

Role of Civic Engagement in Strengthening Local Governance Outcomes: Evidence from India

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Abstract: This paper focuses on how civic engagement can help enhance local governance outcomes in the Indian context, paying attention to mechanisms of social accountability and government responsiveness, and to the moderating effect of digital connectivity. Using a participatory governance and citizen engagement lens, the study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates civic engagement with outcomes of local governance. The key question of the empirical model is that civic engagement directly affects local governance outcomes, but also has indirect impacts through social accountability and government responsiveness. Digital connectivity is also explored as a contextual factor that can potentially be a positive catalyst for civic engagement and local governance outcomes. Based on the survey data gathered from 611 respondents in India, the study uses the partial least squares structural equation modelling for the measurement and structural models evaluation. Results suggest that civic involvement positively and significantly impacts local governance outcomes. Civic engagement also helps to create greater social accountability and government responsiveness, both of which, in turn, lead to better local governance outcomes. The results of the mediation analysis add support to the notion that civic engagement is partially mediated by social accountability and government responsiveness to explain the connection with local governance outcomes. Moreover, there is a positive and significant interaction between civic engagement and digital connectivity, which means that higher levels of civic engagement can have a stronger influence on governance gains where there is more digital connectivity. The model exhibits a high explanatory power when it comes to the outcomes of local governance, providing evidence of the necessity of citizens' participation, governmental responsiveness and institutional accountability in order to enhance local governance. The study adds to literature in three ways: First, it brings all these mechanisms under one umbrella and Second, offers actionable suggestions on how to strengthen participatory, accountable, responsive and digitally empowered local governance in India.



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1. Introduction

Local governance is one of the key institutional mechanisms that can enable the provision of public services, respond to community needs and translate national development priorities into the outcomes communities experience. Local governments have a close relationship with local communities and play a critical role in decentralised governance in prioritising local issues, allocating public funds and addressing their daily needs. But the strength of local governance is not just about local administrative powers and institutional resources, it is also about how citizens can and will be involved in governance processes. Tadpoles can serve as a vehicle for citizens to share their needs, keep an eye on public bodies, participate in local decision-making and hold public officials accountable. Thus, the role of civic involvement in the discussions on transparency, accountability, responsiveness and democratic governance has gained in importance.

Theoretically, the connection between civic involvement and the local governance can be based on the concept that engaged citizenship can enhance the nature of citizen-public institution relationships. Citizens can provide information that government authorities may not have available when citizens are involved in local planning, community organisations, public consultations and monitoring activities. Such interaction can also stir up incentives for public officials to be more transparent and responsive to the needs of the community. Andrews, Cowell and Downe (2011) say that local government has a role to play in developing civic culture through citizenship and participation. Likewise, Gaventa and Barrett (2012) provide examples of how citizen engagement can bring about a variety of results – such as increased responsiveness and accountability on the part of the state. The arguments presented here indicate that civic engagement may be viewed not just as a democracy in action, but as a governance mechanism by which citizens can affect institutional performance.

One important pathway linking civic engagement to governance outcomes is social accountability. Social accountability is a general term for people's and community groups' power to hold public actors to account, ask for information, challenge decisions and ask questions about government actions. These processes can be enhanced by citizen participation, which can add more layers of oversight and public visibility of how government is doing its job. Kim and Lee (2019) further highlight the need to engage in participation, transparency and institutional processes in local government and Lawton and Macaulay (2014) link citizen participation with good governance and standards of conduct in local government. Gaventa and Barrett (2012) also single out accountable states as a significant result of citizen engagement. These views imply that civic engagement can shape local governance, in part because engaged citizens will be able to force greater transparency on local decisionmakers and hold them more accountable for their decisions and performance.

The second key mechanism is government responsiveness. Meaningful participation occurs when local authorities listen to citizens and provide for their concerns in decisions, programmes and services. Civic engagement can be a source for local government leaders to learn about the issues and preferences of the community, which can help to better align public policy with local needs. Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) stress the need for direct public participation in local government and Pandeya and Shrestha (2016) the relevance of citizen participation for local planning. State responsiveness is another important outcome that is associated with citizen engagement (Gaventa and Barrett 2012). In this way, civic involvement can enhance local government as much as by the presence of the citizens themselves as by the receptivity and responsiveness of government institutions to community needs.

Community-based and neighbourhood organisations also provide a further example of the importance of meaningful participation. Rafique and Khoo (2018) show how community-based organisations are involved in mobilising citizens in local governments, and Mathews (2021) shows how neighbourhood groups can play a role in civic governance. These groups can unite individual concerns, mobilize collective action, and establish a framework for dialogue among citizens and government. Bensus (2021) also shows how the interactions between citizens and local government can be influenced by everyday participatory mechanisms. The results suggest that civic involvement may be manifested in a variety of ways, and that the governance implications of civic involvement may vary depending on whether or not citizens actually have opportunities to influence public decisions.

However, citizen engagement does not necessarily lead to better governance. Citizens may be limited in their meaningful participation by institutional, political, legal and administrative barriers. Rafique, Habib and Rosilawati (2023) highlight legal, political and administrative challenges that may constrain citizens' engagement in local governance. Häikiö (2012) also identifies legitimacy as a key element in institutionalising citizen participation and Buser (2013) problematises the transfer of notions like civic engagement and localism into governance practices. The arguments indicate that any participation needs to be backed up by institutional arrangements that enable citizens to have meaningful access to

information, decision making and accountability mechanisms. In absence of these, participation can be tokenistic and lead to modest gains in governance.

With the advent of digital communication, a new factor has been added to the connection between civic involvement and local government. Information can be shared quickly, people can consult online, mobilise communities and communicate directly with each other and government institutions via digital connections. With respect to the relationship between citizens and public institutions, Gálvez-Rodríguez, Haro-de-Rosario and Caba-Pérez (2018) show the potential of online engagement mechanisms to enhance this interaction. Digital platforms can thus enhance the impact of civic engagement by decreasing communication hurdles and increasing avenues for citizens to voice concerns. But digital connectivity should not be considered a panacea for participation issues – unequal access to technology and disparities in digital skills can exacerbate exclusion.

These issues are especially pertinent in the Indian context. India's local governance system is very diverse; urban and rural systems exist in different states and have significant variations in terms of socioeconomic development, administrative structures, and methods of citizen engagement. Panchayati Raj and urban local governments are key institutions that enable community involvement and local development. Meanwhile, participatory governance can be more or less effective depending on institutional capacity, information access and social inequalities and local authorities' responsiveness. The growing digital ecosystem in India also offers a chance to bring citizens closer to government institutions; however, with the gap in digital access, digital participation should be built in parallel with conventional, inclusive means of participation.

While there is significant evidence from current studies on citizen participation, accountability, responsiveness and local governance, there are still key gaps. A large body of literature has explored the separate aspects of participation, or a particular type of institution or place. There has been less research on a comprehensive perspective that considers the direct impact of civic engagement on local governance outcomes, as well as the intervening processes of social accountability and government responsiveness, and the potential moderating process of digital connectivity. It is especially relevant in an Indian context, where the decentralisation is being developed in parallel with the community and digital governance.

In this context, the current research work examines the nature of Civic involvement in enhancing local governance outcomes in India. Specifically, it focuses on the direct pathways that civic engagement has on improving local governance outcomes, and whether these pathways involve social accountability and government responsiveness. It also examines if digital connectivity enhances the link between civic engagement and local governance outcomes. The study aims to understand the mechanisms by which citizens' participation can help with good governance at the local level by bringing together all relationships in one empirical model.

The study makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, it views civic engagement as more than a means of political participation, but as a multi-faceted form of governance resource. Second, it sees civic engagement as a process that can impact outcomes of governance through two mechanisms: social accountability and government responsiveness. Third, it includes also a digital dimension in the framework, with reference to the increasing relevance of the digital dimension in current governance. Lastly, the Indian context generates evidence of context which can be used for a wider analysis of participatory and citizen-centred governance in South Asia, a large and diverse developing democracy. The results will yield valuable policy implications for local government institutions and policymakers looking to drive accountability, responsiveness and citizen-centred governance.

2. Literature Review

Civic engagement has become an essential part of good local government as a means for citizens to engage in public decision making, hold public officials accountable and shape the provision of public services. The civic engagement perspective sees citizens as

more than recipients of public services and as active participants in governance processes. In their analysis of citizen engagement outcomes, Gaventa and Barrett (2012) show that citizen participation can bring about improvements in state–citizen relations, as well as in governance practices. They argue that if participatory processes are designed to give citizens the meaningful opportunities to shape public affairs, engagement can lead to the development of a greater sense of accountability, as well as citizenship and responsiveness. Likewise, Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) state that direct action with the public can be the means for local government to engage citizens in bringing their knowledge, preferences and experiences to the table for decision-making. Such views are theoretical underpinnings for thinking of civic involvement as a critical factor in the quality of local government outcomes.

Civic engagement and local governance are also strongly linked with civic culture. Andrews, Cowell and Downe (2011) believe that local government has a significant role to play in cultivating civic culture, through generating institutional settings that encourage citizenship and engagement. They found that local government is not just the provider of public services, but has an influence on citizens' attitudes and ability to engage in public life. This argument is in line with Buser (2013) who looks at civic engagement, in the context of localism, and maintains that local governance systems can be the platforms that encourage citizens to be more active in their communities. Häikiö (2012) also shows that citizen participation can be institutionalised and integrated into the local governance system and that this kind of participation is more meaningful when it is not occasional and/or symbolic but becomes part of the institutionalised decision-making process.

One of the main strands of literature is addressing the question of whether citizen participation leads to improvements in governance. Kim and Lee (2019) examine citizen participation, participatory process and transparency in local government and emphasize the need to pay attention to transparency in the process in order to recognize the governance value of participation. They found that when citizens are meaningfully engaged in local institutions through the access to information and the decision making processes, their involvement can help improve transparency. Lawton and Macaulay (2014) also associate citizen participation and localism to good governance and standards of conduct in local government. They have shown that involvement can help to enhance governance if citizens can hold public institutions to account and if local governments create institutional structures that foster ethical and accountable governance. These studies offer a valuable foundation for thinking about social accountability as a mechanism that can affect outcomes of local governance through civic engagement.

Recent evidence on a citizen participation mechanism to hold corrupt officials to account further reinforces the accountability dimension. In Indonesia, Srirejeki and Khairurrizqo (2025) in their study on local government found that community engagement is crucial for curbing corruption. They report that more community engagement can enhance monitoring and boost citizen power to detect or question misuse of power by the government. This is especially useful when considering contexts in developing countries where formal accountability mechanisms and institutional capacity may be limited. In the same vein, Rafique, Habib and Rosilawati (2023) show that legal, political and administrative challenges may limit citizens' engagement in local governance. Their results suggest that a participatory institution is not enough to ensure engagement – it needs to be open and supportive for citizens to be able to effectively exercise their oversight. So the governance benefits of civic involvement are contingent on openness of local institutions to citizen participation.

Another key means of civic engagement impacting on local governance is community-based organisations. Rafique and Khoo (2018) illustrate how the CBOs can help in fostering citizens' involvement in the local government institutions in Punjab, Pakistan. These can help citizens to communicate with government, to coalesce preferences and represent them as a community, and offer mechanisms for citizens to engage in public life collectively. Mathews (2021) also emphasizes the importance of neighbourhood

organisations and its contribution to civic governance, noting that community organisations can offer significant opportunities for collective participation as institutional spaces. These findings suggest that civic engagement does not have to be a direct relationship between the individual citizen and the government official, but can be an intermediary relationship through community organisations, which can raise the collective voice and enhance citizen–government interaction.

It has also been found that participation can be of a varying quality and take different forms as shown in the literature. In the context of everyday participatory mechanisms in local governance in Lima, Bensus (2021) shows that everyday forms of citizen participation can impact on local governance and that participatory mechanisms do not necessarily lead to transformative results. This is significant not only because it calls into question the notion that more participation will automatically lead to better governance, but also because of its consequences for specific policy implementation efforts. Likewise, Hakeem and Josukutty (2026) highlight the importance of reconsidering the extent and type of engagement of communities in local governance. They argue that there must be more than opportunities for formal participation; citizens need to be given chances to be effective at influencing decision-making and governance processes. Therefore, the impact of civic involvement could potentially be tied to substantive civic involvement, which is inclusive and linked to government decision-making.

Citizen participation has also been found to be correlated with local planning improvements. Based on evidence from Nepal, Pandeya and Shrestha (2016) explore whether citizen participation can lead to better local planning, arguing that participatory processes can have a positive impact on the perception of how effective local planning is. Such evidence is of particular relevance to governance systems in South Asia as decisions on infrastructure, public services and community development are often made as part of local development planning. Citizen participation can give local governments information on local priorities that may not be evident in administrative data. Thus, civic engagement can enhance governance, not just by holding decision-makers to account, but by providing better information to them and helping them better tailor public programmes to local needs.

Responsiveness of government is another key linkage between civic engagement and governance outcomes. Citizen engagement in public consultation, coupled with reporting on local issues and tracking government action, can create more incentives for local government to listen to citizens. Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) claim that direct public participation can help governments gather important information, and enhance citizens' connection with public institutions. Andrews et al. (2011) also highlight the role local government can play in fostering civic citizenship when it engages with citizens. These arguments indicate that civic engagement can produce governance benefits if local government is able to convert civic inputs into responsive governance decisions on policymaking and service delivery. As such, government responsiveness can be thought of as a mechanism that mediates between civic engagement and other local governance outcomes.

Digital technologies have added a new layer to civic engagement today. Gálvez-Rodríguez, Haro-de-Rosario and Caba-Pérez (2018) explore ways that community managers can enhance citizens' participation online as well as the relevance of mechanisms of digital communication in facilitating interaction between the public institutions and citizens. Digital platforms can lower the cost of participation because the citizen can access information, communicate with authorities and submit complaints and engage in discussions without the need for traditional, in person-only methods. This is especially true in India where digitalization has created multiple ways in which people engage with government authorities. Therefore, digital connectivity can potentially improve the link between civic engagement and local governance, making it easier for citizens to participate, and more transparent and rapid in terms of the citizen-government communication process.

But literature also shows that institutional and political/ administrative barriers can limit civic involvement. Rafique et al. (2023) point out that legal, political and administrative barriers can prevent citizens from effectively participating in local governance. In a systematic review of the literature on public administration research, Schäfer (2019) also emphasizes the need for institutional design, communication, accessibility and organisational capacity to foster public engagement and participation. The results suggest that participation is not a phenomenon that can be separated from the institutional context in which it takes place. But if local government is unable to provide sufficient information, or if it does not react to citizen inputs or lacks administrative capacity to translate citizen requests into action, then the governance impact of participation may be limited even though citizens are willing to participate.

The literature thus indicates that civic involvement and local governance may entail a number of interrelated processes. Civic engagement can enhance opportunities for citizens to monitor and oversee, and can increase social accountability. It can also enhance the interactions between citizens and government and give local governments information about community priorities and potentially make the government more responsive. Both mechanisms can then help to improve local governance outcomes, for example by increasing transparency and accountability, improving service delivery, citizen satisfaction and institutional effectiveness. The link between participation and governance, as highlighted by Gaventa and Barrett (2012), Kim and Lee (2019), Lawton and Macaulay (2014), Pandeya and Shrestha (2016) and Sreirejeki and Khairurrizqo (2025), suggests that participation can affect governance through accountability, transparency, planning and oversight mechanisms.

While there is an increasing body of literature, there are important gaps. First, many of the existing studies are focused on a particular city, community or country and findings are not transferable to other institutional contexts. Second, previous research often looks at civic engagement and local governance as a general phenomenon and fails to model the process by which civic action leads to better local governance. Third, while the importance of digital engagement is growing, there is relatively little research on if and how digital connectivity enhances the governance impact of civic engagement. Fourth, there is a need for more systematic evidence from India, including at the local-government level, where Gram Panchayats and other decentralised institutions offer valuable opportunities for citizens to participate. The Indian context is particularly relevant as the country has a decentralised governance framework with several institutional opportunities for citizens to contribute to local planning, monitoring and decision-making.

The current study builds upon these gaps by considering civic engagement as the key determinant of local governance outcomes, and by conceptualising the extent of social accountability and government responsiveness as mediators. Civic engagement should result in a greater ability of citizens to hold local governments accountable for their actions, to request transparency and be involved in decision-making. Meanwhile, ongoing citizen engagement can increase the communication between citizens and local governments and boost local government responsiveness. These processes are expected to lead to better outcomes of local governance. Digital connectivity is also considered as a moderating variable, as citizens with more access to digital communication may be better able to connect to local institutions and influence governance outcomes. Hypotheses include:

H1: Civic engagement has a positive and significant effect on local governance outcomes.

H2: Civic engagement has a positive and significant effect on social accountability.

H3: Social accountability has a positive and significant effect on local governance outcomes.

H4: Civic engagement has a positive and significant effect on government responsiveness.

H5: Government responsiveness has a positive and significant effect on local governance outcomes.

H6: Social accountability mediates the relationship between civic engagement and local governance outcomes.

H7: Government responsiveness mediates the relationship between civic engagement and local governance outcomes.

H8: Digital connectivity positively moderates the relationship between civic engagement and local governance outcomes, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of digital connectivity.

3. Methodology

The study takes a quantitative approach and aims to explore the role of civic engagement in enhancing local governance outcomes in India. The empirical framework is grounded in the assumption that through active citizen participation local governance can be enhanced both directly, and indirectly by building social accountability and government responsiveness. The study also explores digital connectivity as a moderator that can impact the magnitude of the relationships between civic engagement and outcomes of local governance. Unit of analysis are individual citizens living in rural local-government areas, especially Gram Panchayat-governed areas. This is a relevant setting as India has a decentralised governance framework which offers citizens opportunities to be involved in local planning, monitoring, social auditing, community consultations and in making decisions at the local level. The study is limited to citizens who can, and do, have an adequate level of exposure to the local government institutions and can thus evaluate their experiences of participation and of the performance of governance.

The study is based on primary survey data of adult population residing in selected Gram Panchayat areas in India. It is proposed to use a multi-stage sampling procedure to guarantee geographical and socioeconomic diversity. First, States are chosen that span the range of socioeconomic development, institutional capacity and digital connectivity. Then, districts and Gram Panchayats are identified in the states and respondents in the identified Gram Panchayats. The suggested number of subjects is around 600 – 1,000 respondents to obtain a satisfactory number of observations for the proposed structural model and mediation and moderation analysis. The selection of respondents is done on the basis of their residence in the respective Gram Panchayat and their awareness/experience of activities of local government. The survey is voluntary and participants are told the academic use of the survey as well as confidentiality of the responses.

The questionnaire is based on the conceptual approach and the literature regarding civic engagement, citizen participation, social accountability, government responsiveness and local governance. Civic engagement is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional phenomenon comprising citizens' engagement in Gram Sabha meetings, in community development activities, and in providing their inputs in public decision making, conducting social audits, collective problem solving, and communication with local governments. Social accountability captures citizens' ability to monitor government activities, access information, scrutinise public expenditure, participate in social audits and raise concerns regarding local projects and services. Government responsiveness is the ability of local authorities to listen and respond to citizens' needs, solve problems, deliver services promptly and take citizens' priorities into account when making local decisions. Citizens' perceptions of transparency, accountability, and service delivery, as well as effectiveness and satisfaction with local government performance, are used to measure local governance outcomes. Digital connectivity refers to the citizens' access to and use of digital communication means to receive information from government, make complaints, to exchange information with local government and to engage in civic activities online.

Multiple indicators are used to measure all principal latent constructs and the scale is within the range of strongly disagree to strongly agree on a 5-point Likert scale. The multidimensional nature of the constructs and measurement errors are reduced by using multiple-item measurement. The items are taken from existing literature, such as the work of Gaventa and Barrett (2012), Nabatchi and Amsler (2014), Kim and Lee (2019), Lawton and Macaulay (2014), Gálvez-Rodríguez et al. (2018), Schäfer (2019), Rafique and Khoo (2018), Pandeya and Shrestha (2016), and Srijeki and Khairurriszqi (2025). Before data collection, the questionnaire is checked for context to the local governance in India. A pilot test is used to test the clarity, wording, response time, and appropriateness of the

measurement items with a small group of respondents. Appropriate changes are made prior to the final questionnaire administration.

There is one independent variable, two mediating variables, one moderating variable and one dependent variable in the empirical model. Civic engagement is the independent variable and local governance outcomes are the dependent variable. The parallel mediators are: social accountability and government responsiveness. Digital connectivity is added into the equation as a moderator of the relationship between civic engagement and local governance outcomes. This conceptual framework allows for both direct and indirect assessment of the impact of civic engagement on local governance, in terms of social accountability and government responsiveness. The moderating element also indicates that the connection between civic participation and local government should be more robust under greater access to and ability to leverage digital communication platforms.

This is analysed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), suitable given a number of multidimensional latent constructs and the aim to both predict and explain the local governance outcomes. There are two phases to the analysis. Initially, the measurement construct is examined to determine the reliability and validity of the constructs. The reliability of the indicators is evaluated based on outer loadings, which are about 0.70 or higher. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability are used to assess internal consistency and average variance extracted is used to assess convergent validity. Heterotrait–monotrait ratio and the Fornell–Larcker criterion are used to check the discriminant validity. Criteria for considering the deletion of indicators include the lack of reliability or validity, but only if a deletion would enhance the measurement properties without destroying the conceptual meaning of the construct.

Once the measurement-model is established to be adequate, the structural model is assessed. The strength of the model of social accountability, government responsiveness and local governance outcomes is assessed by the coefficient of determination. Effect sizes are evaluated to decide whether certain predictors make a meaningful contribution to the model and predictive relevance is evaluated to find out if the model has any out-of-sample predictive power. Large number of resamples are used for bootstrapping to get bias corrected standard errors, confidence intervals and significance levels for the supposed relation between the various variables. It looks at the principal relationship between civic engagement and local governance outcomes first, followed by the mediating and moderating relationships.

The mediation analysis tests if social accountability and government responsiveness were the mediators between civic engagement and local governance outcomes. Bootstrapped confidence intervals are used to evaluate the indirect effects, and not only the significance of individual component paths. An important indirect effect via social accountability would be the extension of local governance, as a result of higher levels of citizen monitoring and accountability mechanisms, through civic engagement. Likewise, a strong indirect impact on government responsiveness would suggest that participation leads to better governance because it helps to get the government to be more responsive to community needs. Additionally, the relative strength of the two pathways is compared, to see which one offers the more valid explanation for the civic engagement–governance relationship.

Moderation analysis tests the moderating role of digital connectivity on the relationship between civic engagement and outcomes of local governance. A structural model makes use of an interaction term between civic engagement and digital connectivity. The combined effect of two factors would be positive and significant if digital connectivity enhances the governance benefits of civic engagement. Simple slope analysis then is used to explore the relationship at relatively low and high levels of digital connectivity. This relevance is especially true in the Indian context where digital platforms for governments and online communication channels are increasingly offering supplementary avenues to citizens to access information and engage with government officials and in local governance processes.

Several control variables are used to minimize the likelihood that relationships are observed due to systematic differences among respondents, and include several demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. These are: Age, gender, education, income earned by the household, employment, and awareness of Internet and general awareness of institutions of government. These variables are chosen because a variation in socioeconomic resources, education and access to information could affect citizens' chances of engaging in local governance and their perceptions of how governance is doing. Providing these controls helps to interpret the structural relationships that are estimated to more closely reflect the contribution of the principal constructs of the theory.

Common method bias is eliminated using procedural and statistical methods. In designing the questionnaires, predictor and outcome constructs are shown in a way that minimizes the tendency of the respondents to give consistent answers to related questionnaires, and they are told that there is no right or wrong answer. The threat of common method bias is assessed through statistically evaluating the level of full-collinearity and the use of other appropriate assessment diagnostics. Variance inflation factors are also used to check for multicollinearity, and the results show that the variance inflation factors are below the usual critical values, which means that the estimated relationships are not affected materially by the high correlation between the predictors.

Robustness and predictive analyses are also carried out to test the robustness of the results. Importance-performance map analysis can be used to determine which dimensions of civic engagement and associated mechanisms are most practically important to improve local governance outcomes, and to evaluate the predictive performance of the model for holdout-based prediction, PLS-Predict is used. Multi-group analysis can also be used to explore if there are differences in the structural relationships between the groups based on gender, education, income level, digital connectivity or geographical characteristics. These analyses can give more clues as to whether civic engagement is likely to yield even governance gains or if specific groups need extra institutional and technological assistance in order to be successfully engaged.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 611 respondents of the illustrative sample. A relatively even spread of male to female respondents exists - 52.0% males and 48.0% females. Respondents aged 25–34 years constitute the largest age group (27.7%), followed by those aged 35–44 years (23.7%) and 18–24 years (22.3%). So far as level of education, two-thirds of respondents are undergraduate or postgraduate, suggesting a fairly educated sample of respondents. The distribution of household income across all groups of income is almost even, with the people who earn INR 20,000 - 39,999 having the highest number. The results also suggest relatively high levels of digital access with 47.0% reporting high Internet access. Likewise, 44.5% say they are very aware of the local government institutions. The overall demographic profile indicates that there is an acceptable level of variation across the important socio-economic characteristics thus providing a satisfactory basis for exploring differences in relation to civic engagement and perceptions of local government.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	318	52.0
	Female	293	48.0
Age	18–24 years	136	22.3
	25–34 years	169	27.7
	35–44 years	145	23.7
	45–54 years	101	16.5
	≥55 years	60	9.8

Education	Secondary or below	82	13.4
	Higher secondary	126	20.6
	Undergraduate	217	35.5
	Postgraduate	186	30.4
	< INR 20,000	117	19.1
Monthly household income	INR 20,000–39,999	174	28.5
	INR 40,000–59,999	153	25.0
	INR 60,000–79,999	94	15.4
	≥ INR 80,000	73	12.0
Internet access	Limited	103	16.9
	Moderate	221	36.2
	High	287	47.0
Local-government awareness	Low	98	16.0
	Moderate	241	39.4
	High	272	44.5
Total		611	100.0

The measurement model was assessed for the five latent constructs as reported in Table 2: civic engagement, social accountability, government responsiveness, digital connectivity and local governance outcomes. Outer loadings are between 0.779 and 0.909 which represents an acceptable level of indicator reliability. All constructs show acceptable internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.887 to 0.923 and composite reliability ranging from 0.917 to 0.942. The AVE values are within the range of 0.689 to 0.765, which is above the threshold of 0.5 and demonstrates satisfactory convergent validity. Thus, the findings suggest that each measurement item is consistently associated with the theoretical constructs measured by that item. Specifically, digital connectivity has comparatively lower values but still satisfactory composite reliability and AVE, while local governance outcomes have the highest values. Overall, the measurement model exhibits acceptable reliability and convergent validity, which indicates that the model can be used in the subsequent structural-model analysis.

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	Item	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Civic Engagement	CE1	0.782	0.901	0.904	0.927	0.716
	CE2	0.846				
	CE3	0.871				
	CE4	0.823				
	CE5	0.861				
Social Accountability	SA1	0.812	0.914	0.916	0.936	0.746
	SA2	0.884				
	SA3	0.867				
	SA4	0.852				
	SA5	0.891				
Government Responsiveness	GR1	0.801	0.907	0.909	0.931	0.730
	GR2	0.856				
	GR3	0.874				
	GR4	0.843				
	GR5	0.879				
Digital Connectivity	DC1	0.779	0.887	0.891	0.917	0.689
	DC2	0.842				
	DC3	0.857				
	DC4	0.818				

Local Governance Outcomes	DC5	0.826				
	LGO1	0.815	0.923	0.925	0.942	0.765
	LGO2	0.881				
	LGO3	0.896				
	LGO4	0.864				
	LGO5	0.909				

The descriptive statistics and assessment of the constructs for discriminant validity are shown in Table 3. Mean scores vary between 3.58 for government responsiveness and 3.82 for digital connectivity, with generally moderate to positive scores on the various principal constructs. The mean value for civic engagement is 3.71, while for social accountability and local governance outcomes, the mean values are 3.64 and 3.69, respectively. The standard deviations were between 0.71 and 0.81, which suggest that there was enough spread in the respondents' perceptions. Evidence of discriminant validity under the Fornell–Larcker criterion can be seen from the diagonal values which are square roots of AVE and the inter-construct correlations which are lower than the diagonal values. The correlations are positive but are less than the diagonal validity values, indicating that theoretically the constructs are related but that they reflect different enough dimensions. The overall finding that there is a relatively strong link between government responsiveness and local governance outcomes also reinforces the theoretical assumption that responsive local governments lead to better governance outcomes.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Discriminant Validity

Construct	Mean	SD	CE	SA	GR	DC	LGO
Civic Engagement (CE)	3.71	0.73	0.846	0.721	0.687	0.614	0.704
Social Accountability (SA)	3.64	0.76	0.721	0.864	0.746	0.583	0.781
Government Responsiveness (GR)	3.58	0.78	0.687	0.746	0.854	0.556	0.793
Digital Connectivity (DC)	3.82	0.81	0.614	0.583	0.556	0.830	0.621
Local Governance Outcomes (LGO)	3.69	0.71	0.704	0.781	0.793	0.621	0.875

Note: Diagonal values in bold represent the square root of AVE. Off-diagonal values represent correlations.

The results of the structural models and tests of hypotheses are presented in Table 4. The results show that civic engagement is positively and significantly associated with local governance outcomes ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H1. Civic engagement is also strongly positively related to social accountability ($\beta = 0.618$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H2, and social accountability is also significantly positively related to local governance outcomes ($\beta = 0.341$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Likewise, civic involvement is significantly positively associated with government responsiveness ($\beta = 0.574$, $p < 0.001$), and government responsiveness was a significant contributor to local governance outcomes ($\beta = 0.392$, $p < 0.001$), satisfying H4 and H5. The relationship between civic engagement and digital connectivity is also positive and significant ($\beta = 0.127$, $p = 0.007$), supporting H6, and showing that digital connectivity enhances the positive governance implications of civic engagement. The estimates of effect sizes also indicate that civic engagement has a strong influence on social accountability, but only a modest effect on government responsiveness, as compared to the interaction effect. The structural results mainly support the proposed relationships.

Table 4. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	95% Confidence Interval	f ²	Decision
H1	Civic Engagement → Local Governance Outcomes	0.286	0.052	5.492	<0.001	[0.184, 0.388]	0.112	Supported

H2	Civic Engagement → Social Accountability	0.618	0.041	15.073	<0.001	[0.536, 0.697]	0.619	Supported
H3	Social Accountability → Local Governance Outcomes	0.341	0.061	5.590	<0.001	[0.221, 0.461]	0.161	Supported
H4	Civic Engagement → Government Responsiveness	0.574	0.045	12.756	<0.001	[0.486, 0.661]	0.490	Supported
H5	Government Responsiveness → Local Governance Outcomes	0.392	0.058	6.759	<0.001	[0.277, 0.505]	0.211	Supported
H6	Civic Engagement × Digital Connectivity → Local Governance Outcomes	0.127	0.047	2.702	0.007	[0.036, 0.220]	0.019	Supported

The mediation, moderation and predictive assessment of the proposed model are shown in Table 5. Both indirect pathways are statistically significant and the direct impact of civic engagement on local governance outcomes is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, civic engagement is found to have significant impacts on the outcomes of local governance through the two mechanisms: social accountability ($\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.001$) and government responsiveness ($\beta = 0.225$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that for both mechanisms part of the governance benefits of civic engagement are transmitted. The direct and indirect effects are both relevant and important, which means that the results show partial mediation in a complementary format. The total effect is 0.722 and the total indirect effect is 0.436, indicating that civic engagement can have a significant combined effect via the proposed pathways. The substantial interaction term between civic involvement and digital connectivity also reinforces the moderating role of digital connectivity. Lastly, the R^2 values suggest that the model accounts for 38.2% of the variance in social accountability, 32.9% in government responsiveness and 68.1% in local governance outcomes. The positive Q^2_{predict} value for local governance outcomes further suggests that they have predictive relevance. The findings as a whole indicate that civic engagement has a direct positive effect on local governance and can also be achieved through accountability and responsiveness mechanisms and that digital connectivity is a positive factor in engaging people in civic life.

Table 5. Mediation, Moderation and Predictive Assessment

Analysis	Relationship / Indicator	Effect (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	95% Bootstrap CI	Decision
Direct effect	Civic Engagement → Local Governance Outcomes	0.286	0.052	5.492	<0.001	[0.184, 0.388]	Significant
Mediation	Civic Engagement → Social Accountability → Local Governance Outcomes	0.211	0.043	4.907	<0.001	[0.131, 0.298]	Supported
Mediation	Civic Engagement → Government Responsiveness → Local Governance Outcomes	0.225	0.039	5.769	<0.001	[0.151, 0.304]	Supported
Mediation	Total indirect effect	0.436	0.051	8.549	<0.001	[0.337, 0.537]	Significant
Total effect	Civic Engagement → Local Governance Outcomes	0.722	0.044	16.409	<0.001	[0.635, 0.807]	Significant
Moderation	Civic Engagement × Digital Connectivity → Local Governance Outcomes	0.127	0.047	2.702	0.007	[0.036, 0.220]	Supported
Explanatory power	R^2 : Social Accountability	0.382	—	—	—	—	Moderate
Explanatory power	R^2 : Government Responsiveness	0.329	—	—	—	—	Moderate
Explanatory power	R^2 : Local Governance Outcomes	0.681	—	—	—	—	Substantial
Predictive relevance	Q^2_{predict} : Local Governance Outcomes	0.621	—	—	—	—	Supported

5. Discussions

The results offer consistent evidence that civic engagement is an important factor behind the outcomes of local governance in the Indian context. The result of civic engagement on local governance outcomes is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$),

meaning that the higher civic involvement in local public affairs, the better governance outcome perceived by citizens. This is in line with the overall picture which emerged in the meta-case analysis conducted by Gaventa and Barrett (2012) that citizen engagement is linked to certain key outcomes, including the strengthening of responsive and accountable states. Their evidence also indicates that engagement can lead to gains in citizenship, participation practices, state responsiveness and social inclusion – the size and direction of these impacts will vary depending on the type of engagement and the political environment. The present finding thus adds to a growing body of evidence that civic involvement is not just a democratic value, but a potentially valuable governance tool.

The results show that civic engagement is significantly associated with social accountability ($\beta = 0.618$, $p < 0.001$), lending strong support to the accountability pathway proposed in this study. This indicates that involvement can help citizens to watch the local government, request information, to check what the local government does and to have more influence and say over local decision making. This result is similar to that of Kim and Lee (2019), who highlight the need for participative processes and transparency in local government. It also complements a recent analysis by Lawton and Macaulay (2014) that connects citizen participation and localism with good governance and conduct. In a larger context, Gaventa and Barrett (2012) list responsive and accountable states as one of the key outcome categories of citizen engagement. Further, the size of the coefficient in the current study suggests that social accountability could be one of the most significant pathways by which civic involvement can help to improve local governance.

The positive effect of social accountability on local governance outcomes ($\beta = 0.341$, $p < 0.001$) also suggests that citizen participation does not automatically improve governance, but it does if it is put in place through certain accountability mechanisms. Citizens may be better able to monitor local governments and public programs, and this could create incentives for local governments to be more transparent in their actions, help deliver services to citizens and address citizen concerns. This is in line with the interpretation of Srirejeki and Khairurrizqo (2025) which emphasizes the role of community engagement as a strategy to curb corruption in local governments. This is also in line with the findings of Rafique, Habib and Rosilawati (2023) that meaningful participation can be limited by legal, political and administrative barriers. Based on the current findings, therefore, it seems that participatory spaces alone are not enough—citizens need to be given a real chance to hold government accountable and shape the governance process.

Further understanding of this relationship comes from the mediation analysis. The indirect effect of civic engagement on local governance via social accountability is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the effects of civic engagement being partially mediated by social accountability. This discovery reinforces the added value of the study by going beyond just the statement that "participation enhances governance". Rather the findings show the ways in which participation can create governance gains. This finding supports the argument put forward by Gaventa and Barrett (2012) that participation can contribute to responsive and accountable states, and complements the work of Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) who highlight the importance of direct public participation as a facet of local government. The substantial direct impact of civic engagement and the indirect impact of accountability suggest the presence of a complementary partial mediation, where civic engagement plays a role in government both directly in terms of accountability and indirectly via other forms of collective problem identification and citizen–government interaction, such as information exchange.

The second important finding is that civic involvement is positively related to government responsiveness ($\beta = 0.574$; $p < 0.001$). The relatively high coefficient indicates a strong link between active citizen participation and perceptions that their local government is responsive to and listens to their needs. This outcome is in line with the theoretical argument that citizens offer local governments information on problems, priorities, and service delivery shortcomings that might not be apparent to those making administrative decisions. Gaventa and Barrett (2012) also note that the response of this state has been

important as a consequence of its engagement with citizens. Andrews, Cowell and Downe (2011) also state that local government has a significant part to play in developing civic culture, by providing opportunities for active citizenship. The current findings thus indicate that there can be a reciprocal relationship between engagement and governance – citizens engage in governance and local institutions make the engagement worthwhile.

The second governance mechanism proposed in the model has a positive and significant effect on local governance outcome, which is government responsiveness ($\beta = 0.392$, $p < 0.001$). This result suggests that the effectiveness of local governance is highly related to how the government institutions respond to citizens' demands. In practice, participation will probably be felt as meaningful if the citizen feels that his/her concern is actually taken into account in the public decision making, services and/or local development activity. The findings are aligned with Pandeya and Shrestha (2016) who found in their study in Nepal the importance of citizen participation in local planning. It also aligns with the findings of Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) who highlight the importance of direct public participation in local government decision-making. It suggests that the attitude of the local government towards participation should not be only an administrative one, but the reaction of the authorities to the citizens' inputs has to be key to the transformation of participation into better governance.

This argument is supported by the results of the mediation, which are particularly strong. Civic engagement has a significant indirect effect on local governance outcomes through government responsiveness ($\beta = 0.225$, $p < 0.001$). The size of this indirect pathway is slightly larger than the size of the social-accountability pathway, suggesting that responsiveness may be a mechanism of particular importance for citizen engagement to lead to perceived improvements in governance. This discovery brings some nuance to the literature. Responsiveness makes sure that citizen needs are integrated in government action, while accountability makes it possible that citizens can measure the performances of government. Thus, good governance at the local level could involve both citizens' supervision and government's responsiveness. Both mediation mechanisms are being significant at the same time, suggesting that the two should not be considered mutually exclusive explanations, but rather complementary aspects of participatory governance.

Digital connectivity adds another significant contribution, as a moderating factor. Testing the interaction between civic engagement and digital connectivity reveals a positive, statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.127$, $p = 0.007$); the governance benefits of civic engagement are greater as citizens have access to and are able to use digital communication channels. This is in line with Gálvez-Rodríguez, Haro-de-Rosario and Caba-Pérez (2018), who show the relevance of online forms of engagement mechanisms to allow citizens to interact with public institutions. It also aligns with findings that the internet can enhance local civic engagement by enabling communication and exchange of information among local organizations. In India this finding is very important as digital platforms can complement traditional participation channels and give citizens access to information and the ability to raise concerns and connect with local governments outside of formal, in-person interactions.

The positive moderation effect ought to be interpreted with caution, however. Digital connectivity does not necessarily replace more traditional civic institutions. Instead, it seems to enhance the ability of existing participation mechanisms. Citizens that have access to digital information and communication channels may be better equipped to find out information regarding government programmes, to voice grievances and to mobilise other citizens to help solve local problems. In this way, digitalisation has the potential to alleviate some of the barriers to participation in terms of information and communication. The effect size of the interaction is however quite limited, indicating that digital connectivity is not a major determinant of governance outcomes but rather an enabling condition. This is supported by the overall literature which suggests that elements of institutional set-up, quality of participation, and responsiveness of government institutions are still crucial in translating participation into improved governance.

The results also confirm the general claim that it is the quality and not just the fact of participation that is governance-relevant. Although Bensus (2021) points to the fact that 'local' participatory mechanisms can help to shape local governance, it also reveals the challenge for participation when it does not translate into meaningful influence at the institutional level. In a similar vein, Hakeem and Josukutty (2026) highlight the need for rethinking community participation and involvement in governance at a deeper and more comprehensive level. The above viewpoints are relevant to the interpretation of the present findings, as the positive relationships found in the model cannot be interpreted as a proof that all forms of participation have a positive impact on good governance. Rather, participation should be substantive and have an impact on accountability, responsiveness and decision-making.

The findings are in line with the literature on community-based organisations. Rafique and Khoo (2018) shows how community-based organisations can serve as a means to involve citizens in local government and Mathews (2021) points to the role of neighbourhood organisations for civic governance. These organisations may be able to act as a link between citizens and the local authorities, especially when citizens have trouble expressing themselves on their own. The high correlation between civic involvement and social accountability and government responsiveness in the current study, therefore, may partly be due to the collective aspect of civic involvement. Organised citizens can bring together individual issues, put them forward more effectively, and make it more compelling for local authorities to act.

Meanwhile, the findings should be interpreted in the light of institutional barriers found in earlier studies. Legal, political and administrative restrictions can prevent citizens' participation (Rafique et al., 2023) and institutional design and organisational conditions are key in fostering public participation (Schäfer, 2019). Hence, the positive relationships found in this study are not to be construed as a finding that civic engagement alone can compensate for institutional weaknesses. On the contrary, it is necessary to have accessible institutions, transparent procedures, information available and a willingness of the government to respond in order to enable effective participation. This means that participatory institutions should be strengthened in India's decentralised governance framework along with greater administrative capacity and transparency.

The findings have important implications for Indian local governance. First, local authorities should go beyond the procedural approach in relation to citizen participation and create structures for citizens to affect planning, budgeting and service delivery. Secondly, the systems of social accountability should be strengthened, to ensure the participation leads to real monitoring and control. Third, local government should set up clear processes to address citizens' complaints and show how citizens' suggestions have been taken into account. Lastly, digital tools can be combined with the existing participatory tools to expand information and communication opportunities. Nevertheless, digital participation must be used alongside, and not as a substitute for, in-person and neighborhood participation, as less-connected citizens could otherwise be left out of the process.

6. Conclusions

This study explored the impact of civic involvement in improving local government performance in India, focusing on the mechanisms of social accountability and Government responsiveness and the moderating effects of digital connectivity. The results showed consistent evidence that civic involvement is positively related to better local governance outcomes. In addition to the direct link, the research shows that the governance gains of civic engagement work largely through enhanced social accountability and responsiveness of the government. The results thus point to a more dynamic role for citizens than that of just a passive recipient of public services, but one that allows them to play an active part in the effectiveness, transparency and responsiveness of local governance.

The empirical findings show that civic engagement positively affects outcomes of local governance, supporting the notion that civic involvement is related to improved

perception of local governance performance. Social accountability and governmental responsiveness are even more strongly tied to civic involvement. These results indicate that participation can open the door to citizens' oversight of government activities, to communication of local priorities, to a demand for transparency, and to public officials' responses to community needs. Social accountability and government responsiveness then play a large part in the results of local governance. The mediation analysis also shows that both of the mechanisms account for a portion of the effect of civic engagement, suggesting that civic engagement leads to better governance both directly and through an increase in the accountability and responsiveness of local institutions.

Digital connectivity is also found to be an important role in the study. The strong interaction between civic engagement and digital connectivity suggests that access to digital information and communication channels can contribute to a reinforcing the positive connection between civic engagement and local governance outcomes. Digital platforms have the potential to assist in information sharing processes, grievance communication, citizen–local authority interaction and community mobilisation. The relatively small moderation effect, however, indicates that the role of digital connectivity ought to be seen as an enabling factor and not as an alternative to institutional involvement. Digital tools are best suited to deliver governance gains when they are used in conjunction with open institutions, accessible participatory processes, and responsive government at the local level.

The study makes a number of contributions to the existing literature. First, it brings civic engagement, social accountability and government responsiveness together in one analytical framework, thereby giving a broader explanation as to how civic engagement affects local governance. Second, it brings a new dimension of digital connection as a contextual element that can enhance the efficacy of civic engagement. Third, the study's focus on the Indian context contributes to the still limited evidence on participatory local governance in large and institutionally diverse South Asian context. The results supplement earlier studies that have focused on the importance of citizens' participation in governance, and on the importance of examining the mechanisms through which citizens' participation results in governance outcomes, such as accountability, transparency and responsive government.

The results also have important policy implications. More avenues need to be provided to the citizens for their involvement in local planning, budgeting, monitoring and service delivery processes, at the local government level. Participation should be based on real opportunities for citizens to exert influence, and not viewed as a mere formal administrative demand. Local governments should also improve social accountability arrangements such as public disclosure, citizen monitoring, the provision of grievance redress and community level oversight. In addition, there needs to be clear processes within government agencies to show how citizen's views have been taken into account and acted upon. These steps can foster a virtuous cycle that sees the more significant participation of citizens, leading to greater accountability and responsiveness of local institutions and, in turn, to greater confidence of citizens in local institutions.

Digital connectivity has also to be integrated strategically in participatory governance. Digital platforms can be utilised by local governments to share public information with citizens, gather feedback, share service updates and engagement with communities. However, digital participation needs to be coupled with actions to tackle digital exclusion to ensure that people with low levels of connectivity or digital skills are not systematically disadvantaged. The combination of online mechanisms with traditional community meetings, community organisations and face-to-face consultations would develop a more inclusive participatory framework.

The study has a number of limitations. Findings reflect perceptions of civic involvement and local government and may not necessarily reflect objective improvements in institutional performance or service delivery quality. The cross-sectional design of the study also restricts the possibilities of determining temporal causality. In addition, India's

significant regional, socioeconomic and institutional heterogeneity implies that the relationships found in the study could differ at the level of states, urban or rural localities, and for different kinds of local government institutions. Future research can focus on the limitations by using longitudinal or panel datasets, multi-state comparative studies, and mixed methods that include survey evidence and administrative and objective measures of governance.

Future research might also explore other avenues by which civic engagement can impact the quality of local governance, such as political trust, institutional transparency, procedural justice, citizen empowerment and collective efficacy. Future studies might investigate age, education, gender, socioeconomic status and urban–rural location and their impact on digital participation. A comparative study of civic participation between states in India or between India and other countries in South Asia would also yield important findings about the institutional context in which civic engagement is most effective.

In conclusion, it is clear from the study that civic engagement can achieve a meaningful impact on enhancing the outcomes of local governance if it is converted into accountability and responsiveness of the government. The results indicate that local governance is not just about capacity, but about relations between the citizens and public institutions as well. Increased civic engagement, social accountability, government responsiveness and inclusive digital connectivity can thus offer a holistic pathway towards more transparent, responsive and citizen-centred local governance in India.

Declarations

Ethics and Guidelines: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The ethical approval specifically covers the research procedures and data collection activities conducted for this study.

Consent to participate: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Consent was obtained using a standardized written form, signed by each participant before participation in the survey.

Consent to publish: The authors have provided consent to publish.

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Declaration of using generative AI: During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to correct the grammatical errors. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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