impact of digital technologies on **Dharma**.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To identify key principles of Dharma that can guide ethical digital citizenship.
2. To analyze how Dharmic values can address modern digital challenges like misinformation, cyberbullying and digital inequality.
3. To examine the potential of Dharma to foster participatory governance and promote democratic values in the digital age.
4. To provide suggestions for integrating the principles of Dharma into digital governance policies and practices.

Methodology:

This paper relied on qualitative research approach to examine the intersection of Dharma and digital democracy. The qualitative approach was suited to this study as it allowed for a deep and nuanced knowledge of the complicated interplay of philosophical notions and contemporary social issues.

Data Collection Methods:

- **Literature Review:** A thorough literature review has been carried out to evaluate the existing research on Dharma, digital democracy, ethical citizenship and the challenges of the digital age. This involved examining academic articles, books and other relevant scholarly sources.
- **Content Analysis:** Content analysis has been utilized to analyze digital content such as social media posts, online forums and news articles in order to identify emerging trends and themes related to digital democracy and ethical citizenship.

Data Analysis Techniques:

- **Thematic Analysis:** Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyze recurring themes and patterns in the information gathered from literature review and content analysis. This involved coding the data, identifying themes and interpreting their significance.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Comparative analysis was used to compare and contrast different perspectives on Dharma and its relevance to digital democracy. This involved examining the views of various scholars, practitioners and stakeholders.

Results and Discussion:

Intersection of Dharma and Digital Democracy:

The ethical principles of Dharma offer a profound way to address the challenges of digital democracy. By integrating its core values into digital governance, we can create a framework for more ethical, inclusive and accountable decision-making.

- **Addressing Digital Inequality:**

Dharma, with its emphasis on inclusivity and non-discrimination can guide efforts to bridge the digital divide. It promotes empowerment and helps overcome barriers to digital participation by advocating for digital literacy programs and supporting marginalized communities. For example, initiatives that provide digital training to rural communities and women can assist them access internet resources and participate more fully in the digital economy.

- **Satya and the Fight Against Fake News:**

Dharma values **satya** (truthfulness) and encourages individuals to seek out reliable sources of information and verify the accuracy of online content. **It** can help individuals identify biased or misleading information by promoting critical thinking and discernment. For instance, educational campaigns that teach people how to evaluate online sources and identify fake news can contribute to combating the spread of misinformation.

- **Ahimsa and Addressing Cyberbullying:**

Dharma emphasizes **ahimsa** (non-violence) and compassion. We can build a more courteous and inclusive online environment by promoting empathy and understanding. Additionally, **it** provides a framework for ethical decision-making. By applying **its** principles to online interactions, individuals can avoid harmful behaviors such as cyberbullying and hate speech. Initiatives that promote online civility and bystander intervention can help to create safer online spaces.

- **Aparigraha and Digital Privacy:**

Dharma respects individual autonomy and privacy. We can safeguard personal information and prevent its misuse by advocating for strong privacy laws and protecting individual data. Furthermore, **it** emphasizes responsible citizenship. By encouraging individuals to be mindful of their online behavior and to use digital technologies ethically, we can protect the privacy and security of others.

Initiatives that promote digital privacy education and awareness can help users make educated decisions about their internet activities and protect their personal information.

- **Brahmacharya and Responsible Digital Citizenship:**

The principle of **brahmacharya** (self-control) encourages individuals to practice restraint and mindfulness in their activities on the internet. It is a vital concept in the age of technology, where constant connectivity and digital consumption may give rise to overindulgence, misinformation and a loss of focus on ethical conduct. To promote responsible digital citizenship, governments and organizations should launch digital wellness initiatives that encourage citizens to exercise self-control when using the internet.

Dharma and Participatory Governance:

Dharma can have an important role in promoting participatory governance by:

- **Encouraging Civic Engagement:** Dharma stresses fulfilling one's duties and responsibilities as a citizen. Promoting civic duty can motivate persons to take a proactive role in political processes and contribute to the common good. For instance, the Indian government's initiatives to promote citizen participation such as the Digital India initiative and the Right to Information Act align with the **Dharma** principle of civic duty.
- **Promoting Transparency and Accountability:** Dharma values satya (truthfulness) and transparency. By promoting transparency in government, **Dharma** can empower citizens to hold public officials accountable and ensure they behave in the best interests of the people. The Indian government's emphasis on transparency and accountability in governance as seen in programs like the National e-Governance Plan which demonstrates the influence of Dharma ideals.
- **Fostering Social Cohesion:** Dharma emphasizes ahimsa (non-violence) and compassion. By promoting social cohesion and understanding, **it** can build a more inclusive and participatory society. Initiatives like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which intends to offer employment opportunities to rural households is consistent with the **Dharma** principle of social equity and inclusion.
- **Empowering Marginalized Communities:** **Dharma** promotes the development of marginalized communities. By advocating for digital inclusion and supporting marginalized groups, it can assure that everyone has an equal chance to get involved in democratic processes. Initiatives like the Digital India for Women program aim to empower women through digital technologies reflecting the Dharma principle of equality.

By applying **these** principles to digital governance, we can create a more participatory, inclusive and just society.

Dharma and Digital Governance: Case Studies:

These case studies illustrate the application of **Dharma** principles in digital governance in

India.

Case 1: Digital India Initiative: A Model for Ethical Digital Citizenship

The Indian government's Digital India initiative sought to convert India into a digitally empowered society. The initiative focused on promoting digital literacy, infrastructure development and e-governance by emphasizing ethical digital citizenship and the core values of **Dharma**.

- **Application of Dharma Principles:** The Digital India program incorporated **Dharma** principles by promoting transparency, accountability and inclusivity in digital governance. It emphasized the importance of using digital technologies for the betterment of society and avoiding harmful practices like cyberbullying and misinformation.
- **Effectiveness:** The Digital India program has been successful in promoting digital literacy and infrastructure development. However, challenges such as digital inequality and cyberbullying persist. The initiative's focus on ethical digital citizenship has helped to alleviate some of these difficulties but more work is needed to make sure that digital technologies are used responsibly and fairly.

Source: <https://www.meity.gov.in>

Case 2: Right to Information Act: A Pillar of Transparent Governance

The Right to Information Act (RTI) in India is a landmark legislation that provides citizens with the right to access information from public authorities. It has played a crucial role in promoting transparency, accountability and good governance by empowering citizens to demand information and hold public officials accountable.

- **Application of Dharma Principles:** The RTI is aligned with the **Dharma** principle of **satya** (truthfulness). By providing citizens with access to information, the RTI promotes transparency and accountability which are necessary for ethical governance.
- **Effectiveness:** The RTI has been highly effective in promoting transparency and accountability in India. It has empowered citizens to expose corruption, hold public officials accountable and improve governance. However, challenges such as implementation gaps and resistance from some government agencies persist.

Source: <https://rti.gov.in>

Case 3: E-Governance and Corruption Reduction

The Indian government has launched a variety of e-governance measures to curb corruption and improve efficiency in public services. These initiatives often incorporate transparency mechanisms, online grievance redressal systems and digital payments to minimize opportunities for corruption.

- **Application of Dharma Principles:** E-governance initiatives align with the Dharma principles of **satya** and **aparigraha**. By promoting transparency and reducing opportunities for corruption,

these initiatives contribute to a more ethical and just governance system.

- **Effectiveness:** E-governance initiatives have shown some success in reducing corruption and improving efficiency in public services. However, challenges such as digital literacy and infrastructure gaps persist. Continued efforts are needed to ensure the effective implementation and sustainability of e-governance initiatives.

Source: <https://pib.gov.in>

Case 4: Citizen Engagement Platforms: A Catalyst for Social Accountability

Citizen engagement platforms like online forums and social media groups have come up as important tools for citizen participation and accountability. These platforms allow citizens to voice their concerns, raise awareness about issues and hold public officials accountable.

- **Application of Dharma Principles:** Citizen engagement platforms align with the Dharma principles of satya and aparigraha. By promoting transparency and accountability, these platforms empower citizens to participate in governance and ensure that public authorities operate ethically.
- **Effectiveness:** Citizen engagement platforms have played a significant role in holding governments accountable and promoting social justice. However, challenges such as misinformation and online harassment persist. It is critical to guarantee that these platforms are utilized appropriately and ethically.

Source: <https://www.meity.gov.in>

Case 5: Digital Financial Inclusion and Economic Empowerment

The Indian government has initiated Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) to promote digital financial inclusion. This initiative aims to provide financial services to the unbanked and underbanked population by empowering them to participate in the economy.

- **Application of Dharma Principles:** Digital financial inclusion aligns with the Dharma principle of aparigraha. These initiatives help to reduce economic inequality and promote social justice by providing financial services to the marginalized sections of society.
- **Effectiveness:** Digital financial inclusion initiatives have shown some success in empowering the unbanked and underbanked population. However, challenges such as digital literacy and infrastructure gaps persist. Continued efforts are required to guarantee that these initiatives reach the most vulnerable sections of society.

Source: <https://pmjdy.gov.in>

Conclusion:

In the digital age, the intersection of **Dharma** and democracy offers a compelling framework for ethical governance. By integrating ancient Indian philosophical principles with modern technological advancements, India can lead the way in building a more inclusive, transparent and

accountable form of digital democracy.

Suggestions:

- Schools and universities should incorporate Dharma principles in their digital literacy and ethics curricula to foster responsible and ethical digital behavior.
- Governments and organizations should adopt Dharma based ethical guidelines for digital governance to providing a framework for ethical decision-making.
- Efforts must be made to improve digital literacy, particularly among marginalized communities to bridge the digital divide.
- Governments and organizations should enhance ethical oversight mechanisms through independent audits, ethical reviews and transparency measures to ensure responsible use of digital technologies.
- International cooperation should be prioritized to tackle the global concerns of the digital age.

Recommendations for Future Research and Policy Directions:

- Comparative studies should investigate how Dharma principles apply in different cultural contexts and how they can integrate with other ethical frameworks.
- Policymakers should consider incorporating Dharma principles into digital governance policies to encourage ethical and responsible technology use.
- Collaborative research that merges insights from philosophy, political science, sociology and technology can deepen understanding of the connection between Dharma and digital democracy.

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