



Governance Transformation in India under Narendra Modi (2014–2025): A Critical Review of Centralization, Digitalization, and Policy Delivery

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Abstract

The decade between 2014 and 2025 represents one of the most consequential periods in the evolution of India's governance architecture. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian state has pursued an ambitious agenda of administrative reform, digital service delivery, and economic restructuring, while simultaneously undertaking politically consequential decisions such as the abrogation of Article 370, the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper undertakes a conceptual and critical review of the existing scholarship on what is widely termed the "Modi model" of governance, examining three interlinked dimensions: administrative centralization and its implications for federalism; digital governance and its claimed gains in administrative efficiency; and the relationship between nationalism, political communication, and democratic institutional behaviour. Drawing on biographical, political-science, and public-policy literature, the paper identifies a significant gap: existing accounts tend either toward celebratory documentation of policy achievements or toward normative critique of democratic backsliding, with comparatively little integrated, multi-disciplinary assessment of institutional outcomes. The paper argues that any rigorous evaluation of this governance period must hold the efficiency claims of schemes such as Digital India, Jan Dhan Yojana, and PRAGATI in tension with documented concerns regarding federal balance, institutional autonomy, and the conduct of dissent. The paper concludes by outlining a research agenda—combining institutional analysis with primary survey evidence across diverse Indian states—capable of producing an empirically grounded assessment of governance transformation under Modi.

Keywords: Governance, Narendra Modi, Digital India, Political Centralization, Federalism, Nationalism, Public Policy, India.

1. Introduction

Governance reform in democracies is rarely a neutral, technical exercise; it is invariably entangled with questions of political power, institutional accountability, and ideological vision. The period from 2014 to 2025 in India offers a particularly instructive case for examining this entanglement. Narendra Modi's tenure as Prime Minister has been described by both supporters and critics as transformational, though the two camps differ sharply on the normative valence of that transformation. Proponents emphasise administrative efficiency, digital inclusion, and decisive leadership; critics point to the erosion of institutional checks, the weakening of cooperative federalism, and the majoritarian undertones of key policy decisions (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Modi's political career—from his early role as a full-time worker for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), through his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat (2001–2014), to his decisive national mandates in 2014, 2019, and the coalition-dependent victory of 2024—has been extensively documented in biographical and journalistic literature (Mukhopadhyay, 2013; Marino, 2014; Price, 2015). However, biographical and campaign-focused accounts, while valuable for understanding leadership style and political communication, are not designed to answer the institutional question that animates this paper: has governance in India been structurally transformed, and if so, in what direction?

This paper treats "governance transformation" as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing (a) the functioning of democratic institutions and federal relations, (b) citizen-facing administrative and digital service delivery, and (c) the role of nationalist political communication in shaping institutional behaviour and public consent. Major initiatives of the period—Jan Dhan Yojana, Digital India, Make in India, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Ujjwala Yojana, the Goods and Services Tax (GST), demonetisation, the abrogation of Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the three farm laws and their eventual repeal, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Atmanirbhar Bharat programme—each carry implications for one or more of these dimensions, and each has generated its own distinct strand of scholarly and public debate.

The objective of this paper is not to adjudicate the political merits of the Modi government but to map, organise, and critically interrogate the existing literature on these governance dimensions, identify where systematic empirical evaluation is lacking, and propose a methodological framework through which such an evaluation could be conducted.

2. Review of Literature

The literature on Narendra Modi's leadership and governance can be broadly classified into four overlapping strands: biographical and campaign-history accounts; normative and ideological critiques; policy- and administration-focused analyses; and comparative or sector-specific assessments.

2.1 Biographical and Campaign-History Accounts

A substantial body of writing traces Modi's personal and political trajectory. Mukhopadhyay's (2013) political biography situates Modi's rise within the disciplined organisational machinery of the BJP and the RSS, emphasising the role of strategic communication in constructing his public image. Marino (2014) and Price (2015) similarly focus on the 2014 election campaign, with Price offering a close account of how digital media and modern campaign technology were deployed to build a mass political following. These works are valuable for understanding the communicative and organisational antecedents of governance

style, but they are oriented toward electoral strategy rather than the subsequent institutional consequences of governance once in office.

2.2 Normative and Ideological Critiques

A second strand engages directly with the ideological character of Modi's leadership. Visvanathan (2013) examines the symbolic reconstruction of Modi's political identity following the 2002 Gujarat riots, arguing that the rebranding of Gujarat as a model of development served as the foundation for Modi's subsequent national appeal. Hall (2017) extends this analysis to the international sphere, arguing that Modi's foreign policy draws on a civilizational conception of India shaped by Hindu nationalist thought, with cultural heritage and spiritual diplomacy functioning as instruments of normative power. Jaffrelot's (2021) comprehensive academic study, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, offers perhaps the most systematic critical treatment, tracing the trajectory from Hindutva populism in Gujarat to what Jaffrelot characterises as a national-populist consolidation of power, with implications for the character of Indian democracy itself. This strand of literature is essential for understanding the ideological substrate of governance decisions, but its emphasis on discourse and identity politics means that administrative and institutional outcomes are addressed only indirectly.

2.3 Policy and Administrative Analyses

A third, comparatively thinner strand addresses governance and administration more directly. Panda (2016) offers a conceptual account of Modi's administrative approach as a hybrid model combining managerial efficiency, centralised decision-making, and selective federal engagement, highlighting mechanisms such as PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation) as instruments of top-down accountability and digitally enabled state responsiveness. Viswakarma and Kumar's analysis of Modi's public communication complements this by showing how rhetorical and digital media strategies function not merely as campaign tools but as ongoing instruments of governance and public persuasion. Edited and sector-focused volumes—such as the collection on two decades of Modi's governance edited by Murty, Panagariya, and Jaishankar, and Alphons's sector-wise empirical survey of policy transformation—extend this administrative focus into specific domains such as health, education, and infrastructure, though such volumes are frequently produced with an explicitly appreciative orientation toward the government's record.

2.4 Comparative, Economic, and Sector-Specific Assessments

A fourth strand evaluates specific policy domains, often critically. Sinha and Sinha's economic critique—authored by a former Union Finance Minister—interrogates the consequences of demonetisation and GST implementation for the Indian economy, offering a counterpoint to more celebratory accounts of these reforms. Verma's analysis of Modi's second term situates the COVID-19 response and the abrogation of Article 370 within a broader narrative of policy continuity and economic reform. Jaffrelot's earlier study of Gujarat under Modi treats the state's governance record as a policy laboratory whose techniques were subsequently scaled to the national level, offering a useful within-case comparative perspective on the diffusion of governance style from state to centre.

2.5 Synthesis

Taken together, this literature establishes Modi's governance as simultaneously a project of administrative modernisation and a project of ideological and communicative consolidation. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is literature that integrates these dimensions—that asks, in a single analytical frame, whether efficiency gains in digital and administrative delivery have been accompanied, offset, or enabled by changes in federal balance, institutional autonomy, and the space available for democratic dissent.

3. Research Gap

Three specific gaps emerge from this review. First, while individual flagship schemes such as Digital India, Jan Dhan Yojana, Swachh Bharat, and Make in India have received considerable public and policy attention, there is a lack of independent academic research assessing their long-term institutional and administrative impact, as distinct from output-level claims of coverage or usage. Second, existing literature offers limited systematic comparison between the Modi government's governance philosophy and that of preceding governments, particularly with respect to federal-state dynamics and the locus of policy execution. Third, the institutional and citizen-experience effects of politically consequential events—the abrogation of Article 370, the CAA protests, the management of COVID-19, and the India–Pakistan conflict of 2025—remain insufficiently explored through empirical, multi-state survey research, as opposed to discursive or doctrinal analysis alone. This paper, and the broader doctoral research programme from which it is drawn, seeks to address this gap by combining a critical literature synthesis with a planned empirical survey across five Indian states selected for their socio-political diversity: Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Delhi NCR, Kerala, and Rajasthan.

4. Conceptual Framework and Objectives

Building on the gaps identified above, this paper—and the wider research programme it introduces—is organised around the following objectives: (1) to examine the key policy initiatives introduced between 2014 and 2025; (2) to assess the impact of these initiatives on India's governance structures and institutions; (3) to evaluate the contribution of digital governance to administrative efficiency; (4) to analyse the influence of nationalism and centralisation on democratic processes; (5) to assess the effectiveness of governance in public welfare provision and crisis management; and (6) to compare the Modi governance model with preceding governments in India.

Two analytical propositions, framed for empirical testing in the subsequent research phase, organise this inquiry. The first holds that Modi-era policies have produced a measurable transformation in governance structures, particularly through digitally mediated service delivery, and that this transformation is associated with improvements in administrative efficiency and public service access. The second holds that political centralisation and nationalist political communication have had a significant, independent influence on the behaviour of democratic institutions and on the conduct of federal relations, distinct from and not reducible to any efficiency gains achieved through digitalisation. These propositions are deliberately framed so that efficiency and centralisation are treated as analytically separable outcomes, since one of the central contentions in the literature is whether the two are mutually reinforcing or fundamentally in tension (Jaffrelot, 2021; Panda, 2016).

5. Discussion

5.1 Centralisation and Federal Relations

A recurring theme across the critical literature is the tension between administrative efficiency and federal balance. Mechanisms such as PRAGATI centralise monitoring and accountability at the level of the Prime Minister's Office, which proponents present as a solution to implementation bottlenecks in a historically fragmented bureaucracy (Panda, 2016). Critics, however, read the same mechanisms as evidence of a broader pattern of centralisation that diminishes the autonomy of state governments and weakens cooperative federalism, particularly in states governed by opposition parties. Constitutionally significant decisions taken during this period—most notably the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir—are similarly read in divergent ways: as the resolution of an anomalous constitutional arrangement by supporters, and as a unilateral assertion of central authority over a federal unit by critics. The inclusion of states with markedly different governance and political contexts—Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Delhi NCR, Kerala, and Rajasthan—in the planned empirical phase of this research is intended precisely to surface this variation in how centralisation is experienced across India's diverse federal landscape.

5.2 Digital Governance and Administrative Efficiency

Digital India and related initiatives are frequently cited as the signature administrative achievement of this period, with claims of improved service delivery, reduced leakage in welfare transfers through Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) linkages, and expanded financial inclusion. Sector-specific volumes such as Alphons's empirical survey present this record favourably across multiple policy domains. However, the literature reviewed here also cautions against treating digital coverage statistics as a proxy for governance quality. Improved delivery infrastructure does not, by itself, demonstrate improved institutional accountability, transparency, or responsiveness to citizen grievance—dimensions that require direct measurement through citizen-facing survey instruments rather than administrative output data alone. This is precisely the gap the planned mixed-methods survey, using a stratified sample exceeding the Cochran-derived minimum of 384 respondents across the five selected states, is designed to address.

5.3 Nationalism, Communication, and Democratic Institutions

The third dimension concerns the relationship between nationalist political communication and the functioning of democratic institutions. Visvanathan (2013) and Hall (2017) both identify a deliberate and sophisticated use of symbolic and civilizational narratives in constructing political legitimacy, while Viswakarma and Kumar's analysis of public addresses shows how these narratives are operationalised through both traditional and digital media. Episodes such as the protests surrounding the Citizenship Amendment Act, the passage and eventual repeal of the three farm laws, and the management of dissent during the COVID-19 pandemic provide concrete test cases for examining whether heightened nationalist communication has been accompanied by a narrowing of space for institutional checks and organised dissent, as Jaffrelot (2021) contends, or whether it reflects a legitimate and electorally validated reassertion of majoritarian preference, as more sympathetic accounts suggest. The research programme treats this as an empirical question to be tested through citizen surveys and document analysis rather than resolved a priori.

6. Methodological Note for the Empirical Phase

This paper is conceptual in nature and precedes the empirical data-collection phase of the associated doctoral research. The planned methodology adopts a descriptive and analytical research design employing a mixed-methods approach. Primary data will be collected through structured questionnaires and expert interview schedules administered across the five selected states, supplemented by secondary data drawn from official documents, peer-reviewed journals, and media reports. Purposive sampling will be used for expert interviews, while stratified random sampling will ensure diversity of age (18–30, 31–45, and 46–60 years), gender, occupation, and urban/rural location for the general survey. Applying the Cochran formula for sample size estimation yields a minimum requirement of 384 respondents; to accommodate non-response and incomplete data, the target sample will be increased to between 400 and 450 participants. Quantitative data will be analysed using SPSS or Excel, while qualitative material will be subjected to structured content analysis. This methodological design is intended to operationalise the conceptual framework developed in Sections 4 and 5, allowing the propositions outlined there to be tested against empirical evidence rather than resolved through literature synthesis alone.

7. Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its attempt to move beyond the binary of celebratory and critical accounts that currently characterises much public and scholarly discussion of governance under Modi. By treating administrative efficiency and political centralisation as analytically distinct—and empirically testable—dimensions, the research is positioned to generate evidence-based insight relevant to scholars of comparative governance, civil society organisations, and policymakers engaged in institutional design. It further contributes to the broader comparative literature on populist and personalised governance models by situating the Indian case alongside, rather than as either a uniquely successful or uniquely troubling instance of, global trends in administrative digitalisation and centralised executive authority.

8. Conclusion

The decade between 2014 and 2025 has reshaped multiple dimensions of Indian governance, from the digital infrastructure of welfare delivery to the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir and the conduct of federal relations. Existing scholarship offers rich but fragmented insight into this transformation: biographical accounts illuminate leadership style, ideological critiques interrogate the civilizational and nationalist underpinnings of governance discourse, and administrative analyses document specific policy mechanisms, yet no substantial body of work integrates these strands into a single, empirically grounded evaluation of institutional outcomes. This paper has argued that such an integration is both necessary and feasible, and has outlined a conceptual framework and mixed-methods design through which it can be pursued. The planned multi-state survey research, grounded in this conceptual synthesis, is intended to move the debate over governance transformation under Modi from competing normative assertions toward evidence capable of informing future scholarship and policy.

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