Digital Transformation in NGO Fundraising and Marketing: Strategies, Challenges and Opportunities

Samriddhi Singh

Ph. D Scholar, Faculty of Management Studies, ICFAI University, Jharkhand.

Email: samridhi1362@gmail.com

Dr. Rakesh Kumar Dhar Dubey

Professor, Faculty of Management Studies, ICFAI University, Jharkhand.

Email: rakeshkumar@iujharkhand.edu.in

Abstract

Marked by the advent of computers and the internet in the late 20th century, the "Digital Age" has undoubtedly revolutionized how we access, share and process information - making communication faster, knowledge more accessible and data exchange more efficient. It has left no aspect of human life untouched, be it entertainment, education or business - the nonprofit sector being no exception. The "Digital Age" has drastically transformed the way the nonprofit sector operates and connects with its target audience and other stakeholders.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) act as facilitators in driving the development of a nation by addressing social issues such as education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, etc. However, in an increasingly complex and competitive environment; the survival and sustenance of such organizations is under threat as they heavily rely on traditional fundraising and marketing approaches. Through digital transformation, these NGOs can enhance their impact and improve operational efficiencies by targeting the right audience at a fraction of the cost with a shorter wait time between input and the results.

This research paper aims to analyze the impact of digital transformation on NGO fundraising and marketing by exploring the key benefits, challenges and emerging trends in the sector. The study will incorporate both – qualitative insights from case studies of NGOs that have successfully employed digital strategies and quantitative analysis from surveys measuring the effectiveness of digital fundraising campaigns.

It will provide practical recommendations for NGOs seeking to optimize their digital outreach and fundraising. The insights will be valuable for NGOs, helping them understand how digital tools can enhance benefactor engagement, improve marketing efficiency and ensure financial stability in the ever-evolving nonprofit sector.

Keywords: NGOs, Digital Transformation, Fundraising, Marketing.

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1. Introduction

After breaking free from the shackles of colonialism in 1947, India as a free country embarked on a long and gruelling journey towards development. Post-independence India suffered from massive economic and social challenges such as widespread poverty, low literacy rates, unemployment, lack of industries and poor infrastructure. Something had to be done. Drawing inspiration from the Soviet model of centralized planning, the Indian government established the Planning Commission in 1950 to design a series of structured development plans which later came to be known as the "Five-Year Plans (FYPs)". The goal was to achieve self-reliance, economic growth and social justice.

While the government played an instrumental role in India's development through these plans, it was not viable for the government alone to pursue such complex activities. So, there was an essentiality for other groups or organizations to support the government on various fronts (Siddaiah, 2018). Consequently, the gaps in implementation led to the rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as key players in grassroots development, complementing government efforts. In fact, the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-85) formally recognised NGOs as important partners in development and the subsequent plans further expanded on their contribution towards nation-building. These NGOs focused on education, healthcare, gender equality, environmental conservation and human rights.

Today, with the shift from Five-Year Plans to NITI Aayog's flexible policy planning, NGOs continue to play a vital role in India's development landscape. With over 346061 active NGOs (NGO Darpan Directory), India is easily one of the world's most NGO-saturated nations.

Historically, these NGOs have relied on donations, grants and traditional fundraising activities:

a. to sustain their programs,
b. to spread awareness about their cause and
c. to create a donor base (George, 2019).

These traditional methods are costly, time-consuming and geographically limited. Latha and Prabhakar (2010) revealed that most of the NGOs in India are suffering from shortage of funds and are constantly on the lookout for new avenues. Inadvertently, the 2016 demonetization by the Indian government pushed the NGOs to reconsider their fundraising and marketing strategies, calling for a "digital transformation".

Digital transformation is not the same as digitization, which is the process of converting analog data into digital formats of use but refers to undertaking a critical analysis of the organization, its activities, and strategies with the aim of how best to use those technologies (Azim, et al, 2024). The rapid advancement of technology and internet penetration has undoubtedly revolutionized the way these NGOs manage and execute their missions in an ever-evolving society by reaching larger audiences, engaging benefactors more effectively, and improving transparency. Over the last decade or so, the development sector has witnessed a rise of crowdfunding platforms, social media

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campaigns, AI-driven donor targeting, and blockchain transactions. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated digital adoption, making online fundraising and marketing mainstream.

The advantages of digital fundraising and marketing are manifold. One is no longer bound by geographical limits making it easier for the NGOs to broaden their donor bases. It also reduces the operational costs compared to traditional fundraising and enables real-time engagement which wasn't possible earlier. Data analysis and reporting ensure transparency and trust, establishing credibility. It is safe to say that the digital platforms involved in online fundraising and marketing can be referred to as "technical infrastructure" open to anyone and everyone who has access to the internet, basic fundraising know-how and the funds.

Crowdfunding platforms such as Ketto, Milaap, GiveIndia, etc. have emerged as one of the most significant innovations, enabling NGOs to create a global donor base. They make peer-to-peer donations possible, making fundraising campaigns more accessible and scalable for a nominal service fee.

Social media platforms have further amplified NGO outreach. Famous ones such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and X allow NGOs to share impactful stories, run targeted ad campaigns and engage with potential donors in real time. Instagram's donation stickers and Facebook's fundraising tools have made online giving easier and more appealing. They help NGOs create tailored stories to mediate stronger relationships with their existing or potential donors, knowing that effective storytelling from the NGO is more likely to drive giving (Banerjee, 2021).

Additionally, AI & data analytics play a crucial role in donor segmentation and personalised campaigns. NGOs can now analyse donor behaviour and formulate fundraising and marketing strategies accordingly. AI tools can assist in crafting targeted messages, predict donation trends and even automate communication through chatbots. Blockchain and cryptocurrencies is another emerging technology which offers secure, transparent and decentralised donations.

Globally, organisations such as UNICEF, Red Cross and WWF have successfully integrated the previously mentioned digital tools into their fundraising strategies and so have Indian NGOs. Pratham, an education-focused NGO, runs social media campaigns to drive engagement and donations. CRY (Child Rights and You) has successfully leveraged influencer partnerships and digital storytelling to increase donor contributions.

1.1 Research Problem and Rationale

Digital transformation undoubtedly offers new opportunities for fundraising and marketing to NGOs but one can't overlook their struggles with adoption and effectiveness. Obstacles such as financial constraints, lack of digital know-how, cybersecurity risks, etc. plague India's development sector. Small and mid-sized organisations suffer the most as they are unable to integrate these digital tools into sustainable fundraising models. There is also a lack of insights into best practices, donor behaviour and technological adoption specific to India's nonprofit sector.

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1.2 Research Objectives

This study seeks to attain the following objectives to fill the aforementioned gap:

i.   Examine how NGOs leverage digital platforms such as crowdfunding, social media and AI tools to raise funds and engage donors.
ii.   Analyse the benefits and challenges of digital fundraising and marketing.
iii. Provide recommendations to help NGOs optimize their digital efforts.

1.3 Key Research Questions

Given India's unique donor and digital environments

- How have nonprofits adopted digital transformation in fundraising and marketing?
- What are the key challenges they face?
- What strategies can NGOs adopt to maximize donor engagement through digital platforms?

2. Literature Review

Fitzgerald et al. (2014) defined digital transformation as the use of new digital technologies such as social media, mobile technology, analytics, or embedded devices to enable major business improvements including enhanced customer experiences, streamlined operations, or new business models. In simpler words, we can say that it is the use of technology to improve the performance of an organisation. Often deemed a driver of change, digital transformation's rising importance and it's ever evolving nature calls for extensive research on the topic.

Siddaiah (2018) elaborated on the role played by NGOs in supplementing government efforts aimed at addressing various social challenges prevalent in India. The paper traced their evolution and growing influence on policy advocacy, especially concerning the tribal and backward communities. He also raised concerns about foreign funding and regulatory scrutiny under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA). He suggested that instead of blocking foreign funds, the government should take measures to ensure transparency and accountability among the NGOs.

Banerjee (2021) explored the complex role of crowdfunding platforms in reshaping individual giving in India. These platforms help NGOs craft engaging stories by providing essential digital marketing tools and training for a nominal platform/service fee. Hence, combining philanthropy with profit driven models. Banerjee further concluded that crowdfunding platforms undoubtedly increase donor reach but their models are self-profiting and often limit access for smaller NGOs as observed in The Impact Guru's case.

Online giving has emerged as a key driver of donor engagement in recent years. The Online Giving in India: Insights to Improve Results report (2015) provided a comprehensive overview of digital fundraising trends in India. It was observed that more and more individuals are opting for online

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donations. It also talked about the key challenges, including NGOs limited digital expertise, donor trust issues and complexity of implementing payment gateways. The report then made suggestions on how to pursue successful online fundraising. It predicted that 20% of all giving in India will occur online within two years and 50% within a decade.

NGOs are constantly looking to diversify their funding sources and apply innovative digital strategies. George (2019) categorised NGO funding into transactional (short-term) and strategic (long-term) approaches, emphasizing the need for NGOs to improve their donor relationship practices to ensure retention and active participation. George stated that fundraising is the fuel for running the organization and is a result of disciplined management and leadership. The study then highlighted the increasing role of social media, crowdfunding platforms and CSR initiatives while noting regulatory constraint and donor retention challenges.

Azim et al. (2024) examined how nonprofits integrate technology to enhance operations, donor engagement and service delivery. The study focused on the key issues regarding digital transformation faced by NGOs such as financial constraints, lack of digital expertise and resistance to change. It emphasised that a structured digital roadmap is key to sustainable transformation. Management and leadership also play a vital role in ensuring the actualization of these initiatives are aligned with the NGO's vision and mission.

The Charity Digital Skills Report (2024) provided an annual overview of digital adoption trends among nonprofits. It reported that despite having digital strategies in place, most NGOs remained stagnant due to financial limitations and skill gaps. Barriers such as data security concerns and inadequate training persisted, preventing full-scale digital adoption. The study also highlighted the growing role of AI in nonprofit operations, with 61% of respondents using AI for content creation and administrative tasks. It called for charities invest in skills development and develop inclusive digital funding practices for a successful fundraising experience.

Basco (2018) analysed successful digital fundraising approaches across North American nonprofit healthcare organizations. It was observed that funding in the non-profit sector is on the decline and the organizations are seeking new sources of revenue. The study found that email marketing, personalization of messages, and partnerships with local entities significantly improved donor engagement. It stressed the importance of cultural sensitivity and targeted outreach to enhance fundraising effectiveness. Emotional engagement is key in raising funds from the international audiences.

The role of digital transformation in nonprofit sustainability was further explored by Digital Transformation for Nonprofits (2024). It emphasized that technology adoption goes beyond fundraising and digital tools help in optimizing operations, streamlining communications, and improving cybersecurity. The study argued that nonprofits must conduct a digital maturity assessment which will help them develop a digital-first mindset, fostering a culture of innovation to maximize their impact.

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Dhake et al. conducted a comparative study of 30 NGOs, analysing their marketing practices. Their research highlighted that most NGOs relied on traditional methods such as brochures and newspaper ads, meanwhile digital marketing strategies like social media engagement and celebrity endorsements went underutilized. The study recommended streamlining NGO marketing efforts and integrating modern digital tools to improve outreach. They concluded that NGOs should consider associating with academic institutes and utilize the potential of students as volunteers.

2.1 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

First introduced in 1989 by Davis, the theory aims to explain the reasoning behind a user's acceptance and utilization of new technologies. If the user truly believes that the said technology enhances their productivity (perceived usefulness) and is user friendly (perceived ease of use), the chances of its adoption increase significantly (attitude toward using and behavioural intention).
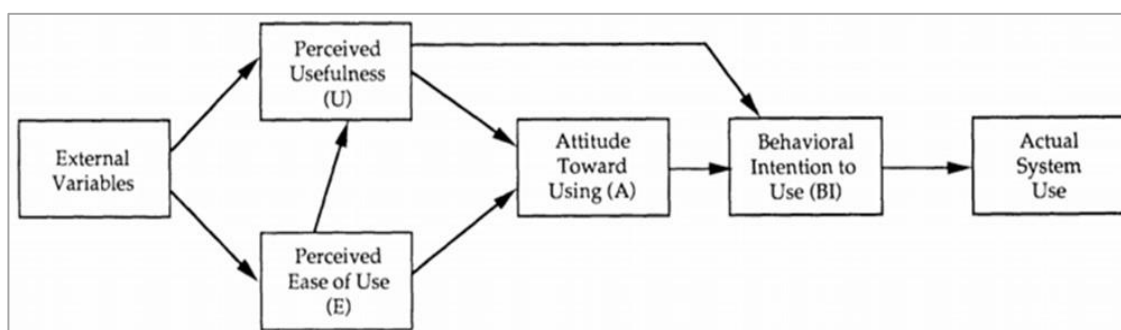
Source: www.enablersofchange.com.au

Implementation of TAM by NGOs can help them adopt digital fundraising and marketing tools based on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. An organisation can identify the platforms which are more effective in reaching donors and speedier fundraising. They can AI and data analytics enhance donor segmentation and further engagement. TAM can help NGOs can strategically adopt digital tools to maximise impact while ensuring ease of implementation.

2.2 Resource-Based View (RBV)

The theory emphasizes that in order to gain competitive advantage, organisations should use existing resources instead of acquiring new ones. It argues that a company has to go against multiple local and global competitors, along with copy-cats and other small-scale businesses; acquiring new skills for each external opportunity isn't feasible.

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Source: https://strategicmanagementinsight.com/tools/resource-based-view/
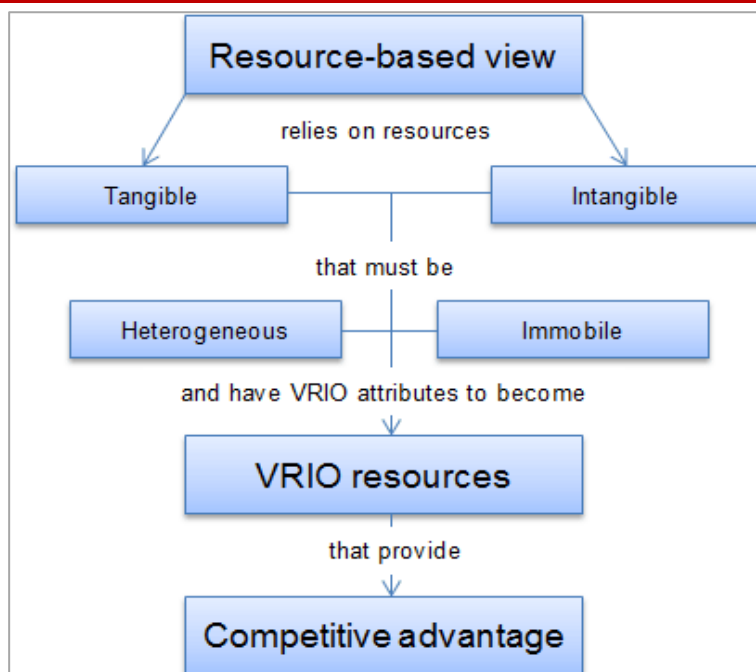
RBV divides these resources into two categories: tangible (land, buildings, machinery, etc.) and intangible (brand reputation, trademark, etc,). These resources are assumed to be heterogenous (they vary from company to company) and immobile (not easily transferable or replicable). The VRIO framework then helps evaluate a resource's competitive potential based on whether it is Valuable, Rare, Inimitable and Organised for use.

2.3 Stakeholder Theory

The sole objective of traditional business models is profit-maximisation. The Stakeholder Theory on the other hand, argues that an organization must balance the needs of all who are affected by the organization's decisions to create sustainable value. A stakeholder could be an employee, a customer, a supplier, the community or even an investor. In the case of nonprofits, the stakeholders are donors, beneficiaries, government bodies, volunteers and corporate partners. Relationship management is of utmost importance to ensure trust, long-term sustainability and successful fundraising activities. The theory is a balanced, ethical and inclusive approach to business. That being said, it has its fair share of limitations. For example, balancing all stakeholders' interests is not possible for what benefits one group, might be a disadvantage to another.

3. Research Methodology

The study has a descriptive research approach to examine how NGOs use digital tools to raise funds and market their causes. The focus is on understanding the current practices, challenges and emerging trends through:

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a. Qualitative interviews with fundraising managers and marketing heads of 15 NGOs operating in Ranchi, Jharkhand,

b. Donor surveys to assess their preferences, trust in digital fundraising and interaction with NGO campaigns; and

c. Secondary data analysis of publicly available fundraising reports and social media metrics.

4. Notable Findings

This study focuses on the adoption, challenges and effectiveness of digital tools in NGO fundraising and marketing. Our interviews with 15 local NGOs and donor survey of 500 individuals gave us a number of interesting insights. The key findings are as follows:

4.1 Increased Adoption of Digital Fundraising Tools

It was observed that most NGOs have put digital fundraising and marketing strategies in place and are using crowdfunding platforms, social media and AI-driven engagement to varying degrees. Platforms like Ketto and Milaap account for nearly 47% of online NGO donations, indicating a shift from traditional fundraising methods. 70% of the interviewed NGOs reported that by running targeted ad campaigns, their donor engagement via Facebook and Instagram has increased significantly.

4.2 Effectiveness of Digital Strategies

65% NGOs reported that emergency relief efforts raised more funds online than offline. Crowdfunding campaigns generate higher donor participation, particularly during crises. The use of AI and data analytics to categorize donors has resulted in improved engagement, leading to a 30% increase in recurring donations among practising NGOs. The trend of Mobile-based giving as a preferred donation method is on the rise with 55% donors opting for NGOs on mobile-friendly platforms.

4.3 Donor Behaviour and Preferences

42% of donors give only during emergencies, while 30% donate once a year; regular donors (monthly/quarterly) make up 18%. It was observed that the popular forms of making donations are

- UPI/wallets such as Google Pay, PhonePe, Paytm (39%),
- direct NGO website donations (25%) and
- cash contributions (15%).

65% of the donors identified transparency in funds utilization as one of the driving factors for recurring donations. The NGOs need to communicate donation impact more clearly and provide real-time donation updates. Donors prefer interactive engagement post donation. 51% favoured acknowledgement emails and 18% requesting utilization reports.

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4.4 The Impact of COVID-19 on Digital Fundraising

The pandemic undoubtedly accelerated NGO digital fundraising efforts with 80% of the NGOs acknowledging a shift to virtual campaigns and social media driven donations. A survey conducted by M+R, an online fundraising and marketing firm, reported a 32% growth in online revenue for nonprofits in 2020.

5. Challenges

Despite the growing significance of digital fundraising, NGOs continue to face several challenges in effectively leveraging digital tools. One of the biggest barriers in digital adoption by NGOs is the unavailability of adequate funding to support and sustain this transformation. Most NGOs operate on tight budgets and hence, cannot afford online giving tools and promotional activities such as donor management software and AI-driven analytics; consequently, limiting their ability to scale fundraising efforts effectively. Additionally, technical limitations and a lack of technical know-how among the NGO staff also hinder adoption, causing inefficiencies in managing online campaigns. Most NGOs don't have even a dedicated marketing team and lack in-house expertise in digital marketing, making it difficult to optimize digital campaigns or safeguard donor data. Their inability to track and analyse donor and online data further complicates the adoption and execution process.

Trust and cybersecurity risks are another major concern with cases of online fraud and data breaches being on the rise. It is imperative for NGOs to invest in secure platforms and transparent communication to establish credibility and build a favourable image but many fail to do so given the complexity of implementing payment gateways. Another point that one must consider is that different countries have varying laws on online donations, taxation and data protection, further complicating the fundraising efforts.

Another major issue that NGOS face is donor retention in the digital space. Online fundraising platforms definitely make it easier to attract donors, but retaining them requires timely engagement, personalised communication and impactful storytelling. Most NGOs are unable to maintain this level of sustained engagement, resulting in donor attrition. Also, with thousands of organizations vying for donor attention on the same platforms, standing out calls for innovative and strategic digital marketing which is resource-intensive.

6. Opportunities

6.1 AI-Powered Donor Segmentation

With the help of Artificial Intelligence (AI), NGOs can now analyse donor data and categorize them according to their giving behaviour, demographics and engagement levels. Based on the AI-driven insights, organizations personalize their outreach efforts, give recommendations and predict giving trends. This targeted approach helps with donor retention and increases the chance of repeated contributions.

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6.2 Social media and Crowdfunding Platforms

Digital platforms have revolutionised fundraising by making it easier for NGOs to reach a global audience at a fraction of the cost. Through impactful storytelling, real-time updates and viral campaigns, NGOs build credibility and strengthen their relationships with the stakeholders; attracting support worldwide. Crowdfunding platforms have empowered small and medium-sized NGOs to secure funding directly from individuals without having to rely on traditional grant-based funding.

6.3 Blockchain for Transparent Donations

Transparency is a key concern for donors. Blockchain technology offers a solution by providing a secure and tamper proof ledger of financial transactions through cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and Ethereum. It eliminated the need for banks or third-part payment processors, speeding up fund transfers. Donors can set conditions to ensure that funds are released only on the attainment of certain milestones. Since, every transaction is publicly recorded, donors can verify exactly how their funds are used, increasing trust in the organisation. Since blockchain facilitates cross-border donations without the need for currency conversions and high processing fees, it becomes easier for NGOs to receive international funding.

6.4 Corporate Partnerships and Digital CSR Initiatives

NGOs and businesses collaborate through corporate partnerships and digital Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives to drive social impact. Corporate partnerships grant NGOs access to financial support, technology, expertise and a wider network. In return, companies get to enhance their reputation, meet sustainability goals and engage employees in meaningful social initiatives. These companies also run digital CSR campaigns through social media, websites and crowdfunding platforms. For e.g. many e-commerce platforms now give the customer the option to contribute to NGO causes at the time of purchase. Some use interactive campaigns such as social media challenges to attract donations and participation.

6.5 Mobile Giving and Contactless Donations

Mobile giving and contactless donations have become popular among NGOs, allowing them to broaden their donor base, increase engagement and streamline the donation process. The organizations now leverage SMS donations, mobile apps and digital wallets to receive funds immediately. Platforms such as GPay, Paytm and Apple Pay make it seamless for donors to contribute while ensuring hygiene and donor security. Donors can also set up recurring contributions (subscription-based donations) through mobile apps. Donors can donate as little as ₹10-₹100 effortlessly (micro donations) because after all, every contribution matters.

7. Conclusion

The digital transformation in nonprofit fundraising and marketing has opened new avenues for NGOs to connect with donors, enhance engagement and drive social impact. Digital tools such as social

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media campaigns, crowdfunding platforms, AI-driven segmentation and mobile giving have revolutionised the way NGOs raise funds and sustain their missions.

The future of NGO fundraising lies in harnessing emerging technologies. However, while digital fundraising presents immense opportunities, NGOs continue to face challenges such as inadequate expertise and familiarity with the online environment, budget constraints and donor trust issues. Overcoming these challenges requires capacity building, strategic partnerships with corporations and policies ensuring data security and transparency.

It is safe to say that the success of digital fundraising depends on the NGO's ability to adapt to technological advancements, maintain donor trust and create compelling narratives that further inspire contribution. By embracing innovation, NGOs can maximize their impact and build sustainable funding models that bring about meaningful changes in society.

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