

Digital Governance and Rajadharma: Bridging Connectivity Gaps in Remote Tribal Regions of Meghalaya

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Abstract:

The transformation of governance through digital technologies has emerged as a crucial pathway for strengthening democratic engagement, enhancing service delivery, and improving transparency in public administration. India's Digital India Mission seeks to integrate citizens with state systems through technology-enabled access to government services and information.

However, for tribal-dominated and geographically challenging regions like Meghalaya, digital governance presents both transformative potential and significant ethical dilemmas. Infrastructure deficits, connectivity gaps, and limited digital literacy remain major obstacles that restrict equitable access to technology-driven governance. When the benefits of digital administration fail to reach the most remote and marginalised sections of society, issues of justice, inclusion, and rights become central. This is where the ethical framework of Rajadharma becomes a vital guiding principle.

Rajadharma, an ancient Indian notion rooted in duty-based ethics, emphasises that rulers hold a moral responsibility to ensure the welfare of all subjects, especially the vulnerable. Governance is not merely a political function but a sacred obligation grounded in justice, fairness, and accountability to the people. Modern democratic governance draws meaningful ethical support from this tradition, particularly in ensuring that technological progress does not marginalise the communities that depend on the state for protection and development. In Meghalaya, where traditional governance systems such as the Dorbar Shnong and Nokma institutions co-exist with constitutional structures under the Sixth Schedule, digital governance must remain sensitive to cultural identity and community-based administration.

Article Publication

Published Online -November 2025

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Remote tribal district of Meghalaya such as South Garo Hills, Eastern West Khasi Hills, and parts of West Jaintia Hills, experience persistent communication blackouts, weak digital infrastructure, and difficulties connecting with government systems. Digital services for welfare distribution, education, healthcare, grievance redressal, and emergency response still struggle to reach these areas effectively. If political modernisation through technology advances without guaranteeing equal access to democratic participation, the principles of Rajadharma risk being compromised.

This paper examines how Rajadharma can serve as a moral foundation for addressing connectivity gaps and strengthening ethical digital governance in Meghalaya. The study discusses the existing digital ecosystem, infrastructural disparities, social inclusion challenges, and traditional governance structures that influence technology implementation in the state. It argues that bridging the digital divide in Meghalaya is not solely a technical necessity but a constitutional and ethical responsibility aligned with Rajadharma. Through a nuanced analysis of governance outcomes and citizen experiences, the paper proposes a Rajadharma-oriented approach for creating just, inclusive, and culturally appropriate digital governance for Meghalaya's remote tribal regions.

Objective

The paper is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To examine the status of digital governance infrastructure and service delivery in remote tribal areas of Meghalaya.
2. To analyse the impact of connectivity gaps and digital exclusion on citizens' access to public services and democratic participation.
3. To interpret the ethical obligations of the state using Rajadharma as a normative framework for digital governance.
4. To evaluate the role of traditional tribal governance institutions in shaping inclusive, culturally grounded digital governance in Meghalaya.

Rajadharma: An Ethical Foundation for Inclusive Governance

Rajadharma embodies the ancient Indian ideal that governance must be grounded in the moral obligation to protect public welfare (Bhargava, 2019). It serves as a philosophical reminder that ruling power is not meant for self-preservation but for ensuring the well-being of the entire community. The core principles emphasised within Rajadharma include Nyaya, which requires rulers to administer justice impartially and ensure that no citizen is denied their rightful access to state support; Lok-Sangrah, which obligates the state to maintain social harmony and promote collective welfare so that vulnerable communities are not abandoned; and Satya, which reflects the ethical necessity for transparency, truthfulness, and

accountability in public administration. When digital governance becomes a dominant tool for administering welfare, Rajadharna insists that technology must enhance these values rather than dilute them.

Innovation must be used to remove barriers that historically disadvantaged groups face and provide them with improved access to services, rights, and opportunities. If digital systems widen the socio-economic gap between urban and remote communities, or if technological errors create new forms of injustice such as denial of welfare, Rajadharna views this as a moral failure of governance. The ethical aim of technological governance should therefore be to humanise public administration by ensuring that every citizen, irrespective of geography, literacy level, or social identity, experiences justice, dignity, and empowerment in the digital age.

Rajadharna also emphasises that governance must always prioritise the most vulnerable sections of society. In a modern democratic context such as Meghalaya, this means recognising that technological progress must not occur at the expense of those living in the state's most remote and poorly connected regions. When public administration transitions to digital service delivery, people without stable network access or digital literacy risk becoming invisible to the state. Rajadharna rejects any form of exclusion that prevents citizens from accessing their basic rights, because the ruler's duty is to ensure that every person receives equal attention regardless of their geographic or economic circumstance. This principle becomes crucial in tribal dominated areas where livelihoods, education, and public services still rely heavily on physical access and where a sudden shift to digital platforms can unintentionally create social hardship. Rajadharna therefore demands that digital reforms must anticipate and remove barriers faced by marginalised groups rather than assuming that everyone can adapt independently to new technological systems. At the same time, Rajadharna requires that state authority remain sensitive to cultural contexts, especially in regions like Meghalaya where identity and self-governance are deeply embedded within indigenous traditions. Digital governance policies that are not aligned with tribal cultural structures, linguistic preferences, or customary laws risk generating distrust and resistance from local communities. Traditional governance systems such as Dorbar Shnong have long acted as moral guardians of social order, and Rajadharna encourages collaboration between such institutions and state administration in order to preserve legitimacy and cohesion. When governance incorporates digital technology without eroding cultural autonomy, it fulfils the ethical obligation of protecting both community welfare and identity. Rajadharna thus promotes a holistic approach to governance where innovation is balanced with fairness, transparency is accompanied by compassion, and technological progress enhances rather than disrupts community harmony.

Meghalaya's Governance Landscape and the Sixth Schedule Context

Meghalaya's governance framework operates within a dual administrative structure where modern constitutional institutions coexist with deeply rooted customary governance systems. Under the Sixth

Schedule of the Indian Constitution, major tribal areas of Meghalaya are administered through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), which hold powers over matters such as land regulation, cultural preservation, and local dispute resolution (Nongbri, 2022). Alongside these statutory bodies, traditional authorities such as the Daloi among the Jaintias, the Syiem under Khasi kingdoms, and the Nokmas in Garo Hills continue to exercise control over land and community governance based on customary norms. These authorities enjoy strong legitimacy among the tribal population, particularly in remote areas where the state bureaucracy maintains a weaker grassroots presence. The continuing influence of these institutions highlights that governance in Meghalaya is not only a legal process but also a cultural and community-driven one.

Digital governance initiatives that fail to integrate these customary structures risk creating institutional friction. In many villages, traditional authorities act as the first point of contact for citizens seeking access to welfare schemes or clarification on government rules. They often mediate between state systems and community realities. When technology-driven reforms are introduced without consultation or partnership with these bodies, the implementation becomes top-down and may be seen as intrusive to community autonomy. Such oversight could generate mistrust, slowing digital adoption and weakening participation in governance programmes. Rajadharmas emphasises social harmony and respect for existing power structures that safeguard people's welfare. Therefore, ethical digital governance in Meghalaya must adopt a collaborative approach where traditional institutions are not bypassed but engaged as facilitators who improve digital literacy, encourage inclusion, and secure community ownership of modern governance processes.

Moreover, the communal nature of land ownership in Meghalaya illustrates why digital administrative mapping or property documentation must recognise customary land rights. Any attempt to standardise records through digital platforms without acknowledging the distinct cultural and legal context can be interpreted as an assault on tribal identity. Rajadharmas requires that the state prioritise social unity and justice by honouring indigenous rights while introducing technology. This means that policies such as digital land registration, Aadhaar-linked benefits, or online verification systems should be designed in consultation with traditional councils, ensuring that technological modernisation strengthens rather than weakens cultural sovereignty. In this way, digital governance becomes not only a tool of efficiency but an ethical bridge connecting constitutional authority with centuries-old indigenous governance traditions.

Digital Governance in Meghalaya: Progress and Barriers

The Government of Meghalaya has begun integrating technology into governance by introducing systems such as e-service centres for essential certificates and applications,

Aadhaar-linked identity authentication, Direct Benefit Transfer for welfare disbursement, online grievance redressal, telemedicine facilities in areas lacking hospital access, and digital platforms for

education. These initiatives reflect an administrative commitment to aligning with India's broader Digital India Mission. Although these institutional reforms mark progress, the outcomes remain highly uneven across the region due to persistent infrastructural challenges. Connectivity in Meghalaya is heavily influenced by geographical terrain where mountainous landscapes and remote settlements make installing communication infrastructure difficult and economically less rewarding. As a result, digital public services work efficiently in district headquarters like Shillong, Tura, and Jowai but weaken drastically in peripheral subdivisions and border areas. The state continues to experience significant digital inequalities that prevent a large portion of its tribal citizens from experiencing the intended benefits of digital governance. This uneven development reflects not only technological scarcity but deeper political and socio-economic patterns where historically marginalised communities remain last in line for infrastructural improvement. The shift towards digital governance has placed technology at the centre of accessing essential welfare services, including health insurance verifications through digital health IDs, pension and old-age support transferred through DBT systems, teleconsultation platforms for remote healthcare, digital ration card verification for food security, and online learning portals during disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. When citizens lack access to stable network connectivity or devices, they become structurally excluded from rights that are legally guaranteed by the state. This denial of access transforms welfare into a conditional entitlement, which stands in direct conflict with Rajadharma's ethical foundation that governance is a duty to ensure welfare, equality, and justice for all residents irrespective of geography. Rajadharma asserts that rulers must protect the most vulnerable; therefore, digital exclusion becomes not only a technical challenge but a violation of ethical governance. The absence of connectivity can result in pensioners walking long distances for biometric authentication only to face network errors or children dropping out of digital classrooms due to lack of devices. These instances reveal an unacceptable disparity where technology, instead of empowering the poorest, reinforces social inequality.

While infrastructure forms the visible dimension of digital governance, capability barriers are equally damaging. Many citizens in remote villages lack the digital literacy necessary to operate smartphones, navigate government websites, or understand electronic documentation requirements. Elderly people often rely on younger family members or local intermediaries to complete digital tasks. Women in rural tribal communities are further disadvantaged due to traditional gender norms that limit their exposure to digital resources and formal education. Economically weaker families struggle to afford smartphones and data plans, thereby widening digital inequality even where connectivity exists. Children attending government schools in rural areas face a double burden: weak connectivity and inadequate digital skills. Rajadharma emphasises the empowerment of all people through opportunities that support their abilities and dignity. Therefore, digital governance cannot succeed merely through infrastructure investments; it must equally focus on human capacity building. Without state-supported digital education initiatives, the poorest remain spectators in technology driven democracy rather than participants.

Meghalaya is a state where indigenous knowledge, identity, and language form the core of social and political life. Digital governance systems that primarily function in English or Hindi unintentionally exclude those who communicate best in Khasi, Garo, or Pnar. When information concerning rights, welfare, and development is not available in native languages, technology reinforces cultural hierarchies. This threatens indigenous autonomy, which is constitutionally protected under the Sixth Schedule. Rajadharma insists on governance that respects cultural diversity and listens to the voice of the community. Therefore, digital governance must incorporate multilingual access, culturally rooted communication strategies, and platforms that acknowledge the authority of tribal customary institutions. Doing so prevents technology from becoming a vehicle of cultural domination and instead transforms it into a tool that strengthens indigenous identity.

Role of Traditional Governance and Rajadharma in Advancing Ethical Digital Justice in Meghalaya

The achievement of ethical and inclusive digital governance in Meghalaya relies fundamentally on the integration of traditional tribal institutions into modern administrative processes. Customary bodies such as the Dorbar Shnong in Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Nokma system in Garo Hills have long acted as central governing forces that regulate community relationships, manage land tenure, and maintain social stability. These structures enjoy a high degree of legitimacy, particularly in remote rural settlements where the presence of formal government institutions is minimal and bureaucratic processes often feel distant or disconnected from everyday life. In such contexts, citizens continue to seek the guidance of traditional leaders when navigating public services, resolving community disputes, or mobilising development initiatives. Their involvement is therefore vital in digital transformation, because technology cannot succeed without social trust and cultural acceptance. Traditional leaders can help identify legitimate beneficiaries, promote awareness about digital governance systems, and encourage participation in online services, ensuring that technology does not become alien or burdensome to ordinary citizens. Rajadharma offers a valuable ethical foundation to strengthen the partnership between traditional and modern governance. It expects all public institutions to uphold justice, inclusiveness, and welfare for every individual. While traditional institutions possess community trust, they must simultaneously adopt reforms to align with contemporary democratic values. Exclusion of women from Dorbar meetings, limited youth representation, or informal power hierarchies reflect structural inequalities that contradict Rajadharma's commitment to equity and fairness. The transformation toward digital governance creates an opportunity for these customary bodies to become more accountable and inclusive, ensuring that cultural preservation does not occur at the cost of social justice. When traditional leaders take active roles in developing local digital literacy initiatives, guiding the community in using e-services, and ensuring equitable grievance resolution through online platforms, they directly contribute to expanding democratic rights.

A Rajadharma-driven framework for digital governance in Meghalaya therefore places justice, welfare, and inclusion at the centre of technological progress. Network expansion must focus first on remote villages and underserved regions, recognising that public welfare cannot remain selective or profit-driven. Investment in human capability is as crucial as investment in fibre-optic cables or communication towers, because the true success of technology lies in its utilisation by the most marginalised. Providing services in Khasi, Garo, and Pnar languages builds cultural belonging and prevents knowledge gaps from becoming power gaps. Community-driven mechanisms such as digital social audits reduce corruption, enhance transparency, and keep public officials accountable to citizens. Similarly, reliable digital infrastructure is necessary to support emergency healthcare communication, ensure students in rural areas do not fall behind in online learning environments, and facilitate timely response during natural disasters.

Ultimately, ethical digital governance in Meghalaya must recognise that technology is not merely a tool of administrative efficiency but a moral responsibility tied to dignity and equal opportunity. A governance model rooted in Rajadharma affirms that progress has little meaning unless it uplifts those living on the margins of society. By combining the cultural legitimacy of traditional tribal institutions with the transparency and efficiency of digital systems, Meghalaya can build a governance environment where modernisation enriches rather than replaces indigenous strengths. Such a balanced approach ensures that the digital future remains inclusive, just, and culturally grounded, upholding the foundational duty of governance to protect and empower every citizen.

Conclusion

Digital governance presents a transformative opportunity for Meghalaya, particularly in strengthening transparency, accessibility, and efficiency within public administration.

However, its success depends on the ethical responsibility of the state to ensure that no citizen is deprived of their rights due to geographical isolation, socio-economic constraints, or limited digital capability. Applying Rajadharma as a governance lens reveals that digital exclusion is not merely an infrastructural challenge but a violation of moral duty, especially when essential welfare services depend on technological access. Therefore, bridging the digital divide in Meghalaya is both a constitutional necessity and a moral commitment. The analysis demonstrates that the most significant barriers occur in remote tribal districts where connectivity failures disrupt access to education, healthcare, welfare, and democratic participation. These inequities contradict Rajadharma's mandate of justice, welfare promotion, and protection of vulnerable groups. Furthermore, Meghalaya's governance landscape is shaped by traditional institutions that hold substantial social legitimacy. Excluding these customary systems from digital reforms risks public mistrust and cultural alienation. A collaborative governance approach rooted in respect for indigenous authority strengthens the effectiveness and acceptance of technological innovations.

A Rajadharma-based digital governance model requires infrastructure development that prioritises blackout zones, comprehensive digital literacy initiatives, multilingual service accessibility, and community accountability mechanisms. The state must view digital inclusion as a foundational right that safeguards dignity and equality in the digital era. By merging cultural strengths with modern technological systems, Meghalaya can uphold the core values of Rajadharma while creating a future where technological progress becomes a vehicle for empowerment rather than exclusion. Ethical digital governance can transform Meghalaya into a model for how modernisation and indigenous autonomy can co-exist harmoniously and equitably.

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