
The Role of Digital Activism in Shaping Government Policies: Evidence from Jharkhand

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Abstract

Digital platforms have transformed civic engagement in India, enabling citizens to mobilize, frame issues, and pressure state institutions. This paper examines the role of digital activism in influencing government policies in Jharkhand, with a primary focus on the language and identity movement that emerged around regional language preferences in employment examinations. Drawing on qualitative analysis of protest trajectories, social media dynamics, policy notifications, and government responsiveness between 2021 and 2026, the study shows how online campaigns sustained momentum after offline protests, amplified identity-based demands linked to the 1932 khatiyani (Domicile) discourse, and contributed to partial policy revisions. While digital activism has enhanced agenda-setting and public accountability, its impact on substantive policy change remains constrained by the digital divide, polarization, and limited institutional mechanisms for systematic feedback. The paper argues that Jharkhand's experience illustrates both the catalytic potential of digital tools for local governance and the need for hybrid offline–online participatory frameworks to foster more inclusive policymaking.

Keywords: Digital activism, policy influence, Jharkhand, language movement, social media, Identity politics, Participatory governance

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1. Introduction

Since its formation on 15 November 2000, Jharkhand has been shaped by competing claims over indigeneity, land, language, and employment. Demographic diversity, displacement linked to mining and development, and persistent unemployment have repeatedly generated socio-political mobilizations. In recent years, digital platforms have become central to these struggles, allowing citizens to raise awareness, coordinate action, and demand accountability from the state. This research explores how digital activism influences government policies in Jharkhand, particularly on issues of indigenous and regional identity, language recognition in public employment, and related socio-political concerns. It focuses on the language movement that intensified after a December 2021 government notification granting regional language status to Bhojpuri, Magahi, Maithili, and Angika in certain districts for local-level job preferences (with Urdu recognized statewide).

Local organizations, notably the Jharkhandi Bhasha Bachao Sangharsh Samiti, opposed the inclusion of languages associated with neighbouring Bihar, arguing that priority should be given to indigenous languages such as Santhali, Ho, Mundari, Nagpuri, and Khortha on the basis of historical khatiyani (1932 land records) that define local identity.

The movement combined offline protests—including a 50-kilometre human chain in Bokaro, demonstrations, rail blockades, and sit-ins—with growing digital activity. In February 2022 the government partially revised the decision, removing Bhojpuri and Magahi from districts such as Dhanbad and Bokaro. Subsequent years saw the movement shift substantially online, sustained by hashtags, reels, live sessions, and the political organization Jharkhand Loktantrik Krantikari Morcha (JLKM), founded by activist-turned-MLA Jairam Kumar Mahato.

The central research questions are:

- (1) Through what mechanisms has digital activism influenced agenda-setting and policy responsiveness in Jharkhand?
- (2) What evidence exists of actual policy shifts linked to online mobilization?

(3) What opportunities and constraints does digital activism present for more inclusive governance in a state marked by digital access gaps and identity contestations?

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on digital activism highlights its capacity for rapid mobilization, framing, and transnational visibility (Castells; Bennett & Segerberg). In the Indian context, studies of the anti-corruption movement, farm laws protests, and citizenship-related campaigns demonstrate social media's role in agenda-setting and public pressure, though conversion into lasting policy change is often partial and contingent on offline organizational strength and political opportunity structures.

Research on state-level digital governance notes the dual role of platforms: citizens use them for advocacy, while governments increasingly monitor and respond via grievance systems and official handles. Literature specific to Jharkhand remains limited. Existing work focuses more on offline Adivasi movements (e.g., Pathalgadi) or e-governance initiatives. This paper addresses the gap by examining how digital tools interact with regional identity politics and employment policy in a relatively young state.

2.Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on three complementary perspectives. First, the networked public sphere (Habermas adapted to digital contexts) explains how online spaces enable counter-publics to contest official narratives. Second, social movement theory—particularly political opportunity structures, framing processes, and resource mobilization—helps explain why language demands gained traction when linked to employment scarcity and historical khatiyani claims. Third, agenda-setting and policy-cycle models clarify the stages at which digital activism exerts influence: problem recognition, agenda entry, and, less frequently, policy formulation or revision.

4. Methodology

This is a qualitative case-study research design. Primary data sources include government notifications (2021–2022 and subsequent JTET-related rules), contemporaneous media reports, social media content patterns (hashtags, viral videos, influencer activity), and statements by movement leaders and officials. Secondary sources comprise academic literature on digital activism and policy responsiveness. Analysis follows process-tracing of the language movement from offline peak (2021–22) to digital sustenance (2023–26), identifying mechanisms of influence and observable policy responses. Limitations include the difficulty of establishing direct causality and the uneven archival quality of ephemeral social media content.

5. Contextual Background: Jharkhand and Identity Politics

Jharkhand's formation was itself the product of a long identity-based struggle. Post-2000, issues of domicile, land records (1932 khatyan), tribal autonomy, and preferential access to government jobs have remained salient. Unemployment, especially among youth, has intensified competition over language criteria in recruitment examinations conducted by bodies such as the Jharkhand Staff Selection Commission (JSSC) and the Jharkhand Teacher Eligibility Test (JTET). These contests frequently map onto broader “Jharkhandi versus outsider” discourses.

6. Case Study: The Language Movement and Digital Activism

6.1 Offline Origins and Immediate Policy Response (2021–2022)

The December 2021 notification triggered protests led by organizations representing Adivasi and moolvasi interests. Demands centred on prioritizing indigenous languages and using 1932 land records as the basis of local identity. Forms of protest included large human chains, rail blockades, and demonstrations. In February 2022 the state government issued a revised notification removing

Bhojpuri and Magahi from the regional language lists for Dhanbad and Bokaro (while retaining them in some other districts and adjusting other languages).

6.2 Transition to Digital Platforms

After the intense offline phase, the movement migrated substantially online. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube became primary sites for awareness, archival protest videos, short-form reels, live sessions, and hashtag campaigns (#JharkhandiBhashaBachao, #HoFor8thSchedule, and related tags). Content emphasizing mother-tongue education, cultural heritage, and employment preference circulated widely among youth audiences.

6.3 Recent Developments (2025–2026)

JTET rules controversy: Debates over the inclusion or exclusion of Bhojpuri, Magahi, and Angika in the Jharkhand Teacher Eligibility Test reignited online and offline discussion. Viral content and political statements kept the issue visible.

Tribal language recognition: Protests and digital campaigns sought inclusion of Ho (and other languages such as Kurmali, Kurukh, Khortha) in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, including gatherings at Jantar Mantar.

Political institutionalization: Jairam Kumar Mahato and the JLKM (emerging from the earlier Bhasha-Khatiyani Sangharsh Samiti) continued to link language demands with broader local-preference politics through speeches, live sessions, and posts circulating on Instagram and Facebook.

Digital activity has expanded the movement's national visibility while offline intensity has generally declined, with spikes around events such as International Mother Language Day.

7. Mechanisms of Influence

Digital activism operates through several interrelated mechanisms:

1. **Awareness and framing:** Short-form video and hashtags reframe language preference as a defence of indigenous identity against “external” languages.

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2. **Mobilization and coordination:** Platforms lower the cost of sustained engagement after physical protests subside.
 3. **Political pressure and accountability:** Tagging of officials and opposition parties creates real-time visibility.
 4. **Cultural reinforcement:** Content on mother-tongue education and heritage sustains affective commitment.
 5. **Polarization:** Online debates sometimes intensify “Jharkhandi versus Bihari” identities and facilitate misinformation.

8. Impact on Government Policies and Responsiveness

The most concrete policy impact remains the February 2022 partial revision of the regional language notification. Subsequent digital activity has kept language and local-preference issues on the public and political agenda, influencing JTET rule debates and broader discourse on competitive examinations in local languages. Government responsiveness is also visible in institutional innovations: ministerial statements committing to swift action on social media complaints, plans for a Chief Minister digital outreach/grievance platform, the Abua Dishom budget portal for citizen suggestions, and the Influencer Engagement Programme 2025 (primarily promotional but indicative of recognition of digital public spheres).

These developments suggest agenda-setting success and incremental institutionalization of digital feedback more than wholesale policy transformation. Substantive changes in recruitment language policy or constitutional recognition of additional languages remain contested and incomplete.

9. Challenges and Limitations

Digital activism in Jharkhand confronts structural constraints. Rural and tribal areas face lower smartphone penetration and digital literacy, risking the amplification of urban or already-networked voices. Polarization and misinformation can distort deliberation. Internet restrictions have occurred in other contexts in the state. Moreover, governments may absorb digital pressure into

grievance-redressal routines without addressing underlying structural issues of employment or recognition. Causality is rarely linear: offline organizational strength and electoral calculations remain decisive.

10. Towards Participatory Governance: Opportunities for Policy Co-Creation Jharkhand already possesses building blocks for more systematic use of digital public input—MyGov-style portals, social media monitoring, influencer programmes, and planned CM digital platforms. A more proactive approach could include:

- A dedicated social-listening and multilingual analytics cell within the Chief Minister's Office or Information and Public Relations Department.
- Structured online consultations on draft policies (e.g., just transition from coal, tribal education, land rights under CNT/SPT Acts) with clear feedback loops and public action-taken reports.
- Empanelment of micro-influencers and community creators not only for promotion but for collecting ground-level input.
- Hybrid design that triangulates social media data with panchayat meetings, community radio, and surveys to mitigate digital-divide bias.

Such measures could strengthen transparency, inclusivity, and trust, aligning with the state's "Abua Dishom" (our land) ethos, while remaining attentive to risks of elite capture or performative engagement.

11. Conclusion

Evidence from Jharkhand demonstrates that digital activism functions as a significant catalyst for agenda-setting, sustained pressure, and partial policy responsiveness, particularly in identity- and employment-related domains. The language movement illustrates how offline contention can migrate online, maintain visibility, and contribute to concrete revisions such as the 2022 language notification adjustment, while continuing to shape debates around JTET and tribal language recognition. At the same time, the translation of digital pressure into

durable, inclusive policy change is mediated by institutional design, political will, and structural inequalities of access.

For Jharkhand, the strategic opportunity lies in moving beyond reactive grievance handling toward genuine co-creation of policy. When digital activism is met with transparent, multilingual, and hybrid participatory mechanisms, it can enhance both democratic accountability and the legitimacy of governance in a diverse and historically contested state. Future research should incorporate systematic social media content analysis, interviews with activists and officials, and comparative cases from other Indian states to deepen understanding of the conditions under which digital publics successfully reshape policy outcomes.

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