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Digitising Accountability in India: The Ombudsman's Constitutional Promise in the Age of CPGRAMS and AI-Driven Governance

MANAN PANKAJKUMAR BHATT* AND DR. VIKASH KUMAR UPADHYAY**

ABSTRACT

Corruption is an old problem which requires sustained solutions and developing tools to address it. In India corruption thwarts the nation's progress, halting governance. Kautilya was writing about it in the Arthashastra. Mughal and colonial administrations struggled with it, and independent India has piled on plenty more since: the Jeep affair, Bofors, the 2G spectrum case, Coalgate. When Parliament finally answered in 2013, it did so with the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, creating the Lokpal at the Union level and Lokayuktas in the States. More than ten years later, an obvious question has gone strangely unasked. Does the Ombudsman model actually deliver on that promise in India, or does it just gesture toward it? At the same time, e-governance has quietly changed how citizens deal with government. Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System or CPGRAMS, now increasingly helped along by Artificial Intelligence (AI) in triaging complaints, has altered grievance redressal in practice, though it grew up almost entirely apart from Ombudsman oversight. This paper looks closely at where the Indian Ombudsman falls short. This paper reflects that digitalisation of accountability will help integrate e-governance with Ombudsman oversight and will fulfil constitutional standards of Articles 14, 19 and 21 of the Constitution of India. This paper has also studied the ombudsman models of Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom, South Korea and Singapore, comparing them to identify a better structure.

Keywords: Ombudsman, Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, Constitutional Accountability, CPGRAMS, AI-Driven Governance, e-Governance, Rule of Law, Corruption

I. INTRODUCTION

The definition of governance does not have one facet. Usually, people understood it as machinery of ministries, offices and forms through which the state does its daily business. Sometimes people also confuse themselves between government and governance. Government

* Author is a Ph.D. Scholar at Institute of Law, Nirma University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1586-6578>

** Author is an Assistant Professor of Law at Institute of Law, Nirma University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.

refers to a formal structure of the State, such as the legislature, executive and judiciary. In contrast, governance is the process and manner in which that formal structure exercises power. Government reform is a worldwide trend, and a response to this trend is known as “good governance”. The World Bank has defined good governance as a system that has an efficient public service, an independent judicial service, and respect for the law and human rights at all levels of government.¹ Leftwich defines good governance as an efficient, open, accountable, and audited public service that has the bureaucratic competence to help design and implement appropriate policies.² Corruption is the antithesis of good governance. Corruption has many connotations and interpretations and it varies from place to place as well as discipline. It includes many acts of bribery, extortion, the exchange of favours, nepotism, judicial fraud, accounting fraud, and public service fraud.³ Corruption violates human rights and it is harmful to individuals. When corruption is broadly spread, people do not have access to justice. They are not secure and cannot protect their livelihoods. Court officials and police support bribe-givers more; poor families suffer a lot as they do not have the capacity to offer bribes. The hospitals do not cure people because the medical officials give better cures to those patients who have the capacity to give bribes and sometimes medical staff sell the medicines available for common people. The schooling of children is also adversely affected, as a large portion of the education budget is diverted. In many ways corruption encourages discrimination and deprives vulnerable people of fulfilling their political, civil, social, cultural and economic rights.⁴

This discussion shows that corruption violates constitutional principles, particularly the Indian Constitution. The preamble of the Indian Constitution secures to all citizens justice, liberty and equality. These ideas of a preamble are also reflected in more detail under Arts 14 and 21. Article 14 guarantees every person equal protection and equality before law as fundamental rights. Article 21 ensures that every person shall have life and personal liberty. Corruption violates the assurance given by the preamble and fundamental rights to equality, life and personal liberty.

The Supreme Court has said that corruption is an attack on the heart of democratic governance, something that breeds distrust and hollows out the constitutional promise of equality.⁵ If a

¹ WORLD BANK, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT 11 (1992).

² Adrian Leftwich, *Governance, Democracy and Development in the Third World*, 14 THIRD WORLD Q. 605, 611 (1993).

³ SUSAN ROSE-ACKERMAN & BONNIE J. PALIFKA, CORRUPTION AND GOVERNMENT: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND REFORM 55 (2d ed. 2016).

⁴ INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY, CORRUPTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS: MAKING THE CONNECTION 23 (2009).

⁵ Vineet Narain v. Union of India, (1998) 1 SCC 226.

government is serious about that, punishing corruption after the fact cannot be enough. It has to be designed out, structurally, in advance.

Two responses to this problem grew up in India, at different times, for different reasons, and mostly without talking to each other. One was the Ombudsman, meant to supervise public administration impartially. The other was e-governance, meant to reform administrative procedure through technology, narrowing discretion while widening traceability. This paper's argument, in short, is that keeping these as separate tracks is a mistake. Anti-corruption reform that takes constitutional accountability seriously has to bring the two together.

II. THE OMBUDSMAN IN INDIA: EVOLUTION, STRUCTURE AND LIMITATIONS

A. Conceptual Origins of the Ombudsman Institution

The word “*umboðsmaðr*” (loosely translated as Proxy person or Representative) itself is Swedish, or at least Nordic in origin, and the institution dates to the early nineteenth century. An Ombudsman is, at its simplest, an independent body empowered to oversee public administration and investigate complaints of maladministration. Accessibility, fairness, and impartial investigation are its design values, not adversarial adjudication.⁶ Over the following century and a half the model travelled well, becoming, in many democracies, the default answer to a simple question: where does a citizen go when the courts are too slow, or too costly, for an ordinary grievance?⁷

Informality is close to the whole point of the model. An Ombudsman is meant to let citizens seek redress without the cost, delay, or procedural weight of litigation, and its authority, notably, does not rest on coercion at all. It rests on moral standing, on transparency, and on the persuasive force of a well-reasoned recommendation.⁸

B. The Ombudsman Idea in the Indian Administrative Context

India has been working on this idea since 1966, when the First Administrative Reforms Commission recommended a Lokpal as an independent watchdog at the Union level to review citizen complaints against public officials, together with Lokayuktas at the State level, both intended to be insulated from political control.⁹ That recommendation then sat dormant for nearly half a century. Political consensus that some sort of national Ombudsman was needed

⁶ NILS HERLITZ, *THE SWEDISH OMBUDSMAN* (1972).

⁷ GERALD E. CAIDEN, *INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK OF THE OMBUDSMAN: EVOLUTION AND PRESENT FUNCTION* (1983).

⁸ TREVOR BUCK, RICHARD KIRKHAM & BRIAN THOMPSON, *THE OMBUDSMAN ENTERPRISE AND ADMINISTRATIVE JUSTICE* (2011).

⁹ ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS COMMISSION, *REPORT ON PROBLEMS OF REDRESS OF CITIZENS' GRIEVANCES* (1966).

was never really in short supply. What was repeatedly in short supply was the political will to actually create one. Successive Lokpal Bills were introduced and lapsed, which says something about how rigidly entrenched institutions resist the prospect of external oversight.¹⁰ States, meanwhile, pursued their own path, and several passed their own Lokayukta legislation in the interim, producing a patchwork of Ombudsman models instead of one coherent system.

It took an enormous civil society anti-corruption movement to supply the momentum for Parliament finally to pass the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act in 2013, a milestone that gave the Ombudsman idea statutory footing at both the Union and State levels. As the sections that follow suggest, however, that statutory footing turned out to raise about as many problems as it solved.

C. The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013: Scope and Structure

Under the 2013 Act, the Lokpal is an independent statutory body empowered to inquire into corruption allegations against public officials, ministers and senior civil servants included. It is designed as a multi-member body, its judicial and non-judicial members together chosen through a dedicated selection committee, whose entire purpose is to insulate the appointment process from precisely the political pressures the institution is meant to check.¹¹

At the State level the Act mandates Lokayuktas, yet it leaves States considerable room to decide their own powers and procedures, a design choice that has proved costly in practice. Some Lokayuktas ended up with real investigative teeth. Others remain under-staffed, under-resourced, and narrow in jurisdiction.¹² The result is not one Ombudsman system so much as a patchwork of variations on a common theme, State by State.

A deeper structural weakness lies underneath all of this. The Indian Ombudsman is, at bottom, a recommending body. It investigates, and it finds, but implementation of its findings rests with the executive, which happens to be the very branch it exists to check.¹³ This dependency does serious damage to enforcement and to public confidence alike, and it recurs, in one form or another, throughout the rest of this analysis.

D. Structural and Functional Constraints

Whether the Ombudsman lives up to its constitutional billing depends, in practice, on how the institution was designed, how its procedures unfold on the ground, and the political currents running around it. Five recurring gaps stand out and each deserves separate treatment.

¹⁰ P.D.T. Achary, *Lokpal: Anatomy of a Failure*, 45 ECON. & POL. WKLY. 12 (2010).

¹¹ The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, No. 1 of 2014, India Code (2014), § 3.

¹² Renuka Sasanamari, *Lokayukta System in India: A Critique*, 4 INT'L J. ARTS & SCI. RES. 135 (2017).

¹³ Sasanamari, *supra* note 12.

The first is independence without autonomy. The Ombudsman is formally separated from executive influence: it cannot punish, cannot enforce, and holds no coercive power of its own. Yet the Lokpal, in practice, must lean on external investigative agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and State Anti-Corruption Bureaux simply to make anything happen, which is a somewhat self-defeating arrangement for a body meant to scrutinise executive lapses.¹⁴ Scholars of Indian administrative law have been unusually blunt about where this leads. Without real investigative freedom to match its legal independence, the Ombudsman risks becoming exactly what its critics have long called it, a “toothless tiger”: formally impressive, functionally sidelined, and not trusted by the public it was built to serve.¹⁵

The second is accessibility set against procedural rigidity. An Ombudsman is supposed to be the easy option, the alternative to litigation, yet in India layered preliminary scrutiny, jurisdictional carve outs, and thin powers of *Suo motu* action have chipped away at that promise, particularly for the ordinary complainant with no lawyer and little patience for process.¹⁶ Comparative governance research is consistent on this point: accountability bodies burdened by excessive process tend to lose public engagement simply because complainants give up. India is not an exception to that pattern.

The third is oversight without enforcement bite. Classical Ombudsman models bet on moral suasion rather than coercion, an approach that functions reasonably well where administrative ethics are already strong but far less well where corruption is entrenched. The numbers here are not encouraging. On the Corruption Perceptions Index 2023, India ranked 93rd out of 180 countries, scoring 39 out of 100, a position that has barely shifted across successive years despite the Ombudsman framework having been in place for over a decade.¹⁷ That stagnation is itself a finding worth pausing over. It suggests that the mere existence of an oversight body is not sufficient in itself. Without enforceable authority behind it, the gap between complaints filed and wrongs remedied persists.

The fourth is federal fragmentation, producing uneven accountability. The Constitution’s promise of even-handed governance sits awkwardly beside the reality that Lokayuktas differ, State to State, in jurisdiction, powers, appointment procedure, and independence. Constitutional scholars have long observed that such variation dilutes Lokayuktas as guardians of governance,¹⁸ and when combined with uneven investigative freedom and procedural friction,

¹⁴ M.P. JAIN, *ADMINISTRATIVE LAW OF INDIA* (8th ed. 2021).

¹⁵ JAIN, *supra* note 14.

¹⁶ Achary, *supra* note 10.

¹⁷ TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL, *CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX 2023*.

¹⁸ S.P. SATHE, *JUDICIAL ACTIVISM IN INDIA* (2002).

it leaves the Ombudsman more symbolic than substantive as a check on power in a number of States.

The fifth is a persistent gap in transparency. Constitutional accountability depends on transparency almost by definition, and Parliament itself recognised as much when it enacted a general statutory right to information covering public authorities.¹⁹ Ombudsman institutions in India, however, have been slow to embrace proactive disclosure, detailed performance reporting, or accessible digital tools of the kind that statute anticipates. With so little public data on how these bodies perform, citizens are left with almost no way of monitoring the institutions meant to protect them, an odd deficiency to carry into an era that otherwise trades on the promise of Digital India. That opacity is measurable. Only seven of the twenty-nine State Lokayuktas currently in existence publish their own annual reports, which means the very institution built to check public administration is, for the most part, not itself open to public view.²⁰

III. E-GOVERNANCE IN INDIA: CONCEPT, EVOLUTION AND ANTI-CORRUPTION POTENTIAL

A. Understanding E-Governance as a Governance Reform Tool

E-governance denotes the use of information and communication technologies in government processes toward better service delivery, greater openness, and wider participation, though that narrow definition rather undersells it. The United Nations and the World Bank have both stressed that e-governance amounts to more than digitisation alone, and that it reorients how government functions, toward accountability and toward the citizen.²¹

From an administrative law perspective, the appeal is direct. Standardised procedures, automated decision-making, and digital audit trails all reduce unstructured discretion, and because technology narrows the scope for unmediated, face-to-face contact between citizen and official, it correspondingly narrows the opportunities for rent-seeking and petty corruption.²²

B. Evolution of E-Governance Policy in India

India's formal engagement with e-governance dates to 2006 and the launch of the National e-Governance Plan, which sought to move government services online. The shift it represents is worth naming precisely: a move away from department centred administration and toward service delivery judged on efficiency, transparency, and reliability.²³

¹⁹ The Right to Information Act, No. 22 of 2005, India Code (2005).

²⁰ *Lokayuktas' Report Card: Only Seven of the 29 Release Their Annual Reports*, BUS. STANDARD (Oct. 10, 2022).

²¹ UNITED NATIONS, E-GOVERNMENT SURVEY (various years).

²² SUSAN ROSE-ACKERMAN, CORRUPTION AND GOVERNMENT (1999).

²³ GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, NATIONAL E-GOVERNANCE PLAN (2006).

Digital India, launched in 2015, built on that foundation through digital infrastructure, digital literacy, and universal access to online services. None of it would carry much legal weight without the Information Technology Act, 2000, which supplies the scaffolding by recognising electronic records, digital signatures, and electronic service delivery as legally valid acts.²⁴

C. Digital Grievance Redressal and Transparency Mechanisms

Among the more consequential products of this shift has been the digital complaint platform, CPGRAMS chief among them, which lets citizens file complaints online, track their progress, and receive time bound responses from government departments.²⁵

Whether it actually works is a fair question, and the honest answer is partly. Empirical research suggests digital grievance systems do enhance openness, simply by making complaints easier to track and by narrowing the information gap between citizen and government.²⁶ Technology alone cannot guarantee accountability, though. Everything still depends on the complaint handling system behind the portal being efficient and institutionally reliable - a portal, after all, is only as good as the office answering it. Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG) own figures show the average time taken to dispose of a CPGRAMS grievance falling from roughly twenty-eight days in 2019 to about thirteen days in more recent reporting cycles, a real improvement on paper. Speed is not the same thing as resolution. A falling disposal-time average says nothing about whether a closed grievance was actually addressed or simply logged and shut, the exact ambiguity pressed earlier in this Part.²⁷

D. Limits of E-Governance as a Standalone Anti-Corruption Tool

E-governance has shown real promise against specific forms of corruption, even if its record is inconsistent. Incomplete digitisation, weak institutional integration, and poor follow-up can, in combination, reduce a grievance portal to little more than a “complaint repository,” a place where grievances get logged, not resolved.²⁸ The implication is plain. E-governance and Ombudsman oversight need to operate together, not as parallel systems that happen to share a subject matter.

²⁴ The Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000, India Code (2000).

²⁵ DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS & PUBLIC GRIEVANCES, CPGRAMS GUIDELINES.

²⁶ Suman Goel & Raj Kumar, *E-Governance: A Tool for Tackling Corruption in India*, 2 INT’L J. MGMT. SCI. & TECH. 35 (2014).

²⁷ DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS & PUBLIC GRIEVANCES, CPGRAMS ANNUAL REPORT.

²⁸ WORLD BANK, DIGITAL DIVIDENDS (2016).

E. Digitalisation of Welfare Architecture: “JAM Trinity” (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile), India Stack and Direct Benefit Transfer

Grievance portals and digitised service delivery are only part of the story, and a narrower part than it might first appear. Understanding where Indian e-governance is actually headed requires looking at the broader transformation of India’s digital public infrastructure since 2014, a transformation that reshaped the relationship between the State, the citizen, and welfare administration more fundamentally than any single portal could.

Financial inclusion was the first big move. The Jan Dhan Yojana brought millions of people, many with no prior relationship to formal banking at all, into the banking system for the first time.²⁹ Aadhaar supplied the identity layer beneath this expansion, a digital identity mechanism capable of authenticating beneficiaries across welfare and administrative programmes of every kind.³⁰ Add the rapid spread of mobile connectivity and inexpensive 5G data, and the result is what is can be called the “JAM trinity”- Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, and Mobile, which now underpins much of India’s digital governance architecture.³¹

India Stack consolidated this further, providing a layered digital public infrastructure built for paperless governance, digital authentication, and interoperable financial transactions.³² Its most visible product is probably the Unified Payments Interface, which lets people move money instantly and cheaply from a mobile phone.³³ Its growth has done more than make payments convenient. It has pushed economic activity out of cash and into traceable channels, and cash, historically, is where a great deal of quiet corruption used to hide.

Direct Benefit Transfer is where this transformation bites hardest. By depositing welfare benefits straight into verified beneficiary accounts, it is designed to cut out intermediary leakage, constrain discretion at the exact point of delivery, and make public money traceable.³⁴ Put differently, discretionary, person to person welfare distribution is gradually being replaced by something rule based, auditable, and mediated by technology instead of an official’s individual judgment.

There is a constitutional reading of all this, and it is, on balance, a favourable one. Digitalisation of this kind supports the values behind Articles 14 and 21 through greater equality of access to

²⁹ GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, PRADHAN MANTRI JAN DHAN YOJANA: PROGRESS REPORT (2023).

³⁰ The Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Act, No. 18 of 2016, India Code (2016).

³¹ GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, ECONOMIC SURVEY 2016-17, ch. 3 (JAM trinity).

³² ISPIRT FOUNDATION, INDIA STACK: AN OVERVIEW.

³³ NATIONAL PAYMENTS CORPORATION OF INDIA, UPI: PRODUCT OVERVIEW.

³⁴ GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, DBT MISSION, ANNUAL REPORT (2022).

benefits, more procedural fairness, and more transparency in State action generally. It is not costless, however. Large scale digital governance brings its own concerns: exclusion errors, data protection, algorithmic opacity, and a new species of accountability question.³⁵ Which is really the argument of this paper in miniature. Technological systems cannot, on their own, guarantee accountability. Their legitimacy depends on oversight institutions capable of catching grievances, correcting systemic failures, and keeping digital governance tethered to constitutional norms instead of letting it drift away from them.

IV. CONSTITUTIONAL MANDATES ON TECHNOLOGY AND ADMINISTRATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

The Constitution of India has no direct mandate on the use of technology in administration. However, the use of technology and its inter-relation with the principles of equality, rule of law, and administrative accountability has its foundation in constitutional mandate. The Constitution sets the governing standard for how public power may be exercised, which means any integration of technology driven reform with Ombudsman oversight has to be tested against fairness, non-arbitrariness, access to justice, and openness, and not against efficiency alone.

A. Rule of Law, Equality, and the Control of Administrative Discretion

Begin with the rule of law, which occupies a foundational place in Indian constitutional theory. Every exercise of public power must remain within the bounds of legality and be applied fairly and uniformly. Article 14 prohibits arbitrary State action and mandates equality before the law, and administrative discretion, though necessary for governance, becomes constitutionally suspect the moment it is exercised without transparency, standards, or oversight.³⁶

Judicial doctrine on this point has been consistent for decades. Arbitrariness is antithetical to equality, and Article 14 guards against arbitrary State action whether legislative, executive, or purely administrative in character.³⁷ Corruption, seen this way, amounts to an extreme form of arbitrariness rather than an incidental violation of that command, one that privileges personal gain over public good and offends the rule of law's basic demand for fairness and predictability.

E-governance can, in principle, serve as a constitutional instrument for controlling discretion. Standardised workflows and digitised, auditable record keeping make it considerably harder to bend administrative processes out of shape, and once rules are embedded into a digital system, discretionary spaces begin converting into rule bound processes, a substantial advance

³⁵ WORLD BANK, DIGITAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY (2016).

³⁶ E.P. Royappa v. State of Tamil Nadu, (1974) 4 SCC 3.

³⁷ Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India, (1978) 1 SCC 248.

for the constitutional value of equality however one weighs its other costs.³⁸ That potential only gets realised when technology is paired with accountability structures capable of addressing the failures, abuses, or circumvention of the digital systems themselves. Technology unaccompanied by oversight merely relocates discretion. It does not eliminate it.

B. Article 21 and the Right to Effective Grievance Redressal

Article 21's guarantee of life and personal liberty has long been read broadly enough to include dignity, access to justice, and procedural fairness.³⁹ Maladministration and corruption are, on this reading, forms of administrative injustice that clash directly with those rights by denying individuals timely services, benefits, and entitlements they are legally owed.

The Supreme Court has been consistent here. Access to justice is an essential part of Article 21.⁴⁰ Courts remain the ultimate guardians of constitutional rights, of course, yet they were never likely to serve as a realistic forum for every routine administrative grievance. Lean too heavily on judicial remedies and the result is delay, cost, and institutional strain, which in practice denies timely justice to a great many citizens who cannot wait that long.

Grievance redressal, viewed from this angle, rises above mere policy convenience to become a constitutional necessity. Platforms such as CPGRAMS give practical shape to the right to be heard and to receive a reasoned response.⁴¹ Redressal without independent oversight risks turning into procedural formality. Complaints closed, not resolved. Link Ombudsman institutions to digital grievance systems, by contrast, and something more useful emerges: a constitutional bridge between administrative procedure and substantive remedy.

C. Transparency, Accountability, and Democratic Governance

Transparency and accountability are not written into the Constitution as free-standing fundamental rights, yet they flow unmistakably from democracy and the rule of law as basic features of the constitutional scheme.⁴² Judicial recognition of the right to information as part of Article 19(1)(a) confirms this constitutional commitment to open governance.⁴³

E-governance advances transparency in obvious ways: public access to information, visibility into decision-making, service delivery timelines a citizen can check. Digital dashboards and

³⁸ AMARTYA SEN, DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM 35–37 (1999).

³⁹ Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi, (1981) 1 SCC 608.

⁴⁰ Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar, (1980) 1 SCC 81.

⁴¹ DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS & PUBLIC GRIEVANCES, CPGRAMS ANNUAL REPORT, *supra* note 27.

⁴² Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala, (1973) 4 SCC 225.

⁴³ State of U.P. v. Raj Narain, (1975) 4 SCC 428.

online tracking narrow the informational asymmetry between citizen and State.⁴⁴ Transparency without accountability is thin comfort, however. Knowing that a decision was delayed or unjust does not help very much if no mechanism exists to challenge or correct it.

This is precisely where Ombudsman institutions earn their keep, converting transparency into accountability. Their investigatory role, their independence from the executive, and their capacity to issue reasoned findings all align with what constitutional governance requires. Feed these institutions into digital governance ecosystems, and their ability to spot systemic failure, monitor compliance, and recommend reform grounded in real data only strengthens.

V. INTEGRATING E-GOVERNANCE WITH THE OMBUDSMAN FRAMEWORK: A CONSTITUTIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPERATIVE

So here is the claim this paper is making. Sustainable anti-corruption reform in India means structurally integrating e-governance with the Ombudsman framework, and that is a bigger ask than it sounds. It is not just a software upgrade bolted onto an old institution. It amounts to rethinking, at a basic level, how accountability is supposed to travel through public administration in the first place.

A. Fragmentation of Remedies and the Citizen's Dilemma

India's grievance redressal architecture is, at present, badly fragmented. Service complaints, vigilance matters, and corruption allegations are each routed through a separate channel, governed by its own procedure and jurisdiction, leaving citizens to work through a complex bureaucratic maze just to identify the right forum.⁴⁵ This burden falls hardest on precisely the populations least equipped to carry it, a pattern well documented in the wider literature on unequal access to formal grievance systems.⁴⁶ That imbalance is, in its own quiet way, an undermining of the constitutional promise of equal access to remedies.

Digital portals have simplified the entry point. Too often, though, they operate in isolation from oversight institutions. As a result, a grievance that reveals a pattern of corruption or systemic maladministration can still be closed superficially, or transferred, without any real accountability attaching. Without an unbroken escalation path between grievance portals and Ombudsman institutions, both systems lose deterrent force.

⁴⁴ WORLD BANK, *supra* note 35.

⁴⁵ DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS & PUBLIC GRIEVANCES, CPGRAMS GUIDELINES, *supra* note 25.

⁴⁶ Marc Galanter, *Why the 'Haves' Come Out Ahead: Speculations on the Limits of Legal Change*, 9 LAW & SOC'Y REV. 95 (1974).

B. Designing an Integrated Digital-Ombudsman Model

Picture instead an integrated model in which citizens enter the accountability system through a single digital interface, with complaints routed algorithmically and administratively to whichever authority has jurisdiction. Ordinary service failures stay with the relevant department, while complaints indicating corruption, abuse of discretion, or repeated non-compliance escalate to the Ombudsman.⁴⁷

Such a model preserves administrative efficiency while adding proper constitutional oversight. Digital case management systems can supply Ombudsman institutions with complete complaint histories, documentary evidence, and timelines, cutting procedural delay and sharpening investigatory capacity. Public facing tracking, meanwhile, does something for legitimacy that little else quite manages: it demonstrates to citizens that complaints get looked at, not just filed away.

C. Anti-Corruption Impact of Digital Oversight Integration

The anti-corruption value of this integration comes down to two things: traceability and escalation. Those are the conditions corruption survives worst. Corruption thrives in opaque administrative spaces, where decisions go undocumented and delay is treated as normal. Digital systems generate the audit trail that exposes such opacity, while Ombudsman scrutiny is what turns the resulting data into actual accountability.⁴⁸

Comparative governance research is clear enough on this point. E-governance reduces corruption most effectively when it is paired with independent oversight. Left to itself, technology tends to displace corrupt practice rather than eliminate it, since officials adapt, as officials generally do. Ombudsman integration supplies the check against that adaptation: an external actor capable of investigating misconduct even as it evolves.

D. Artificial Intelligence, Analytics, and Oversight: Opportunities and Risks

Artificial Intelligence and data analytics add a further layer, carrying real upside and real risk in roughly equal measure. AI assisted grievance triaging, pattern detection, and risk profiling can sharpen both administrative and Ombudsman functions by flagging offices or officials with repeated complaints for systemic investigation, instead of waiting for each complaint to be handled in isolation.

⁴⁷ OECD, DIGITAL GOVERNMENT AND ANTI-CORRUPTION (2017).

⁴⁸ Richard Heeks, *Information Technology and Public Sector Accountability*, 23 INFO. POLITY 1 (2018).

AI in governance must still meet constitutional standards of fairness, explainability, and due process. Otherwise, it just trades old problems for new ones. Automated decision-making that lacks transparency risks introducing fresh forms of arbitrariness, a different flavour of the very disease this paper is diagnosing.⁴⁹ Ombudsman institutions have an obvious supervisory role to play here, keeping algorithmic tools advisory, not determinative, and keeping human judgment at the centre of the process, not at its margins.

E. Constitutional Safeguards and Ethical Limits

Integration of this kind cannot proceed without constitutional and ethical guardrails, data protection, privacy, and procedural fairness chief among them. Digital grievance systems collect sensitive personal data by design, which makes strict safeguards non-negotiable, and the continuing absence of comprehensive data protection legislation only sharpens the concern.⁵⁰

Ombudsman institutions must, for their part, retain independence inside a digital environment. Technology should strengthen that autonomy, not quietly erode it, and clear statutory rules on data sharing, jurisdiction, and procedure are what stand between an integrated system and executive capture of digital oversight.

VI. COMPARATIVE AND CASE STUDY PERSPECTIVES: LESSONS FOR INDIA

Comparative administrative law is useful here mainly because the underlying problem is so widely shared. Legal systems differ enormously in institutional design and political culture, yet corruption, maladministration, and citizen grievance redressal recur across almost all of them, which is exactly what makes comparative analysis worth the effort.

A. Nordic Countries: Digital Ombudsman as an Accountability Model

Sweden gave the world the Ombudsman. Nordic countries remain a benchmark for what the institution can achieve. In Sweden and Finland, Ombudsman offices are built directly into digital public administration, so citizens can submit complaints electronically, access documents online, and track proceedings in something close to real time.⁵¹ The effect on procedural fairness and public trust has been considerable, achieved mostly by lowering access barriers, not through any single dramatic reform.

What actually distinguishes the Nordic model, though, is less the digital layer than the compliance culture underneath it. Ombudsman recommendations remain formally non-binding, yet they carry real persuasive weight, reinforced by parliamentary oversight and public

⁴⁹ Danielle Keats Citron, *Technological Due Process*, 85 WASH. U. L. REV. 1249 (2008).

⁵⁰ JUSTICE B.N. SRIKRISHNA COMMITTEE, REPORT ON DATA PROTECTION (2018).

⁵¹ HERLITZ, *supra* note 6.

disclosure.⁵² Digital integration adds to that by letting Ombudsman offices analyse complaint patterns and catch recurring administrative failures, with technology serving as a facilitative tool rather than a substitute for human judgment, a distinction worth holding onto.

B. United Kingdom: Parliamentary Ombudsman and Digital Complaints

The United Kingdom's Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman operates inside a constitutional framework built around ministerial responsibility and parliamentary scrutiny, using digital complaint submission and electronic case management to speed up investigations and improve transparency.⁵³

Its findings, much like India's, are recommendatory. Compliance rates remain high anyway. That is not primarily a function of digital tools: it owes more to strong constitutional convention and political accountability.⁵⁴ The lesson worth drawing from the UK experience is almost the opposite of a technology story. Digitalisation does help efficiency and access, but its success ultimately rests on an entrenched culture of administrative responsibility that no software can substitute for.

C. Asian Jurisdictions: Hybrid Models of Oversight and Technology

Several Asian jurisdictions have gone further still, building hybrid models that combine digital grievance systems directly with strong oversight bodies. South Korea's Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission integrates electronic complaint platforms with real investigatory authority, allowing corruption or maladministration complaints to escalate without obstruction.⁵⁵ Singapore runs a similarly centralised model: digital reporting linked to strong enforcement institutions. It is efficient. Whether it can be replicated elsewhere is another question.⁵⁶

Taken together, these systems demonstrate that technological integration improves anti-corruption outcomes specifically when grievance data flows into empowered oversight institutions, and not otherwise. They also carry a warning about centralisation, which can compromise institutional independence, a risk that matters considerably more within India's federal constitutional framework than within Singapore's unitary one.⁵⁷

⁵² BUCK, KIRKHAM & THOMPSON, *supra* note 8.

⁵³ PARLIAMENTARY & HEALTH SERVICE OMBUDSMAN, ANNUAL REPORT (UK).

⁵⁴ Adam Tomkins, *Public Law and Accountability*, 67 MOD. L. REV. 1 (2004).

⁵⁵ OECD, INTEGRITY REVIEW OF KOREA (2020).

⁵⁶ JON S.T. QUAH, CURBING CORRUPTION IN ASIAN COUNTRIES (2007).

⁵⁷ MARK TUSHNET, COMPARATIVE CONSTITUTIONAL LAW 211–13 (2014).

D. Lessons for India

Digital accessibility measurably improves citizen engagement with oversight institutions. Integration between grievance portals and Ombudsman bodies is what converts individual complaints into systemic reform, since accessibility alone does not do that work. Technology, finally, has to operate inside constitutional and institutional safeguards if independence, fairness, and legitimacy are to survive the process of integration at all.

None of these comparisons map onto India cleanly, and it is worth saying so plainly. Sweden, Finland, and Singapore are unitary states, small enough for a single oversight culture to take hold uniformly. India's Lokayuktas answer to twenty-eight different State legislatures, not one Parliament, which is exactly why the harmonisation problem noted earlier in this paper persists here in a way it does not for Stockholm or Seoul. The digital layer is not importable either, not directly. India's Aadhaar-based identity infrastructure is architecturally distinctive, and the Supreme Court has itself flagged the profiling and surveillance risks built into that centralised design, a concern no Nordic-style digital Ombudsman model was ever built to answer. What travels from these jurisdictions, in the end, is the underlying logic rather than the blueprint: digital tools work only when independent oversight sits behind them.⁵⁸

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIA: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED ACCOUNTABILITY ARCHITECTURE

A. Legal and Policy Reforms

Start with statute. The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 needs amendment to provide explicitly for electronic filing, digital case management, and interoperability with government grievance portals, reforms that would widen accessibility without abandoning the procedural safeguards constitutional due process demands.⁵⁹

Uniform minimum standards on powers, staffing, and technological infrastructure should follow for Lokayuktas across every State. Federal autonomy deserves respect. Even so, a degree of harmonisation is what equality before the law requires in practice, and not only on paper, a lesson the Second Administrative Reforms Commission drew explicitly when it examined citizen-centric administration.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, (2017) 10 SCC 1.

⁵⁹ The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, No. 1 of 2014, India Code (2014).

⁶⁰ SECOND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS COMMISSION, CITIZEN-CENTRIC ADMINISTRATION (2009).

B. Institutional Strengthening and Capacity Building

Ombudsman institutions need dedicated digital units staffed by personnel trained in administrative law, data analytics, and cyber forensics, instead of generalists asked to interpret grievance data as a side task. Capacity of this kind is what allows an office to identify systemic corruption patterns and formulate recommendations grounded in evidence, not instinct.

Formal coordination protocols between grievance portals, vigilance bodies, and Ombudsman institutions would help considerably. Clear escalation thresholds, repeated unresolved grievances or allegations involving abuse of discretion among them, would reduce the burden on citizens while tightening accountability at the same time.

C. Technology Design and Constitutional Safeguards

Technological integration has to be built around constitutional principles of fairness, transparency, and privacy from the outset, not bolted on afterward. Automated systems should remain assistive and never determinative, with final decisions resting with human authorities, and explainability standards should govern algorithmic triaging so that outcomes never become opaque or arbitrary.

Grievance data is sensitive by nature, which makes strong data protection safeguards essential rather than optional. Pending comprehensive legislation, interim administrative safeguards should protect complainant confidentiality and guard against misuse of information in the meantime.⁶¹

D. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Public Accountability

Periodic public reporting on grievance outcomes and Ombudsman performance ought to be institutionalised. Not left to discretion. Aggregated, anonymised data can inform systemic reform without compromising individual privacy, and independent audits of digital governance systems would do a great deal for both credibility and public trust. Most of this list, it should be said plainly, builds on ground the Second Administrative Reforms Commission and comparable policy literature had already marked out. The new piece is narrower: constitutional guardrails around AI-assisted triaging, of the kind sketched in Part 5.4, are not yet part of that existing conversation.⁶²

⁶¹ JUSTICE B.N. SRIKRISHNA COMMITTEE, *supra* note 50.

⁶² DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS & PUBLIC GRIEVANCES, CPGRAMS REFORM REPORTS.

VIII. CONCLUSION

A word on the limits of this paper is worth adding, in fairness to the reader. What is offered here rests mainly on statutes, judicial decisions, and published government and comparative reports, not on primary fieldwork of the kind a Right to Information (RTI)-based survey of Lokayukta case files or interviews with CPGRAMS grievance officers could supply. The Corruption Perceptions Index and the DARPG disposal-time figures cited earlier are useful, but they are aggregate indicators, not a substitute for ground-level data on how individual complaints move through the system. That gap is worth flagging honestly, and it is also where the next stage of this research would probably need to go.

Corruption in Indian public administration has been discussed for so long that repeating the obvious feels almost pointless: it erodes trust, gets in the way of policy implementation, and sits uneasily with the rule of law. What is less obvious, and worth saying anyway, is that India already has both halves of an answer sitting on the shelf. Institutional oversight exists through the Ombudsman. Technological reform exists through e-governance. The trouble is that the two never really talked to each other; they grew up on separate tracks.

That is really what this paper has tried to show, that bringing e-governance and the Ombudsman framework together offers a constitutionally grounded way to cut corruption and firm up administrative accountability, one that keeps faith with equality, transparency, access to justice and non-arbitrariness instead of treating those as afterthoughts tacked on at the end. Handled well, and kept honest by independent oversight, technology could turn grievance redressal into something more than paperwork. It could actually function as an instrument of democratic governance, which is a fairly large claim, but not an unreasonable one given everything traced in the preceding pages.

None of this depends mainly on how clever the technology gets. It depends on institutional will, on legal clarity, and on a measure of ethical restraint that no statute, however well drafted, can fully legislate into being. Build e-governance into a robust, Ombudsman-led accountability architecture, though, and India gets measurably closer to the kind of accountability its Constitution promised from the start: responsive, transparent, and, one hopes, a good deal harder for corruption to hide inside.⁶³

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