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The Quintessential Question: Who Governs the Algorithm?

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What does participatory democracy truly mean in the age of Artificial Intelligence? Is it merely an ornamental constitutional phrase, recited ceremonially in civics textbooks and public discourse, or can it still manifest as a living democratic ethic wherein an ordinary citizen, driven not by institutional authority but constitutional conscience, meaningfully contributes to the architecture of national policy? There are moments in the life of a democracy when the most consequential questions do not emerge from parliamentary benches, ministerial corridors, or corporate boardrooms, but from the conscience of ordinary citizens compelled to interrogate the direction in which their Republic is moving.

Artificial Intelligence presents India with precisely such a moment. For all the celebratory rhetoric surrounding technological advancement, digital revolutions, and algorithmic efficiency, an uncomfortable question lingers beneath the euphoria: who ultimately governs the algorithm, and more importantly, who protects the citizen from it?

This Remains, to Me, the Quintessential Question of the AI Age

Because history has repeatedly demonstrated a dangerous truth: technology advances far more rapidly than morality, while regulation arrives breathlessly late to catastrophes already unfolding. Democracies rarely collapse overnight. They erode silently, through systems normalised before they are questioned. And perhaps no system in contemporary history possesses greater capacity to invisibly reshape human existence than Artificial Intelligence.

Over the past decade, AI has ceased to be a speculative technological novelty and has instead become an invisible architect of modern life. Algorithms now influence employment opportunities, healthcare access, educational mobility, financial credibility, predictive policing, surveillance infrastructures, and even the information ecosystems through which democracies construct public opinion. The citizen today is not merely governed by institutions; increasingly, the citizen is filtered through code. The algorithm has quietly become the new bureaucracy of the digital century. Yet despite its profound societal implications, AI governance across much of the world remains fragmented, reactive, and disturbingly underdeveloped. We continue to pursue innovation with evangelical enthusiasm while postponing the more uncomfortable conversation regarding accountability. Nations compete to dominate Artificial Intelligence, but far fewer pause to ask what an unregulated intelligence may ultimately do to democratic societies.

India, standing at the precipice of becoming a global digital superpower, confronts an especially delicate challenge. We aspire simultaneously towards technological sovereignty, economic acceleration, digital inclusion, and constitutional justice. But technological progress devoid of ethical accountability risks becoming not empowerment, but institutionalised asymmetry masquerading as efficiency. The central anxiety surrounding Artificial Intelligence is therefore not merely technological – it is constitutional.

When opaque algorithms determine opportunities without explanation, when synthetic media destabilises truth itself, when surveillance infrastructures evolve faster than legal safeguards, and when automated systems begin influencing human dignity without transparency or accountability, democracy cannot afford regulatory ambiguity. The algorithm may be mathematical, but its consequences are profoundly human. A society that automates decisions without safeguarding rights does not become modern. It merely digitises inequality.

It was this realisation that compelled me, during an ordinary classroom discussion in April 2025, to confront a deeply unsettling reality: while AI was rapidly permeating governance, employment, education, media, and democratic discourse itself, India still lacked a comprehensive legislative framework capable of regulating its ethical and constitutional implications. What followed was neither rebellion nor self-glorification. It was an exercise in democratic participation. Working independently from Faridabad, Haryana without institutional affiliation, political patronage, or legislative authority, I undertook months of research into constitutional law, comparative governance frameworks, ethical philosophy, technology regulation models, and international AI policy discourse. Drawing from the European Union AI Act, OECD principles, UNESCO recommendations, constitutional jurisprudence, and comparative global approaches, I drafted an 81-page legislative proposal titled –

The Artificial Intelligence (Regulation and Governance) Act, 2025

At its core, the framework attempted to reconcile innovation with accountability, digital sovereignty with civil liberties, and technological advancement with human dignity. The proposal advocated a risk-based classification system for AI technologies, statutory oversight bodies, algorithmic transparency obligations, AI ethics education, safeguards against deepfake manipulation and synthetic misinformation, grievance redressal mechanisms, and crucially, a citizen-centric approach rooted in Articles 14, 19, and 21 of the Constitution of India. Because if Artificial Intelligence is to influence human lives, constitutional morality must govern Artificial Intelligence.

The framework was subsequently submitted to multiple constitutional and governmental authorities, including the Prime Minister's Office and Rashtrapati Bhavan, where it was later published on the official website of the President of India. The work eventually received international recognition for its contribution to AI governance discourse. Yet the significance of this journey, at least to me, extends far beyond personal acknowledgement or institutional validation. The larger question is whether Indian democracy is prepared to genuinely institutionalise participatory governance in the age of emerging technologies.

Across the world, policymaking increasingly risks becoming confined within technocratic silos inaccessible to ordinary citizens. Artificial Intelligence, despite influencing billions of lives, is frequently discussed in vocabularies comprehensible only to corporations, consultants, bureaucracies, or specialised think tanks. Expertise is indispensable, certainly, but democracy cannot survive as a spectator sport where citizens merely endure policies they were never invited to intellectually participate in shaping. A Republic cannot meaningfully call itself democratic if its citizens are trusted to vote, but not trusted to think.

India's constitutional imagination was never intended to be passive. It envisioned citizenship not merely as legal identity, but as active democratic engagement. Yet the irony remains difficult to ignore. We frequently encourage young people to "participate in nation-building," while institutional pathways for substantive civic contribution remain sporadic, opaque, and often performative. Public consultations are frequently symbolic rather than structural. Citizen submissions are acknowledged inconsistently. Intellectual contributions emerging beyond elite institutional ecosystems struggle to enter mainstream policy discourse.

And yet, the AI revolution makes such exclusion increasingly dangerous. Artificial Intelligence is not merely another sectoral issue akin to telecommunications or infrastructure policy. In India alone, the digital economy's contribution to GDP has surged from 8.5% in 2020 to an estimated 13.8% in 2025. This expansion is anchored by an Indian AI market that reached USD 7.63 billion in 2024 and is projected to skyrocket past USD 17 billion by 2027. This is no longer a localized tech phenomenon; it is a massive macroeconomic ecosystem capable of reshaping labour markets, democratic communication, warfare ethics, judicial administration, privacy norms, social trust, and even human cognition itself.

The scale of this shift is visible in the workforce. Recent data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) notes India's total workforce stands at approximately 56.2 crore (562 million) individuals. While NITI Aayog and NASSCOM highlighted that AI adoption across critical sectors has opened vast avenues, projecting nearly 4 million new customer service and tech-adjacent roles, the transition also presents systemic challenges. Research outlines a massive "skill mismatch crisis" in the country, warning that structural automation could put millions of routine-intensive, middle-skill jobs at risk if aggressive upskilling is not met. This reality aligns directly with the Economic Survey's mandate that India must generate 7.85 million jobs annually until 2030 to sustain inclusive growth. Consequently, AI governance cannot remain confined to technical optimisation alone. Driven by NITI Aayog's "AI for All" blueprint, it demands a framework that goes beyond engineers. It requires constitutional thinkers, ethicists, sociologists, educators, psychologists, civil society actors, and crucially, citizens themselves to ensure this massive infrastructure transitions safely into a public good. Because technology designed without societal participation eventually begins governing society without consent.

India possesses a unique opportunity in this regard. Unlike many Western democracies currently struggling to reconcile hyper-individualised digital capitalism with social cohesion, India's constitutional framework inherently balances rights with collective welfare. If approached thoughtfully, India could pioneer a genuinely human-centred AI governance model for the Global South, one prioritising accessibility, constitutional accountability, linguistic diversity, and democratic safeguards alongside technological advancement. But such a future requires more than startup enthusiasm or digital optimism. It requires intellectual seriousness and regulatory courage. Above all, it requires institutional openness

towards unconventional contributions emerging beyond traditional corridors of power. Most importantly, it requires us to reject the dangerous illusion that technological inevitability excuses democratic passivity.

The quintessential question, ultimately, is not whether India will become an AI power. It almost certainly will. The real question is whether the Republic can ensure that the citizen remains protected, dignified, and constitutionally empowered within that technological future. Because if democracy is to endure meaningfully in the algorithmic century, governance itself must evolve from bureaucratic transaction into participatory imagination. And perhaps, somewhere within that transformation lies not merely the future of Artificial Intelligence in India, but the future of Indian democracy itself [1-6].

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