



Good Governance: A Study of Historical Practice in India

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Abstract : *The concept of " Governance is not new. It is as old as human civilization. Simply put " governance "means: the process of decision -making and the process by which decisions are implemented. Governance can be used in several contexts such as corporate governance, international governance, national governance and local governance. Good governance in ancient India was deeply embedded in a rich philosophical and ethical framework that guided the actions of rulers and citizens alike. Rooted in the concept of Dharma, which refers to righteousness, moral law, and the ethical conduct of individuals and society, governance was seen not merely as a political system but as a spiritual and moral duty. Ancient Indian texts, such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Kautilya's Arthashastra, offer valuable insights into the ideals and practices that defined governance during this era. Good governance during the British period in India was marked by a system that prioritized the interests of the colonial rulers over those of the Indian populace. The British introduced a centralized, bureaucratic system designed to maintain control, extract resources, and sustain their dominance in the subcontinent. Good governance in India is profoundly influenced by the Indian Constitution, which serves as the foundational document of the country's democratic system. Adopted in 1950, the Constitution laid down the principles and structures for governance, ensuring a balance between justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. The framers of the Constitution drew inspiration from a variety of sources, including India's ancient traditions, colonial experiences, and global democratic principles. Good governance in India is a continuous process of addressing challenges, improving systems, and ensuring that the principles of democracy, equality, justice, and rule of law are upheld. While significant strides have been made in many areas, there are still considerable hurdles to overcome, including corruption, inefficiency, social inequality, and regional disparities. The country's governance model remains a work in progress, and its success will depend on the collective efforts of the government, civil society, and the people to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure transparency, and promote inclusive development. Through sustained commitment and reform, India can move closer to realizing the full potential of good governance for all its citizens.*

Key Words: *Good, Governance, India, Justice, Public, Government.*

Introduction:

Governance and good governance have become the theme for discussion, deliberations and discourse at the local, national and international levels. Good governance, people centered governance,

responsive governance all call for a collective sense of destiny and direction for human beings. Crisis in governance witnesses all over the globe has called for the re-examination of broader tenets of governance. The concept of " Governance



is not new. It is as old as human civilization. Simply put "governance" means: the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented. Governance can be used in several contexts such as corporate governance, international governance, national governance and local governance. An analysis of governance focuses on the formal and informal actors involved in decision-making and implementing the decisions made and the formal and informal structures that have been set in place to arrive at and implement the decision. Government is one of the actors in governance.

Governance in simple terms means the process of decision-making and its implementation in collective problem situations. The term 'governance' had become popular especially since 1990s with the usage of the term by international donor agencies such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) etc. The developing countries including India, as we all know, are dependent on the developed countries for technical and financial assistance. The international institutions, for the first time in the beginning of 1990s, drew attention to certain crucial deficiencies in the governance system of the developing countries. These included no availability of information to the people, lack of accountability, poor management of the public sector and lack of appropriate legal framework. Governance emphasizes not just routine implementation of policies and programmes but making the entire activity accountable, democratic, participative and responsive to people's needs.

By the mid-16th century, however, government denoted a "system by which something is governed" and by

the early 18th century it further evolved to acquire the meaning of a "governing authority." In this process the term governance gradually became marginalized, and by the 19th century it was deemed to reflect an incipient archaism. For the next 100 years, it would hardly be used as a political term. Dictionaries would define government in terms of a governing authority, including the political order and its institutional framework, while governance was treated as the agency and process of governing, and was often viewed as archaic. However, during 1980s under economic reforms, especially under globalization the use of term governance became popular with its emphasis on the process and manner of governing to the notion of sustainable development. Meanwhile, organizations such as the IMF, NGOs, the UN and its agencies, the World Bank and international media were quick to pick up the term and use it in a variety of ways. Together with its derived term, good governance, the catch-all term governance has since become a buzzword in the vocabulary of polity and administrative reform in developing countries dependent on support from international development agencies. The concept of Good Governance has gained prominence around the world in recent times. It has become a buzzword in the vocabulary of polity and administrative reform, mainly due to the importance given to it by international community. Actually, the term governance has become synonymous to sound development management. In recent times the concept of Good Governance first emerged in the mid-1980s as governability with the emphasis on adherence to the rule of law. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war, the term governance came to be used to define the reinventing



of public administration, particularly in the developing countries, to make it more receptive to the needs of globalization.

Historical Background

Good governance in ancient India was deeply embedded in a rich philosophical and ethical framework that guided the actions of rulers and citizens alike. Rooted in the concept of *Dharma*, which refers to righteousness, moral law, and the ethical conduct of individuals and society, governance was seen not merely as a political system but as a spiritual and moral duty. Ancient Indian texts, such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, offer valuable insights into the ideals and practices that defined governance during this era.

The concept of *Rajdharma*, or the moral law of kingship, was central to the governance structure in ancient India. Rulers were not merely seen as wielders of power, but as stewards entrusted with the welfare of their subjects. They were expected to govern with justice, uphold righteousness, and ensure the peace and prosperity of their people. This moral code prescribed by *Rajdharma* emphasized the ruler's responsibility to act selflessly, to maintain order, and to protect the well-being of all citizens, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized. A king's failure to follow *Rajdharma* would result in the loss of legitimacy, as it was believed that a ruler who did not adhere to ethical principles would lead to disorder and suffering for the people.

Ancient Indian governance was also influenced by the idea of *Swaraj* or self-rule, which emphasized the role of the people in the governance process. This notion, which was later revived during India's struggle for independence by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, highlights the importance of autonomy, decentralized power, and participatory

decision-making. In this context, governance was not viewed as an imposition of authority from above, but as a cooperative and collective responsibility of the ruler and the ruled. It was believed that when rulers governed justly and in harmony with the will of the people, the entire society would flourish.

The *Arthashastra*, written by the ancient scholar Kautilya, offers a practical guide to governance and administration. Kautilya's treatise advocates for a well-structured bureaucracy, the efficient collection of resources, and the establishment of justice. However, it also emphasizes the need for the ruler to be wise, shrewd, and strategic in maintaining the welfare of the state. Kautilya viewed governance as an art that required both moral wisdom and pragmatic statecraft, where the ruler had to balance ethical duties with the practical necessities of power and politics. He stressed the importance of security, economic development, and the maintenance of law and order as key aspects of a prosperous state.

In ancient India, governance was not seen as a purely material endeavour, but one that intertwined with spirituality and ethical values. The rulers were expected to be exemplars of virtue, not just in their private lives but in their public conduct. Good governance meant not only the efficient administration of the state but also the spiritual and moral upliftment of the people. The principles of justice, fairness, and welfare were seen as essential to creating a harmonious society, and these ideas have left a lasting impact on the governance philosophy that continues to influence India today.

ancient Indian perspectives on governance were grounded in deep ethical and moral principles, with a strong emphasis on justice, righteousness, and



the welfare of the people. These ideals were articulated through concepts like *Dharma*, *Rajdharma*, and *Swaraj*, which envisioned a harmonious and just society where rulers were accountable to their people. The blend of moral guidance and pragmatic governance found in texts like the *Arthashastra* continues to shape the understanding of good governance in India, even in the modern era.

British Period

Good governance during the British period in India was marked by a system that prioritized the interests of the colonial rulers over those of the Indian populace. The British introduced a centralized, bureaucratic system designed to maintain control, extract resources, and sustain their dominance in the subcontinent. While this system established the foundations for administrative processes and legal structures in India, it also led to exploitation, inequality, and a disregard for the welfare of the majority of Indians. The governance model imposed by the British was more about maintaining authority than ensuring the well-being of the citizens, creating a legacy that influenced post-independence India.

The British system of governance in India was highly centralized, with decision-making concentrated in the hands of the British officials. The Indian population had little to no say in the formulation of policies, and the administrative apparatus served the interests of the colonial government. The British introduced a new, formal legal system, largely modeled after English law, which replaced the traditional legal frameworks in India. This legal system was designed to control and regulate, rather than to empower the Indian people or promote justice. While the legal framework laid the groundwork for India's

current legal structure, it was also a tool for the British to suppress dissent and maintain order in a way that primarily served colonial interests.

The governance model during the British era was also heavily marked by racial discrimination. The civil services, police, and military were largely staffed by British officials, while Indians were often relegated to subordinate positions. The British also created a hierarchy of power that reinforced social divisions based on race, caste, and class, which undermined social cohesion and promoted inequalities. This hierarchical structure was reflected in the economic policies as well. The British economic model was exploitative, with a focus on extracting resources from India for the benefit of Britain. The agricultural policies, for example, were designed to maximize revenue collection, often at the expense of Indian farmers who were burdened with taxes. The British governance model, therefore, failed to ensure the welfare of the Indian population, instead promoting a system of exploitation and inequality.

The British also introduced reforms intended to create a semblance of good governance, but these were primarily aimed at consolidating British rule. For instance, the Indian Councils Act of 1861 introduced limited participation for Indians in the legislative process, but it was more of a token gesture, as significant power still remained in the hands of the British. Similarly, the Government of India Act of 1919 expanded the legislative framework to allow for some Indian representation, but the executive remained firmly under British control. These reforms did little to address the needs of the majority of Indians and often further entrenched British control over the Indian subcontinent.



During the British period, the idea of good governance, as understood in contemporary India, was not fully realized. The British administration was focused on maintaining control and extracting resources, with little regard for the development or welfare of the indigenous population. The governance system lacked transparency and accountability, as decisions were made without any meaningful consultation with the Indian people. The colonial government was unresponsive to the needs of the Indian populace, and the British policies often resulted in widespread poverty, famines, and suffering. The British period of governance left behind a legacy of a deeply entrenched bureaucracy and legal system, but also a system that was fundamentally unjust, exclusionary, and exploitative.

Despite the shortcomings, some aspects of British rule contributed to the development of governance structures that would later be adapted by independent India. The British introduced modern infrastructure such as railways, telecommunication, and a unified postal system, which facilitated communication and economic activities across vast distances. Additionally, the administrative machinery and the legal system they established provided a foundation for the post-independence state. However, these contributions were overshadowed by the exploitative nature of British rule, which fundamentally undermined the principles of good governance.

the British period in India saw a governance model that prioritized control, exploitation, and economic gain over the welfare and rights of the Indian people. While the British did establish certain administrative and legal frameworks that would influence future governance, their

system was fundamentally undemocratic, centralized, and exploitative. The legacy of this period left India with significant challenges, including social inequalities, an oppressive bureaucracy, and an economic structure that was heavily skewed in favor of the colonizers. These issues became central to the demands for good governance in India following independence.

Influence of Indian Constitution

Good governance in India is profoundly influenced by the Indian Constitution, which serves as the foundational document of the country's democratic system. Adopted in 1950, the Constitution laid down the principles and structures for governance, ensuring a balance between justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. The framers of the Constitution drew inspiration from a variety of sources, including India's ancient traditions, colonial experiences, and global democratic principles. They sought to establish a framework that would promote transparency, accountability, social justice, and inclusivity, which are all crucial elements of good governance.

The Constitution also guarantees fundamental rights to every citizen, such as the right to equality, the right to freedom of speech, and the right to life and liberty. These rights not only protect individual freedoms but also promote social justice by safeguarding marginalized communities. By enshrining these rights, the Constitution places a moral and legal obligation on the state to act in ways that respect the dignity and rights of all citizens. Good governance, in this context, involves the government's duty to uphold these rights and ensure that they are accessible to all, particularly to the disadvantaged sections of society.



Equally important is the concept of the rule of law, which is fundamental to the Indian Constitution. The rule of law ensures that the government operates within a legal framework, and that laws are applied fairly and equally to all citizens, without bias or discrimination. This principle has been crucial in shaping India's approach to governance, as it ensures that there is no arbitrariness in the exercise of state power. The judiciary, which is an independent body under the Constitution, plays a vital role in upholding the rule of law by acting as a check on the executive and legislative branches of government. The system of checks and balances, as established by the Constitution, is essential to good governance because it prevents the abuse of power and promotes accountability at all levels of government.

At the core of the Indian Constitution is the idea of democracy, which directly shapes the governance structure. The Constitution envisions a system where the government is elected by the people and remains accountable to them. It provides for universal adult suffrage, ensuring that all citizens, irrespective of caste, creed, or gender, have the right to participate in the political process. This principle of participatory democracy is central to good governance, as it ensures that the government remains responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people.

Another key element of good governance in India, as outlined by the Constitution, is decentralization. The Constitution sets up a federal structure that divides powers between the central government and state governments. This decentralization ensures that local issues can be addressed more effectively by governments that are closer to the people.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments further empower local governments by providing them with greater autonomy and a formal role in governance. This decentralization helps in making governance more participatory and responsive, as it allows citizens at the grassroots level to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

The Directive Principles of State Policy, which form an integral part of the Constitution, further emphasize the role of the government in promoting welfare and social justice. These principles provide guidance to the state in making laws and formulating policies aimed at reducing social and economic inequalities. Though non-justiciable, these principles set the framework for ensuring that governance focuses on the collective well-being of society, particularly in terms of access to education, health care, employment, and social security. The state's responsibility to promote the welfare of all its citizens, especially the marginalized, reflects the constitutional commitment to inclusive and equitable governance.

The Constitution also promotes transparency and accountability in governance through mechanisms such as the establishment of the Election Commission, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, and various anti-corruption measures. These institutions play a critical role in ensuring that the actions of the government are transparent and that public resources are managed responsibly. The Right to Information Act, passed in 2005, further strengthens transparency by providing citizens with the right to access information held by public authorities. This empowers the people to question and challenge government actions, making governance more accountable.



The Indian Constitution provides a robust framework for good governance, grounded in democratic principles, the protection of fundamental rights, the rule of law, social justice, and accountability. It ensures that the government remains responsive to the needs of its people, promotes equality and fairness, and acts in a manner that is transparent and just. The Constitution's emphasis on decentralization, welfare, and inclusive development further strengthens its contribution to good governance, making it a living document that continues to shape the political and administrative structures of India.

Challenges for good governance in India:

Good governance in India faces a variety of challenges that hinder the effective functioning of its democratic institutions and the delivery of services to its people. Despite the country's remarkable progress since independence, these challenges persist and often undermine the principles of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity that are essential for sound governance. One of the most significant challenges is corruption, which is deeply ingrained in both public and private sectors across the country. Corruption in India manifests in various forms, including bribery, nepotism, and favouritism, and it severely impacts the efficiency and credibility of government institutions. From the local administration to the highest levels of the political system, corruption leads to the misallocation of resources, poor service delivery, and undermines the public trust in the system. While there have been attempts to address this issue, such as the implementation of the Right to Information Act and the establishment of anti-corruption bodies, corruption remains a pervasive problem that stymies

progress in many sectors like education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

Another pressing challenge is the bureaucratic inefficiency that characterizes much of India's governance system. The Indian bureaucracy, though large and expansive, is often criticized for its slow pace of decision-making, excessive red tape, and lack of coordination between departments. This results in delayed implementation of policies and hinders the effective delivery of public services. The bureaucratic structure is rigid and hierarchical, which often creates barriers for innovation and responsiveness to the needs of citizens. This inefficiency is compounded by a shortage of skilled personnel and inadequate training, particularly in rural and remote areas, further limiting the effectiveness of governance.

The political environment in India also presents significant challenges for good governance. The political system is often marked by instability due to coalition politics, fragmented parties, and short-term electoral priorities. In such a landscape, policy decisions are frequently influenced by political considerations rather than the long-term welfare of the country. Party loyalty, patronage networks, and political expediency often take precedence over merit, expertise, and the public interest. This leads to inconsistent policies and governance models that undermine public confidence and result in poor decision-making.

Social inequality is a critical challenge that hampers the realization of good governance in India. Despite constitutional provisions and affirmative action, deep-rooted inequalities based on caste, religion, gender, and socio-economic status persist across the country. The marginalized communities, including Dalits, tribals, women, and religious



minorities, often face discrimination and exclusion from the benefits of governance. Their lack of access to quality education, healthcare, employment, and political representation means that they are often left out of the governance process. Addressing these systemic inequalities remains a major challenge for ensuring inclusive governance that benefits all citizens equally.

Furthermore, transparency and accountability in government functioning remain major concerns in India. While mechanisms like the Right to Information Act have been introduced to promote transparency, the implementation is often weak. Information is sometimes withheld, and citizens face hurdles in accessing it, leading to a lack of accountability among public officials. Government decision-making is often opaque, and there is insufficient oversight to ensure that policies and programs are executed as intended. Public officials are seldom held accountable for inefficiency or corruption, and the mechanisms for redress are often slow and ineffective.

The judicial system, despite its importance in ensuring justice and upholding the rule of law, also faces challenges that affect governance in India. The judicial process is marred by delays and a backlog of cases, with many cases taking years or even decades to reach a conclusion. This results in a denial of timely justice for citizens and undermines confidence in the legal system. Additionally, access to legal aid remains limited for disadvantaged sections of society, further perpetuating social and economic inequalities. These challenges within the judiciary undermine the role of law in ensuring fairness and justice, which is a cornerstone of good governance.

Another challenge is the vast and diverse nature of India itself. With a

population of over 1.4 billion people, India is home to a multitude of cultures, languages, and traditions, making governance at the national level a complex task. The country's federal structure requires coordination between the central and state governments, but regional disparities and differences often lead to conflicts and policy inconsistencies. Local governance structures also face difficulties in addressing the specific needs of rural and urban populations, further complicating governance. Inequality between regions, especially between urban and rural areas, results in uneven development and service delivery. Finally, inadequate infrastructure remains a major barrier to good governance in India. Poor roads, unreliable power supply, inadequate sanitation, and limited access to quality healthcare and education in many parts of the country hinder the ability of the government to effectively serve its people. The lack of basic infrastructure in rural and remote areas makes it difficult to implement policies and programs that aim to improve living standards. Despite significant progress in infrastructure development, India still faces significant gaps in access to essential services, which affects the overall quality of governance.

Indian Practice

As one of the largest democracies in the world, India has sought to establish a system of governance that promotes transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and responsiveness to the needs of its diverse population. The Indian approach to governance is deeply rooted in its constitutional framework, which emphasizes justice, equality, and the rule of law, while simultaneously addressing the complexities posed by its vast size, social diversity, and economic challenges. The principle of universal adult suffrage,



guaranteeing every citizen the right to vote, is fundamental to India's democratic ethos and allows the people to shape their future by electing representatives who are entrusted with power to govern. This democratic framework ensures that governance remains participatory and responsive, while empowering citizens to engage in the political process.

Indian governance is the emphasis on social justice and inclusivity. The Indian state has worked to address the historic injustices faced by marginalized communities through affirmative action policies, such as reservations in education, employment, and political representation. However, challenges remain in ensuring that these policies are effectively implemented and reach those in need. Social inequality based on caste, gender, and religion still persists, and marginalized communities continue to face significant barriers to accessing basic services and opportunities. A key part of good governance in India lies in overcoming these disparities and ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their background, are provided with equal opportunities for advancement. The rule of law is another crucial aspect of good governance in India. The legal system in India, based on the principles of justice, equity, and fairness, serves as a safeguard against arbitrary power and ensures that all individuals are treated equally under the law. The judiciary, which operates independently from the executive and legislature, plays a key role in upholding the Constitution and protecting fundamental rights. However, the judicial system faces its own set of challenges, including a massive backlog of cases, delays in the delivery of justice, and limited access to legal resources for disadvantaged groups. These issues undermine the effectiveness of the judicial

system in promoting justice and fairness for all citizens.

As a developing nation, India has made significant progress in areas such as infrastructure development, technological innovation, and poverty reduction. However, it continues to grapple with regional disparities, urban-rural divides, and environmental sustainability. Effective governance requires balancing economic growth with social equity, ensuring that development is inclusive and benefits all sections of society. The government has made strides in this direction through various welfare schemes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), and the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, all of which aim to address issues of poverty, inequality, and public health.

decentralization plays a critical role in ensuring that governance reaches the grassroots level. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992 gave greater autonomy to local self-governments, empowering Panchayats (rural) and Municipalities (urban) to make decisions and implement policies that directly affect their communities. This decentralization fosters a more participatory form of governance, as it allows citizens to have a say in the decisions that impact their daily lives. However, challenges remain in ensuring that local governments have the necessary resources, training, and capacity to function effectively. India's diversity also poses a unique challenge to good governance. With a population of over 1.4 billion people, comprising various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups, the country's governance system must navigate these complexities while fostering unity and national integration.



Effective governance in India requires policies that respect this diversity and ensure that all communities are included in the development process. This is particularly important in a country where regional disparities and identity-based politics can create tensions and divisions.

Conclusion

Good governance in India is a continuous process of addressing challenges, improving systems, and ensuring that the principles of democracy, equality, justice, and rule of law are upheld. While significant strides have been made in many areas, there are still considerable hurdles to overcome, including corruption, inefficiency, social inequality, and regional disparities. The country's governance model remains a work in progress, and its success will depend on the collective efforts of the government, civil society, and the people to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure transparency, and promote inclusive development. Through sustained commitment and reform, India can move closer to realizing the full potential of good governance for all its citizens.

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