

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
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Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

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Digital Empowerment Foundation and Council for Social and Digital Development

Osama Manzar, Syed S. Kazi and Tuisha Sircar

<https://www.defindia.org> and <https://www.csddindia.in>

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected civil society – operations were disrupted, new issues emerged, and civic space continued to close.¹ The pandemic brought about travel restrictions, supply and network chain disruptions, and a lack of access to many of the services that civil society organisations (CSOs) offered. Consequently, digital technology emerged as a way for civil society to network, collaborate and engage in their areas of work and on their priorities. Although digital tools reshaped global communications decades ago, lockdown measures strengthened digital adoption among movements, organisations and communities, with many using social media to mobilise people and resources, organise, and engage in advocacy, networking and campaigning to raise concerns and seek support and solutions.²

The pandemic also forced organisations in India to reach for fresh ways of understanding, interpreting and dissecting digital rights issues in an attempt to find remedies in a new context. With the acceleration in digital adoption during the pandemic, the issues around which there is a renewed dialogue include the following:

- In a bid to connect and network large-scale civic organisations, grassroots collectives and communities are freshly focusing on digital literacy and access to the internet and technology to limit the risk of excluding people.³

- Tech-based CSOs are increasingly becoming cognisant of the massive extraction and collection of data that have reached unprecedented levels, whether through government initiatives in response to the pandemic, or by the private sector through the intensified use of the internet globally.⁴
- With the pandemic stirring the relations between the state and civil society, and more activism going online, further restrictions on digital communications have become a reality.⁵

Besides this framework of changes, there have been other areas of concern for CSOs, including enabling the right to information, addressing disinformation and misinformation, and access to critical public information and government schemes.

In this newfound and accelerated digital space, there are two broad shifts that emerged quite clearly in how CSOs in India changed their ways of working to meet the challenges that they confronted. Firstly, issues emerged around the “why” and “how”. Traditional rights advocacy CSOs started revisiting traditional modes of communicating, and are now looking at adapting to digital modes to advocate on rights. Many are now opting to reorient and upgrade their work using digital platforms. And secondly, digital rights and tech-based organisations already engaged in digital advocacy started to refocus on the new challenges of digital rights that were emerging, looking for alternative ways to address these: the “what” and “how”. This included transitioning to a “super-normal” or higher-level use of digital platforms, resources and tools and alternative ways of networking to engage in advocacy.

This report aims to foreground the above key considerations in India, the world’s largest democracy and emerging “digital democratic” country. It

1 Brechenmacher, S., Youngs, R., & Carothers, T. (2020, 21 April). Civil Society and the Coronavirus: Dynamism Despite Disruption. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/21/civil-society-and-coronavirus-dynamism-despite-disruption-pub-81592>

2 Nampoothiri, N. J., & Artuso, F. (2021). Civil Society’s Response to Coronavirus Disease 2019: Patterns from Two Hundred Case Studies of Emergent Agency. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 16(2), 203-212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09732586211015057>

3 Allmann, K. (2020, 11 May). Covid-19 is increasing digital inequality: We need human connectivity to close the digital divide. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/swlh/covid-19-is-increasing-digital-inequality-but-human-connectivity-is-the-answer-424812acbb65>; Reddy A, B., Jose, S., & Vaidehi, R. (2020). Digital Divide in Online Education: Of Access and Inclusivity. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(36).

4 Zwitter, A., & Gstrein, O. J. (2020). Big data, privacy and COVID-19 – learning from humanitarian expertise in data protection. *International Journal of Humanitarian Action*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-020-00072-6>

5 Lindberg, S. I. (Ed.) (2021). *Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021*. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute. https://www.v-dem.net/media/finder_public/c9/3f/c93f8e74-a3fd-4bac-afdf-ee2cfc0a375/dr_2021.pdf

discusses how digitally-enabled,⁶ digital technology and rights-based organisations in the country have revisited their priorities, strategies, means and mediums in a period of accelerated transition to advocate, network and seek solutions to the digital issues that concern millions in an emerging digital society and economy. This report seeks to look at the future of digital rights and other technology-based issues in India, through the lens of the civil society organisations in the tech space, but not limited to this.

To be able to imagine a post-pandemic reality of how CSOs engage in advocacy, it is pertinent to highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped their advocacy strategies on critical digital rights and tech issues in India, a country marred by various challenges. While for some stakeholders these changing means, methods and approaches to advocacy have the potential for a drastic digital transformation, others hold a more pessimistic perspective, expressing concerns about the challenges that civic actors are facing in the creation of a robust network of digital rights advocates in India. The latter can be highlighted by the fact that since the advent of the digital century, the number of CSOs working on digital rights and tech issues in India has been abysmally low, and few new voices are emerging.

Context: A shifting focus for CSOs

The highly infectious COVID-19 virus, which originated in Wuhan, China, was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a global health emergency on 11 March 2020.⁷ The declaration of the pandemic led to the imposition of lockdowns across nations, including India, as a precautionary measure to contain the spread of infection by mandating populations to self-isolate, quarantine and maintain social distancing. Since March 2020, India has seen three waves of exponentially rising cases of the virus, which led to full or partial restrictions on the mobility of people both inter- and intra-states. The restrictions forced organisations and institutions to adapt to the use of digital communications in order to continue their work from remote locations. The large network of CSOs in India advocating on various rights-based issues also developed innovative

strategies to continue functioning and provide support to those in need during these dire times.

The advent of the pandemic not only forced CSOs advocating on rights-based issues to adapt to new strategies, but also induced them to shift their advocacy priorities. They tirelessly participated in relief efforts, disseminated critical information necessary to contain panic, and worked with the state's centralised funding mechanism created to combat the pandemic to supplement their work.

The health, education and livelihood sectors promptly adapted to digital strategies. For instance, Smile Foundation⁸ launched an initiative called “Shiksha Na Ruke” where they provided underprivileged children access to continuous learning through the provision of electronic devices, trained teachers for virtual teaching, curated educational content suitable for digital platforms, and ensured mental well-being through individual mentoring sessions. In the health sector, the Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA)⁹ has been conducting emotional resilience sessions and counselling through online group calls with adolescents in grassroots communities. They also trained Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and hundreds of members of Mahila Arogya Samitis (Women's Health Committees) remotely on preventive measures, proper use of masks, the identification of early symptoms of COVID-19, and how to do referrals to medical practitioners. It has been estimated that nearly three million people were impacted by the outreach of CSOs in India.¹⁰

The pandemic also forced CSOs working on critical digital rights and tech issues in India to revisit issues such as free speech, digital security, accessibility, internet governance, digital surveillance, data privacy, censorship, and what was termed the “infodemic”. The debates around these issues are being juxtaposed and intersected with other social discourses around gender, caste, poverty and the environment.

Our investigation

In line with the substance of the enquiry of this issue of GISWatch, the core question we sought to address in this report was: “How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed or shaped the ways in which civil society organisations do their advocacy work around digital technology-related issues, including digital rights?”

6 Digitally enabled organisations are those that opt to primarily function using digital platforms, tools and resources. Largely, their internal and external communication and advocacy work (research, workshops, meetings, etc.) are done online. Many digital rights organisations had already transitioned to such a mode of working prior to the pandemic. However, the pandemic pushed most organisations to make the transition and develop either fully online or hybrid ways of functioning.

7 Ducharme, J. (2020, 11 March). World Health Organization Declares COVID-19 a ‘Pandemic.’ Here’s What That Means. *TIME*. <https://time.com/5791661/who-coronavirus-pandemic-declaration>

8 <https://www.smilefoundationindia.org/me>

9 <https://snehamumbai.org/covid-19>

10 Participatory Research in Asia & VANI Network. (2020). *Response of Indian Civil Society Towards COVID-19*. https://www.pria.org/knowledge_resource/1594293825_Response%20of%20CSO%20towards%20covid19.pdf

This required a careful analysis of its many layers. For example, in order to arrive at a comparative perspective, it has been necessary to understand the changes that CSOs had to make in their methods, tools and approaches to continue their advocacy work, compared to the pre-pandemic period.

The digital capacities of the organisations was also important, as was the extent of networking and collaboration among CSOs, public agencies and communities, which spoke to the resilience of CSOs during the pandemic.

Lastly, it was necessary to look at the scope of the changes engendered by the pandemic, and the extent to which these changes might impact the functioning and advocacy work of CSOs with respect to digital tech issues in the future.

The following sections are based on research conducted by Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and the Council for Social and Digital Development (CSDD) through both qualitative and quantitative processes. The qualitative data was collected through in-depth interview sessions with five well-known CSOs working on digital rights and other tech-based issues in India. Quantitative data has been used to map the changing advocacy strategies and shifting priority issues of the CSOs. For this, nine organisations were selected. A detailed mapping of their advocacy between March 2020 and December 2021 was conducted by looking at the content on their websites and social media profiles. This considered the focus of their research, workshops, webinars, conferences and discussions, among others. These were then subjected to a cross-tabulation analysis using variables such as the topic and the advocacy methods, its frequency and date.

Filling the gap: CSOs and informal activism during COVID-19

Civil society in India is a vast network of organisations, working upwards from the grassroots level. It is conceptualised as “the sum total of all individual and collective initiatives for common public good.”¹¹ During the pandemic, the most striking trend in civil society has been the spread of informal activism – forms of self-organisation aimed at practical problem solving.¹² On one hand, civil society filled the gap left by the state. On the other hand, informal networks and communities filled the gaps left by some of the larger and more formal CSOs with more rigid bureaucracies.

Technology played a central role in the delivery of various emergency services that were earlier dependent on community mobilisation. For example, Social Media Matters,¹³ an organisation primarily working on online safety, disinformation and misinformation, and digital parenting, started a project called “My Pincode” where a few million users in India were reached through 783 Facebook groups. The purpose was to counter the spread of “fake news” about the pandemic, to present real-time updates on the pandemic from the government in simple, accessible language, and to share videos made by volunteers.¹⁴

During the second wave of the COVID-19 outbreak in India in April 2021, there was an acute shortage of life-saving oxygen, drugs and hospital beds across the nation.¹⁵ Efforts by both government and CSOs had shortcomings given the vastness of the crisis. Consequently, thousands of civilians, especially youth, participated in a voluntary drive of setting up apps to crowdsource aid, delivering key supplies and using social media to direct resources to people in need.¹⁶

Moving to digital: Minimising the use of resources and maximising reach

For tech-based CSOs, the shift to a digital mode of operating has been relatively easier, despite changes in the mode of communication to phone calls and online meetings. For some organisations, the transition to online work has also allowed them to minimise the use of resources, including financial resources, and maximise reach. For instance, the Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC), an organisation based out of Delhi, now conducts its digital security training and research on digital platforms using free/libre and open source platforms like Jitsi or BigBlueButton. Like other CSOs, it has started publishing its research reports online, which not only saves resources but also saves time. Before the pandemic, the SFLC ran in-person conferences for policy consultations that required a heavy financial investment. Now its conferences have moved online, which allows them to increase their reach globally.¹⁷

11 Tandon, R., & Mohanty, R. (2002). *Civil Society and Governance*. Samskriti.

12 Youngs, R., et al. (2021). *Civil Society and the Global Pandemic: Building Back Different?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2021-CRN_Global%20Pandemic.pdf

13 <https://www.socialmediamatters.in>

14 Interview with Social Media Matters CEO Pratishta Arora, 27 January 2022.

15 Thadhani, A. (2021). *Preventing a Repeat of the COVID-19 Second-Wave Oxygen Crisis in India*. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/preventing-a-repeat-of-the-covid-19-second-wave-oxygen-crisis-in-india>

16 AFP. (2021, 4 May). India's youth fight the covid second wave with apps and oxygen. *Live Mint*. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/indias-young-fight-the-covid-second-wave-with-apps-and-oxygen-11620095849517.html>

17 Interview with Software Freedom Law Centre volunteer legal counsel Radhika Jhalani, 7 February 2022.

TABLE 1.

Areas of focus for research and advocacy by Indian digital rights CSOs during the COVID-19 pandemic

Areas of focus	
1.	Potential and challenges of FinTech: Inclusive systems, regulatory mechanisms, digital infrastructure, crypto assets ¹⁸
2.	Digital labour
3.	Reimagining data systems beyond gender binaries
4.	Rural connectivity: The last mile and engaging with digital rights and technology-related issues at the grassroots
5.	Data privacy, personal freedom and informed user consent
6.	The arbitrary imposition of Aarogya Setu ¹⁹
7.	“Fake news”, misinformation and disinformation
8.	Digital surveillance through technologies such as facial recognition systems
9.	Digital security, online safety and data empowerment
10.	Reimagining artificial intelligence (AI) futures: Inclusive systems, innovation, policy advocacy, regulatory mechanisms, digital infrastructure
11.	Digital technologies and education
12.	Digital justice for gender and disability inclusion
13.	Online violence against marginalised groups
14.	Reimagining the data commons
15.	Datafication of people’s health
16.	Gender and the digital divide
17.	E-waste management and the circular economy of the electronics sector
18.	Access to livelihoods and entitlements
19.	Digital parenting

This is not confined to the SFLC. Working online, CSOs have been able to host more webinars and online conferences, in an environment where this was increasingly accepted as standard practice, allowing them to reach a wider audience.²⁰ This included the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), which launched a forum

in 2020 to expand its public engagement efforts in a “democratic dialogue with citizens” on digital rights.²¹ DEF engaged with a wider public by reinventing its “DEFDialogues” during the COVID-19 pandemic, which are available on YouTube and the DEF website.²²

There was evidence of an increase in the use of social media, especially Twitter and Instagram, for policy advocacy and awareness raising on various rights-based issues, including digital rights. The Centre for Internet and Society also started a technology and policy podcast in 2020 called “In Flux”, which is available on various streaming platforms.²³

These initiatives occurred against the backdrop of an increase in the adoption of free/libre and open source software since the start of the pandemic.²⁴

18 Markets around the world are increasingly integrating cryptocurrencies in their economies. For instance, Costa Rica announced that employees might get legally paid in cryptocurrency. As a result, its adoption in the country spiked. The Philippines is another example of cryptocurrency being championed. In 2020, the country’s central bank approved nearly 16 cryptocurrency exchanges, placing the Philippines at the forefront of Southeast Asian countries in terms of the “crypto boom”. India is also an emerging crypto market: according to a report by Chainalysis, India’s crypto market increased by 641% between July 2020 and June 2021. Cryptocurrency also brought in new cohorts of investors to the market – youngsters and women. As a result, the government is increasingly looking at the introduction of strict regulations of crypto assets and penetration of the market by introducing Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDC).

19 Aarogya Setu is an Indian COVID-19 “contact tracing, syndromic mapping and self-assessment” digital service, primarily a mobile app, developed by the National Informatics Centre under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

20 Tanidir, Y., et al. (2021). How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect audience’s attitudes in webinars? *The International Journal of Clinical Practice*, 75(7). <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcp.14239>

21 <https://internetfreedom.in/year-in-review-scaling-up-iffs-operations-and-community>

22 <https://www.defindia.org/defdialogues>

23 <https://in-flux.cis-india.org>

24 TechGig. (2021, 9 February). Open Source software developers were more active during COVID-19: Survey. *Tech Gig*. <https://content.techgig.com/open-source-software-developers-were-more-active-during-covid-19-survey/articleshow/80764250.cms>

Areas of focus for digital rights activists during the pandemic

Table 1 lists the broad focus areas for digital rights and technology-related issues among the following key Indian digital rights CSOs during the pandemic: Digital Empowerment Foundation,²⁵ Centre for Internet and Society,²⁶ IT for Change,²⁷ Internet Democracy Project,²⁸ NASSCOM Foundation,²⁹ Internet Freedom Foundation,³⁰ Centre for Catalyzing Change,³¹ Social Media Matters³² and Policy 4.o.³³ These areas of focus were either new areas for the organisations or areas that the organisations returned to due to the impact of the pandemic. The issues are in no specific order of priority. As the table suggests, there was a focus on the emerging digital economy and financial resources, and its impact on labour and employment, which included issues impacting on gender, the informal workforce and farmers. A renewed focus on surveillance technologies also emerged, including its implications for privacy and constitutional rights such as free speech, censorship and access to the internet. E-education and e-health related concerns were also covered. Most importantly, concerns around the digital divide were revisited with a renewed urgency. More than addressing these problems on a short-term basis, CSOs engaged in reimagining futures and issues that need sustainable focus and work in growing the digital society.

Networking and collaborating for greater public participation

CSOs in India have shown resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic by strategically entering into partnerships and networking with stakeholders, grassroots organisations and other CSOs to engage in people-driven work.³⁴ Collaborations were seen between CSOs and government agencies, local organisations, local people and communities, and even with migrant and diaspora organisations.³⁵

CSOs solely engaged in the policy space like the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) also relied on extensive networking and collaboration. For instance, for their analysis of AgriStack,³⁶ IFF collaborated with various farmer groups and even sent a joint letter signed by 55 organisations to the Union Minister for Agriculture asking for further consultations with all stakeholders. The letter highlighted the need for statutory backing, and demanded greater transparency with regard to the financial details of the project.³⁷ In collaboration with close to 50 organisations, IFF also studied the Aarogya Setu app, critically mapped resistance to and criticism of the app, filed right to information requests to understand the development and roll-out of the app, and engaged in strategic litigation in the Kerala High Court against its arbitrary imposition.³⁸ In terms of its work on medical healthcare data policies it has collaborated with organisations in the medical healthcare space like the Forum for Medical Ethics and Research.³⁹

Navigating the need for grassroots work on digital rights

With the restrictions imposed on mobility, CSOs had to adapt to innovative strategies to continue functioning, sometimes in remote locations. Many CSOs like Social Media Matters and Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT),⁴⁰ despite working on technology-related issues, typically engaged in field-work research and face-to-face capacity building and advocacy. However, after the pandemic they developed new methods, changed their approach, and adapted to the use of new digital tools so that they could continue their grassroots engagement. For instance, FAT mobilised its project participants – who are primarily adolescent girls from marginalised groups in rural, peri-urban and urban communities across Delhi, Bihar, Jharkhand and Pune – through smart devices that were either owned by the girls or distributed by FAT to remote locations. The pandemic prompted them to start a girl-led campaign called “Corona nahi Karuna” where they used the devices to gather information, distinguish between fake news and legitimate news, connect to organisations distributing

25 <https://www.defindia.org>

26 <https://cis-india.org>

27 <https://itforchange.net>

28 <https://internetdemocracy.in>

29 <https://nasscomfoundation.org>

30 <https://internetfreedom.in>

31 <https://www.c3india.org>

32 <https://www.socialmediamatters.in>

33 <https://policyfourpointo.com>

34 Datta, N. (2021, 25 February). Promoting resilience among CSOs through partnerships and people-driven work in India. *Global Standard for CSO Accountability*. <https://www.csostandard.org/cso-standard/promoting-resilience-among-csos-through-partnerships-and-people-driven-work-in-india>

35 Khan, F., Yadav, A., & Sahoo, S. (2021, 26 April). Pandemic, CSOs, and Collaboration - Perspectives from India. *Queen Mary Global Policy Institute*. <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/gpi/projects/migpanbrin/blog/items/pandemic-csos-and-collaboration---perspectives-from-india.html>

36 As a collection of digital databases, AgriStack would have some core features including a unique farmer identity number for each farmer, and some building blocks such as data on weather, the newest science and research on agriculture, agricultural commodity prices in India and abroad, and information and access to central government schemes, agricultural regulations and permissions.

37 <https://internetfreedom.in/joint-letter-to-the-agriculture-minister>

38 <https://internetfreedom.in/kerala-hc-aarogya-setu>

39 Interview with Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) Executive Director Apar Gupta, 1 February 2022.

40 <https://www.fat-net.org>

TABLE 2

Shift in methods used for advocacy: Pre-2020 and post-2020

Number	Pre-2020	Post-2020
1	Field-based research	Limited field-based interventions/Remote research
2	In-person community engagement	Online community engagement
3	In-person capacity building	Online capacity building
4	In-person workshops	Online workshops
5	In-person conferences	Online conferences
6	In-person meetings	Online/telephonic meetings
7	Seminars	Webinars

rations as well as to different government schemes, and assist people in their communities in various ways. By doing this they created an emergency support system using smart devices.

However, the implementation of FAT's programmes online also resulted in the loss of participants for various reasons, such as a lack of access to devices, restrictions imposed by families on the girls owning devices, difficulties in managing school or college commitments, and increased household responsibilities.

Apart from these challenges, other issues included a lack of privacy and confidentiality at home during online sessions, an increase in household health problems due to the pandemic, and increased boredom, which affected online participation of the girls.⁴¹ Some participants also left the project due to early marriage.

Gender safety and user-generated data under lockdown

For a platform like Safetipin,⁴² whose advocacy work on "safe cities for women" relies on the data generated through the Safetipin app, the pandemic posed a major problem. The app functions through safety audits, whereby the user rates a specific location through geotagging on the basis of nine parameters: lighting, visibility, pedestrian routes to the location, openness, transport, people, security, gender usage and feeling. These parameters are each given different weightings and an algorithm calculates the safety scores. As more audits are performed by users, Safetipin collects more "accurate" information. This data is then used to write reports and shared with the stakeholders who further use it to execute certain projects.

However, during the months of the lockdown, due to restrictions on mobility, people either stopped

stepping outside of their houses or travelled in private vehicles. Consequently, no new data was generated through the Safetipin app. The Safetipin team modified their methodology to conducting online surveys and physical safety audits in selected zones following proper COVID-19 protocols.⁴³

Shifts to digital methods for research, capacity building and advocacy

The methods for advocacy shifted drastically for CSOs working on rights-based issues, including digital rights, during the pandemic. While most of this shift relied on digital technologies as broadly presented in Table 2, in some cases there was a shift towards a "community outreach" model of collecting data⁴⁴ (as seen in the case of Safetipin). Nevertheless, CSOs are reimagining their engagement with the digital world in a post-pandemic society and striving for a greater digital transformation.

Future challenges to digital rights advocacy in India

The pandemic has engendered unique challenges for every CSO working on rights-based issues, including digital rights. Some of the broad challenges faced by CSOs working on digital rights and technology-related issues in India are:

- **Lack of grassroots engagement:** Various socio-cultural and economic factors are playing a role in worsening existing inequalities along the lines of gender, caste and religion. Consequently, CSOs are unable to bridge the gap between learning, empowerment and advocacy solely through technology. Issues relating to the digital divide and digital illiteracy in India, like online education or access to critical information, were therefore heightened due to this crisis.

41 Interview with Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT) Executive Director Gayatri Buragohain, 27 January 2022.

42 <https://safetipin.com>

43 Interview with Safetipin programme head Sonali Vyas, 7 February 2022.

44 Youngs, R., et al. (2021). Op. cit.

- **Unfavourable funding environment:** The pandemic has exacerbated the existing economic inequalities in India. According to the statistics released by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, 10 million people lost their jobs by May 2021. The labour participation rate has come down to 40% from a pre-pandemic level of 42.5%.⁴⁵ CSOs are also facing operational difficulties as the current funding environment does not allow investing in human resources.⁴⁶ The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2020 has further put caps on foreign contributions for CSOs, greatly affecting their capacity to be sustainable.⁴⁷ The lack of subsidies, inadequate tax exemptions, high administrative costs and expensive digital resources and services are creating a barrier for existing CSOs to scale up their operations, generate new opportunities and provide relief at the grassroots. These factors are also hindering new organisations from emerging.
- **Constrained digital skills and capacities:** With the increasing adoption of the digital, there is a need to invest in building the digital skills and capacities of CSOs in order for them to seamlessly function online in the future. This challenge is closely linked to the challenge regarding the unfavourable funding environment in India, as CSOs need to invest in human resources, collaborate with external agencies on mass digital training across different verticals, and invest in up-to-date digital tools for effective and efficient functioning.
- **An increase in arbitrary control and surveillance:** While India has seen a surge in the disruption of various civil liberties of its citizens in the past few years, discourses surrounding the violation of digital rights have also picked up pace as digital rights are increasingly being recognised as human rights. Since 2012, India has seen 556 cases of internet shutdowns.⁴⁸ These

have come alongside repeated instances of the government cracking down on citizens' right to free speech.⁴⁹ Many experts have also raised concerns about the Draft Data Protection Bill (2021), which poses a threat to data privacy and the personal freedom of citizens.⁵⁰ Moreover, there are currently 82 facial recognition systems in place across India, strengthening the state's surveillance architecture.⁵¹ There are many other concerns regarding citizens' digital rights, especially without adequate legal safeguards and a good regulatory framework for digital infrastructure. CSOs working on digital rights and other technology-related issues are increasingly dealing with the threat of being seen as confrontationist and anti-establishment, which is closing opportunities for them to freely participate in the civic space.

- **Lack of a collaborative space to find synergy and work with public agencies:** The civic space where CSOs can collaborate and work dialectically with public agencies is increasingly shrinking in India. Being the world's largest democracy, India needs adequate public participation to deliver on its citizen-centred policies where CSOs play an important role.

Conclusion

CSOs in India working on rights-based issues, including digital rights, have shown great resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic by adapting to innovative digital strategies to continue functioning, and to provide support to those in need of essential services and resources. The CSOs largely managed the transition to a digital mode of operation and changed their approach and methods of advocating on critical digital rights issues.

However, the increased reliance on technology renewed concerns with respect to digital rights. Emerging debates about technology are intersecting with other social discourses like those on gender, caste, poverty and the environment. At the same time, these debates are dealing with matters such as free speech, digital security, accessibility, internet governance, digital surveillance, data privacy, and

45 BusinessToday. (2021, 1 June). 10 million lost jobs in Covid 2nd wave, 97% households' income declined: CMIE. *BusinessToday*. in. <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/economy-politics/story/income-of-97-households-declined-since-covid-19-pandemic-began-cmie-298381-2021-06-01>

46 Bandhyopadhyay, K. K., et al. (2021). *Civil Society Support to COVID-19 Affected Families: Outreach and Resourcing in the Second Wave*. PRIA. https://www.pria.org/knowledge_resource/1625214248_Civil_Society_Support_to_C19_Affected_Families_During_2nd_wave.pdf

47 Bhatnagar, G. V. (2020, 22 September). Leading NGOs Believe FCRA Changes Will 'Kill' Voluntary Sector. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/rights/fcra-amendment-ngo-sector-impact-grassroots-activism>

48 The Software Freedom Law Centre's internet shutdown tracker provides real-time data on the number of internet shutdowns in India. At the time of writing this report, 556 cases of internet shutdown had been reported since 2012. <https://internetshutdowns.in>

49 Mchangama, J., & Mendiratta, R. (2021, 25 June). Supporting free speech, but not criticism of government. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/supporting-free-speech-but-not-criticism-of-government-7376023>

50 Chari, S. (2022, 4 February). Data privacy too complex to be decided by mere voice vote. Debate Data Protection Bill first. *The Print*. <https://theprint.in/opinion/data-privacy-too-complex-to-be-decided-by-mere-voice-vote-debate-data-protection-bill-first/820652>

51 The Internet Freedom Foundation's facial recognition technology (FRT) tracker under Project Panoptic provides real-time data on the number of FRT systems installed across India. <https://panoptic.in>

ensorship. Because of this, and more than before, CSOs working on critical digital rights and tech issues have started collaborating and networking with CSOs and other stakeholders advocating on more traditional issues.

However, while the shift to digital has opened up new avenues for a greater digital transformation, many are increasingly expressing concerns about the challenges that civic actors are facing in the creation of a robust network of digital rights advocates in India. Some of these challenges are: 1) a lack of direct grassroots engagement; 2) an unfavourable funding environment; 3) inaccessibility of cost-effective digital resources, platforms and services; 4) constrained digital skills and capacities; 5) growing arbitrary control and surveillance; and 6) a lack of a collaborative space to find synergy and work with public agencies.

Action steps

Through consultation and critical engagement with various CSOs on the topic of the future of digital rights and technology-related issues in India, DEF and CSDD are proposing the following action steps:

- Make cost-effective digital resources, services and tools available to CSOs and grassroots communities to enable a democratic and inclusive digital ecosystem. Emphasise building the digital skills and capacities of CSOs to sustain a growing digital society.

- Through greater grassroots contact, nurture and encourage more digital rights and technology-based organisations to emerge at the community level.
- Encourage the creation of more collaborative digital forums by CSOs for a greater civic participation.
- Encourage greater engagement between CSOs, public agencies and local communities in the matters of emerging digital technology and rights issues.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2021-2022 Report
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