

DDC-6

Digital Public Infrastructure

The 6th edition of the Digital Delhi Conclave on Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) convened a diverse group of policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to examine the current state and future promise of DPI in India. Through a series of events, we hosted an intense day-long conversation, which included two panel discussions, a workshop, and a fireside chat. Participants explored privacy challenges in public systems, lessons from existing DPI deployments, and strategies for gender-inclusive design. The event underscored the urgency of grounding DPI in public values—privacy, participation, accountability, and equity—and offered concrete recommendations for advancing DPI’s reach, inclusivity, and societal impact. As part of the event, there was an art installation by Openstudi0, titled ‘Castle under the canopy’ - a commentary on the importance of parks as vital infrastructure.

1. Inauguration

- **Praveen** welcomed attendees and outlined the Conclave’s objectives.
 - **Deepak** introduced the theme of Digital Public Infrastructure, emphasizing DPI’s role in sustainable development.
 - **Director Ranjan Bose** welcomed the participants to a day of intense discussion on digital public infrastructure.
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2. Panel 1: “Privacy – a Public Concern?”

Moderator: Dr. Deepak Prince, with curated questions for the panelists from a IIIT-D alumnus - Naresh Aditya Madhav (Data Protection Officer, Concentrix Corp.).

Key Presentations

- **Prof. Sambuddho Chakravarty (IIIT-Delhi)**
 - Critiqued the new DPDP Act for omitting any explicit reference to “privacy,” in stark contrast to the Supreme Court’s 2017 Puttaswamy verdict.
 - Highlighted repeated Aadhaar data breaches as evidence of systemic vulnerability.
 - Argued that prioritizing rapid digitization over robust safeguards disproportionately endangers urban populations whose financial lives hinge on data integrity.

- Noted India’s collectivist ethos complicates public understanding and advocacy of individual privacy rights.
- **Smriti Parsheera (Lawyer & Policy Researcher)**
 - Framed privacy as the “right to draw boundaries” around personal data, spotlighting the Ayushman Bharat health scheme’s opaque enrollment.
 - Warned of widespread commodification of health records and stressed the need to reform consent mechanisms.

Discussion Highlights

- Consensus that **privacy advocacy** must expand beyond industry-government dialogues to schools, communities, and public forums.
- Recognition that **political and corporate interests** are intertwined, shaping data governance outcomes.
- Call for developing native terminology and public narratives around privacy that resonate with Indian socio-cultural contexts.

The session explored India’s evolving data protection landscape and the complexities surrounding digital privacy. **Prof. Sambuddho (IIIT-Delhi)** provided an insightful analysis of the **Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act**, highlighting the vulnerabilities associated with Aadhaar and the widespread disregard for privacy in India, where it is often seen as a “quasi-blasphemous” concept. **Smriti Parsheera (Lawyer & Digital Policy Researcher)** reinforced these concerns, drawing attention to the commodification of health data and the potential risks associated with schemes like **Ayushman Bharat**. **Dr. Deepak Prince (IIIT-Delhi)** framed privacy as a **moral issue**, emphasizing that ensuring privacy requires a two-pronged approach: **transparency and protection**. The panel engaged in a compelling discussion on how India can navigate the fine balance between privacy rights and the economic and political pressures shaping digital governance.

3. Panel 2: “Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Lessons for DPI of the Future”

Moderator: Dr. Manohar Kumar (IIITD)

Key Presentations

- **Dr. Manohar** urged reframing DPI around **participation, accountability, and inclusivity**, rather than purely technical metrics.

- **Kriti Mittal (Omidyar Network)** posed DPI's dual promise: **expanding service access** and **democratizing problem-solving capability**.
- **Prof. Balaji Parthasarathy (IIIT-Bangalore)** questioned whether privately operated "public" platforms (e.g., ride-hailing) meaningfully alter labor conditions, advocating a nuanced public-private analysis.
- **Prof. Shishir Jha (IIT Bombay)** described India's internet infrastructure as a "bounced check" still awaiting full delivery, and highlighted the economic value of data flow over physical goods.

Emerging Themes

- The need to **center public good** in data ownership and governance.
- Reimagining DPI as an **ecosystem** that transcends binary public/private distinctions.
- Leveraging big data responsibly for **policy-making** and collective benefit.

The session focused on **the public aspect of DPI and its implications for the future**.

Moderated by **Dr. Manohar Kumar (IIIT-Delhi)**, the discussion challenged traditional definitions of "public" within DPI. **Ms. Kriti Mittal (Associate Director, Strategy & Policy, eGovernments Foundation)** highlighted the pathways to unlocking the full potential of DPI for societal benefit, urging stakeholders to rethink the way digital infrastructure serves the public. **Prof. Balaji Parthasarathy (IIIT Bangalore)** posed a critical question: "**DPI for whom?**", arguing that DPI is not just about efficiency and service delivery but about ensuring that the benefits reach the right people. **Prof. Shishir K Jha (IIT Bombay)** stressed the importance of treating **data as a public good**, advocating for DPI frameworks that empower policymakers with data-driven decision-making capabilities. The discussion delved into the nuances of accessibility, equity, and governance in the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

4. Workshop: "Challenges for Inclusive DPI – Gender"

Facilitator: Sharon Buteau (LEAD, Krea University)

- Distinguished **gender-intentional** design from gender-neutral approaches to prevent replication of existing biases.
- Highlighted digital gender gaps: only **30%** of the 350 million UPI users are women.
- Proposed six pillars for **Gender-Responsive DPI**:
 1. Affordability
 2. Accessibility
 3. Digital Literacy
 4. Relevance
 5. Safety & Security
 6. Social Norms

This session focused on the concept of “**gender intentionality**”, arguing that being gender-neutral is not enough and that digital frameworks must actively incorporate gender considerations. Sharon presented a striking statistic—**while 350 million people use UPI, only 30% are women**—highlighting the **gender gap in digital adoption**. She outlined six key areas that need attention to build a **Gender-Responsive DPI: Affordability, Accessibility, Digital Literacy, Relevance, Safety & Security, and Social Norms**. The workshop provided valuable insights into how digital services can be designed to cater to the diverse needs of all users, especially marginalized communities.

5. Fireside Chat - Digitizing GST

(Dr. Anuj Grover in conversation with MV Vasudevan, retd. Addnl. Commissioner, MoF)

Foundational Step:

- Establish a detailed business specification and requirements-management framework before any technical work begins.

Scale and Redundancy:

- For large-scale projects like GST digitisation, identify and eliminate redundant processes to ensure end-to-end supply-chain effectiveness.
- Map out the full workflow graph to manage complexity.

Project Oversight:

- Absence of a single “map view” often fragments efforts—projects resemble a “jigsaw puzzle” that must be pieced together by a coordinated team under central oversight.

Modular Architecture:

- Break the process into discrete modules (e.g., 100 modules); a failure in any module can stall the entire workflow.
- Robust business architecture is the bedrock that stitches these modules into a cohesive infrastructure.

Tendering Process:

- After specifications and workflows are finalized, issue requests for proposals (RFPs): first technical bids, then financial bids.
- Bidders must grasp not only technical architecture but also the government’s broader expectations and end-user needs.

Data Security & Recovery:

- Critical dependency on strategies for “re-rooting” when data repositories fail.
- Prioritize both data safety and the ability to recover required data efficiently.

User Experience:

- Initial project phases will face glitches and bottlenecks; design for a seamless user journey from the outset.
- Key infrastructure considerations include bandwidth constraints, network reliability, and clear separation of upper- and lower-layer system responsibilities.

The day concluded with a **fireside chat on GST digitization**, featuring **Mr. M. V. Vasudevan (Retd. IRS)** in conversation with **Dr. Anuj Grover (IIT-Delhi)**. Mr. Vasudevan shared his firsthand experience of **digitizing GST**, emphasizing the importance of defining **clear business specifications** at the outset of any large-scale digital project. He discussed the complexities of managing **redundancies and workflows**, noting that a well-assembled team is essential for ensuring smooth project execution. He also touched upon key considerations such as **data security, recovery mechanisms, and user experience**, illustrating how robust digital infrastructure can lead to seamless governance. His insights offered a valuable perspective on the challenges and opportunities of large-scale digital transformation in India.

6. Closing and Networking

- **Prizes Ceremony**

The student-run events, organized by representatives of the student clubs Infronix, Girl Up Udhaan, Women in Tech and Finnexia, saw enthusiastic participation from colleges in and around the national capital region. Winners were felicitated at the end of the DDC program.

- **High-Tea Networking** facilitated informal discussions among attendees.
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In addition to the above, as part of the DDC, **Openstudio0**, a public art collective (composed of Deepak Prince, Ajmal Shifaz, Vishnuprasad, Jishnudas KS) displayed an **art installation** titled ‘**Castle under the Canopy**’. The work sought to highlight the importance of Parks as Infrastructure for cities, that add not only ecological value but also contribute to expanding the horizon of imagination.

The project involved over 40 kgs of polyester fabric sourced from the adjoining neighborhood of Sanjay Colony - a market for export reject cloth. These pieces of cloth were then stretched out

in the IIIT-DDA park behind campus, as children and other passers-by in the park painted various images on individual cloth. These were then made into one large collage, approximately 15mx20m in dimension. The cloth was displayed outside R&D building on the day of the event.



Castle under the canopy
Collage/Acrylic on polyester fabric.