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DIGITAL LITERACY AND FAKE MESSAGE DETECTION IN RURAL INDIA: A SURVEY WITH REFERENCE TO CHHATTISGARH

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ABSTRACT

The increasing penetration of mobile internet and social media has intensified the spread of fake messages, particularly in rural areas where digital literacy levels vary widely. Rural India remains especially vulnerable to misinformation due to limited access to formal media education, language constraints and strong reliance on forwarded digital content. This survey paper reviews existing research, policy documents and digital literacy initiatives related to fake message detection in rural India, with specific reference to Chhattisgarh. By synthesizing findings from academic studies, government reports and non-governmental interventions, the paper examines patterns of fake message circulation, levels of awareness and commonly adopted detection practices among rural users. The survey identifies key challenges, including inadequate fact-checking skills, low critical media evaluation and uneven reach of digital literacy programmes. It also highlights gaps in current research and implementation frameworks. The paper aims to provide a consolidated understanding of the role of digital literacy in addressing fake message circulation in rural contexts and to offer insights for future research, policy formulation and media literacy interventions.

KEYWORDS: Digital literacy, Fake message detection, Misinformation, Rural India, Chhattisgarh, Media literacy, Social media.

INTRODUCTION

The digital world in India in the 21st century is full of contradictions. On the one hand, technology has made it easier for everyone to get information. On the other hand, it has also made it easier for false information to spread. The "Digital India" initiative and the arrival of very cheap mobile data have caused a communication revolution that has spread to every part of the country in the last ten years. In rural areas like Chhattisgarh, the smartphone is no longer a luxury; it's the main way to connect with the outside world, and sometimes the only way. But this rapid rise in connectivity has outpaced the growth of critical media literacy, making a huge number of people open to the "infodemic" of false information.

In rural India, "fake news" is not just a political issue; it is a real threat to people's safety, health, and social cohesion. In these areas, false information often comes in the form of unproven health advice, fake government welfare programs, or emotionally charged stories about communities. In cities, people can use different media streams to check the truth of what they see. But in rural areas, people often live in "digital silos" where encrypted platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook are the only places to find the truth. In these settings, "forwarding" a message is viewed as a social obligation rather than a data transmission, motivated by the intent to safeguard or enlighten one's community.

Chhattisgarh is a very interesting place to look at this crisis. There are many different types of rural and tribal people living in the state, and the infrastructure is at different stages of development. The government has started a number of digital literacy programs, like PMGDISHA, but these programs often only teach people how to use technology in a "functional" way, like how to turn on a computer or use an app. They don't teach people how to use technology in a "critical" way, like how to figure out what a suspicious message means. Current research indicates that although a rural user may exhibit considerable proficiency in navigating a smartphone interface, they may lack the cognitive frameworks necessary to discern manipulation cues, authenticate sources, or withstand the emotional triggers present in deceptive content.

The "trust architecture" of rural society is one of the biggest problems with closing this gap. In communities that are close-knit, people often check information based on who sent it instead of what it says. When a village elder, a local leader, or a family member forwards a message, it has an inherent stamp of authority that makes people less likely to doubt it. This dependence on trust between people makes it easy for lies to spread. Moreover, the linguistic landscape of Chhattisgarh- where Chhattisgarhi and various tribal dialects coexist with Hindi-

poses a challenge for centralized fact-checking entities. Most automated detection tools and media literacy campaigns that focus on cities are made for the most common languages. This leaves people who speak vernacular languages in a “verification vacuum”.

Another problem that is often ignored in policy talks is the "cognitive cost" of verification. For a rural person who works in agriculture or manual labor, it takes a lot of work to leave an encrypted app and look for a fact-check on a third-party website. When false information is meant to make people feel like they need to act quickly, like a warning about a gang that steals children or a sudden change in a subsidy rule, the emotional brain takes over the analytical brain. This is why interventions that only raise awareness often don't lead to long-term changes in behavior. Spreading false information is a habit-based behavior that is made worse by the way digital platforms are set up to reward speed and engagement over accuracy. Rural India has always used oral traditions and communal storytelling to share information. The shift to a digital-first information ecosystem happened almost overnight, without the time of widespread print literacy that urban areas went through. This "leapfrogging" means that people still don't fully trust written text in digital media (like newspapers or books) like they do in formal media. For a lot of people who are new to digital technology, if a message shows up on a screen with professional-looking graphics or a voiceover that sounds official, they believe it right away.

The literature published between 2021 and 2025 makes it clear that fake message detection is not just a technical problem that can be solved by better algorithms. It is not just a technical problem; it is also a social problem that needs a mix of information literacy, cognitive habits, and community-based solutions. Researchers are starting to say that digital literacy in rural India won't work unless it is "socially embedded." This means that it needs to use existing local structures like schools, panchayats, and "digital champions" at the grassroots level. This survey paper aims to unify the disparate research on digital literacy and fake message detection in rural India, particularly emphasizing the subtleties of the Chhattisgarhi context. The subsequent sections will analyze the patterns of misinformation dissemination, the present level of awareness among rural users, and the efficacy of current literacy frameworks by integrating insights from academic research, governmental reports, and non-governmental initiatives. The ultimate goal is to move beyond a "one-size-fits-all" approach and find out how digital literacy can become a shared social practice that gives people in rural areas the confidence and critical thinking skills they need to use the internet.

We also need to think about how gender and socio-economic status play a role in filling these gaps. In many rural households, men may have more freedom to use devices than women, who may have to share access. This makes it even harder for women to get involved in digital literacy programs. To make sure that the most vulnerable people in Chhattisgarh aren't left behind in the fight against false information, any comprehensive plan for the state must take these internal divisions into account.

Our goal with this exploration is to answer a basic question: How can we give the rural heartland of India the tools to tell the difference between truth and lies in a time when one forwarded message can start a fight or put public health at risk? The subsequent analysis transitions from a comprehensive literature review to a focused examination of localized strategies, offering a framework for future research, policy development, and media literacy initiatives in Chhattisgarh and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The expansion of smartphone use and low-cost data has accelerated digital participation in rural India, but it has also increased exposure to misleading and manipulative messages circulated through social media and encrypted messaging platforms. Within this environment, research from 2021–2025 increasingly treats “fake message detection” not as a purely technical task, but as a combined outcome of information literacy, cognitive habits, social trust networks, and the design of digital platforms.

A strong foundational argument in the literature is that information literacy is the most direct literacy pathway to fake news detection. Jones-Jang, Mortensen, and Liu (2021) show that among media, civic, and technological literacies, information literacy is most predictive of whether users can recognize fake news. Their work positions detection as a skill set that includes source evaluation, corroboration, and recognizing cues of manipulation rather than simply “being active online” (Jones-Jang, Mortensen, and Liu 2021). This becomes especially relevant for rural contexts where access may rise quickly while critical evaluation practices lag.

Alongside literacy, scholars emphasize the role of reflexive thinking at the moment of sharing. Pennycook and Rand (2021) argue that misinformation often spreads because people do not pause to assess accuracy, and that small interventions (accuracy prompts) can reduce sharing of false content. This insight is important for rural WhatsApp-dominant environments where forwarding is normalized and social friction is low (Pennycook and Rand 2021). Extending the behavioural angle, Rao and Kumar (2021) caution that many awareness

campaigns produce only short-lived improvements, with users reverting to habitual sharing unless learning is reinforced through repeated community-level touchpoints (Rao and Kumar 2021). Together, these works suggest that detection is not just knowledge-based; it is habit-based.

A practical strand of research focuses on mobile-first literacy interventions designed for low-literacy settings. Das and Biswas (2021) demonstrate that concise, culturally adapted short videos in vernacular languages can strengthen digital literacy outcomes through high recall and easy circulation (Das and Biswas 2021). Verma and Ahuja (2021) similarly argue that gamified learning improves engagement and retention for rural audiences by shifting learning from lecture-based instruction to participatory activity (Verma and Ahuja 2021). This is particularly useful for misinformation education because detection skills improve through repeated practice: spotting clickbait cues, checking sources, and comparing claims.

The literature also argues that literacy initiatives are more effective when they include ethical reasoning and social responsibility. Kumari and John (2021) find that moral reasoning helps users reflect on harm, consequences, and intent, which can increase restraint in sharing unverified messages (Kumari and John 2021). This ethical dimension matters because misinformation is frequently designed to trigger emotion and urgency. Chadha and Kapoor (2022) reinforce this by showing that fake news circulates not only due to ignorance but also because it serves emotional and social needs such as identity reinforcement and group belonging (Chadha and Kapoor 2022). In survey terms, these studies imply that any review of fake message detection should track not just "verification knowledge," but also emotional triggers and social motivations.

Several studies highlight structural vulnerabilities that shape who is able to detect fake messages effectively. Khan and Idris (2022) emphasize gendered digital access patterns, where women in rural households may have indirect or constrained access to devices and lower autonomy in digital learning spaces, increasing their exposure risk and limiting verification practices (Khan and Idris 2022). Diepeveen and Pinet (2022) add that users often overestimate their own digital competence, and this overconfidence can itself become a driver of misinformation sharing (Diepeveen and Pinet 2022). These findings are important for rural India because they push researchers to measure not only literacy levels, but also perceived literacy and the social conditions that shape learning.

The platform environment itself creates constraints. Chatterjee and Dey (2022) argue that fake news detection tools and computational approaches struggle in multilingual and dialect-rich contexts due to limited language resources and uneven model performance beyond dominant languages (Chatterjee and Dey 2022). For regions such as Chhattisgarh, where Hindi coexists with Chhattisgarhi and tribal languages, this limitation matters because detection and debunking are less effective when tools do not match the linguistic reality of users. Thakur and Raghavan (2022) examine misinformation in political communication and warn that literacy initiatives perceived as partisan may lose credibility, indicating that trust and neutrality are essential design principles for misinformation education (Thakur and Raghavan 2022).

Research from 2023 onward expands the discussion to encrypted and closed-group misinformation, where conventional platform moderation and fact-check visibility are limited. Bansal et al. (2023) discuss the sociotechnical complexity of misinformation on encrypted platforms and suggest that community-led strategies can be more effective than centralized monitoring in such environments (Bansal et al. 2023). Narayan et al. (2023) complement this by showing how peer networks shape acceptance and propose "social correction strategies" that train users to challenge misinformation respectfully within trusted circles (Narayan et al. 2023). This is particularly relevant for rural communities where social cohesion is high and correction must be culturally tactful to avoid conflict.

Institutional and community communication channels also appear in recent literature as scalable pathways. Sengupta and Raman (2023) show that integrating digital literacy within school curricula can significantly improve students' ability to recognize fake news, indicating that early institutionalization creates long-term resilience (Sengupta and Raman 2023). Menon and Tripathi (2023) demonstrate that folk media and community storytelling can successfully communicate misinformation awareness in tribal regions by aligning learning with familiar cultural forms (Menon and Tripathi 2023). Apuke, Omar, and Tunca (2023), though based outside India, provide supportive evidence that interactive sessions, peer learning, and simulations reduce the tendency to share unverified content, reinforcing the pedagogical value of participatory approaches for young users (Apuke, Omar, and Tunca 2023).

Work from 2024 emphasizes grassroots and decentralized models suited to rural governance and service ecosystems. Ahuja and Pandey (2024) propose a "digital champions" approach that trains local actors such as teachers, shopkeepers, and frontline workers to become

community-level verification resources (Ahuja and Pandey 2024). Sen and Das (2024) present a panchayat-based fact-checking model where local desks and verified bulletins create a trusted institutional point for clarification and reporting (Sen and Das 2024). Goswami and Raut (2024) argue that digital literacy programs are more effective when culturally adapted, rejecting one-size-fits-all, urban-centric content and advocating localized examples, language, and community role models (Goswami and Raut 2024). This line of work is especially aligned with rural Chhattisgarh, where cultural diversity and local governance institutions can be leveraged for misinformation resilience.

Finally, 2025-accessed institutional resources such as PIB Fact Check and national digital literacy initiatives indicate a growing policy recognition of misinformation and literacy needs, though the research literature consistently notes that implementation quality and evaluation remain uneven (Press Information Bureau 2025; “PMGDISHA” 2025; “Digital India Programme” 2025). For a survey paper, this suggests that mapping both scholarly findings and documented initiatives is important, while also distinguishing between “programme presence” and “programme effectiveness.”

Overall, the 2021–2025 literature supports three conclusions relevant to a survey on rural Chhattisgarh: (i) detection capacity depends heavily on information literacy and reflective sharing habits (Jones-Jang, Mortensen, and Liu 2021; Pennycook and Rand 2021), (ii) social trust networks and encrypted platforms require community-based correction strategies (Bansal et al. 2023; Narayan et al. 2023), and (iii) sustainable improvement is most likely when interventions are localized, culturally grounded, and institutionally reinforced through schools, panchayats, and grassroots champions (Sengupta and Raman 2023; Sen and Das 2024; Goswami and Raut 2024).

Thematic analysis

When we look at the main ideas that are coming out of current research, it's clear that finding fake messages in rural areas isn't just a "tech problem"- it's also a social one. Messages usually go through encrypted, high-trust "digital silos" like WhatsApp, where people often believe what a family member says without thinking twice. People are getting better at using the hardware, but there is still a huge gap in "critical literacy," which is the instinct to stop and check before sharing. It's interesting that in places like Chhattisgarh, people often rely on word-of-mouth rather than professional fact-checking sites, which many people don't even know exist. To fix this, the data shows that "one-size-fits-all" programs aren't working;

instead, we need strategies that are specific to each community and use community leaders and even folk media to get the message across.

Patterns of Fake Message Circulation in Rural Contexts-

In rural India, the way false information spreads isn't just about sending data; it's a deeply social thing that is part of everyday life in the community. The research shows that encrypted apps like WhatsApp and Facebook groups aren't just apps; for many families, they are the main, and sometimes only, source of news. These spaces are private and "closed," which makes them a great place for fake messages to spread without the watchful eyes of professional journalists or fact-checkers.

One of the most interesting patterns is the "trust-based circulation." In a village, people don't judge a message by how good the evidence is, but by how well-known the sender is. If a respected teacher, a close family member, or an elder in the community sends a message, it has an unspoken stamp of authenticity that makes people less likely to doubt it. Because of this "authority bias," messages about health cures, government schemes, and local community issues spread like wildfire. People don't always want to spread lies; they often want to help their neighbours, which makes the community more vulnerable in a strange way. Also, the content is usually meant to make you feel something. The messages take advantage of the specific worries and hopes that come with living in the country, whether they are urgent warnings about child-lifters or fake updates about welfare benefits. In places like Chhattisgarh, where Chhattisgarhi and local dialects are the main languages spoken, the circulation is even more complicated. Misinformation that fits these language situations feels "closer to home," which makes it even harder for standard-Hindi fact-checking tools that focus on cities to step in before the damage is done.

Digital Literacy Levels and Detection Practices-

In rural India, digital literacy goes beyond just being able to swipe or tap on a screen. There is a huge gap between "functional" skills and "critical" skills that is often hard to see. Most people in villages across Chhattisgarh are now very good at using the internet. They can send voice notes, download videos, and keep track of their social media profiles very quickly. But just because they are good with technology doesn't mean they can always tell when someone is lying. The research shows that even though people are more "connected" than ever, they haven't gotten better at critically thinking about what they see on their screens at the same time.

In a typical rural area, figuring out if a message is fake isn't a scientific process; it's more of a social one. Most people don't have a list of things to check; they just go with their "gut feelings" or what everyone else is doing. For instance, a common thing to do is to just ask someone else - usually a friend, neighbour, or local "expert"- if they've heard the same news. There is also a psychological trap where repetition starts to seem like reality. For example, if a message shows up in three different WhatsApp groups, the average user starts to think it must be true.

One of the biggest problems is that people don't know about formal fact-checking tools. Many people in rural areas have never heard of tools like PIB Fact Check or Alt News. People often think these tools are "built for someone else" because they are usually in English or formal Hindi, which is different from the Chhattisgarhi or tribal dialects people use every day. Because of this, most people don't have the time or training to do verification, which is seen as a difficult task.

Also, people are more likely to trust the "digital aesthetics" of a message. People are much more likely to believe a post if it has a professional-sounding voiceover, an official-looking logo, or is presented as "breaking news." In these communities, the "trust architecture" is based on social ties. A message from a local leader or a family member has an automatic stamp of authority that makes people less likely to doubt it. This means that the person in the country isn't just getting false information; they're also spreading it without meaning to because they want to share "important" news with their loved ones.

Role of Digital Literacy Initiatives-

When we look at the various digital literacy initiatives rolled out across rural India, it’s easy to get impressed by the sheer scale of the numbers. Programs like PMGDISHA have reached millions, aiming to turn every rural household into a digitally empowered unit. However, if we’re being honest and looking at the ground reality in states like Chhattisgarh, there is a fundamental "missing link" in how these programs are designed. Most official initiatives treat digital literacy like a technical checklist: can you open an email? Can you use a UPI app? Can you search for a government scheme? While these are essential survival skills in a digital economy, they don't actually teach a person how to handle a lie (Rao & Kumar, 2021).

The real "role" of a digital literacy initiative shouldn't just be about building confidence with hardware; it should be about building a "critical mindset." Recent scholarly work suggests that we need to move away from the classroom model and toward something more socially embedded. For example, Sengupta and Raman (2023) have argued that the most effective

way to combat fake news is through long-term curriculum integration in rural schools. The idea is that if you train the youth, they become the "de facto" fact-checkers for their households, helping their parents and grandparents navigate the murky waters of WhatsApp forwards.

In Chhattisgarh, we are seeing a shift toward more creative, "human-centric" approaches. Some of the most promising initiatives aren't coming from high-tech labs, but from grassroots efforts that use folk media, street plays, and local "digital champions" (Ahuja & Pandey, 2024). These programs work because they speak the local language—literally and culturally. They don't just tell people "don't share fake news"; they explain *why* it's being sent and how it exploits their emotions.

Another critical role of these initiatives is bridging the linguistic gap. As Sen and Das (2024) pointed out, decentralizing fact-checking through local Panchayats is a game-changer. When a village council takes ownership of information hygiene, it carries more weight than a distant government broadcast. The future of digital literacy in rural contexts isn't about more apps or faster data; it's about creating a "social vaccine" where the community itself develops the immunity to recognize, pause, and debunk misinformation before it can do real-world damage.

Regional Relevance to Chhattisgarh-

When we talk about India's digital literacy, we often make the mistake of seeing the whole country as one big, uniform block. But to really get how misinformation spreads, you have to look at the specific ways that things are done in a place like Chhattisgarh. In this case, the problem with fake news isn't just "bad information." It's also very connected to the state's geography, tribal history, and language diversity.

In rural Chhattisgarh, the "digital divide" isn't just about who has a 4G connection; it's also about who can understand the warnings. Many fact-checking projects run by the government or the state use standard Hindi or English. But a lot of people in rural areas speak Chhattisgarhi, Halbi, or Gondi. When someone writes a fake message about a "new government tax" or a "miracle herbal cure" in the local language, it sounds real and familiar. It gets around the mental filters that might catch a generic, badly translated Hindi message.

The social structure of the state is also very important. In a lot of villages in Bastar or Surguja, the community is the main safety net. Information moves through traditional structures like village heads, local "Kotwars," or self-help groups (SHGs). If a fake message

gets into these groups, it immediately gains credibility that no AI tool that focuses on cities can easily disprove.

The quick shift from oral traditions to digital screens is what makes Chhattisgarh's case so urgent. There was no "newspaper era" or "desktop computer era" for many first-time users in the state. They went straight from talking to WhatsApp. This leapfrogging means that the doubt we usually have about printed text hasn't had time to grow. For a farmer in Dhamtari or a forest dweller in Gariaband, a message on a smartphone isn't just a notification; it's often seen as a modern version of an official announcement. To fix this, we need more than just apps. We need strategies that are specific to each area and that respect and use the state's unique community ties.

DISCUSSION

When we take a step back and look at the bigger picture, it becomes clear that the story of "Digital India" has a lot of layers. In terms of hardware and data, we have successfully achieved "digital inclusion." However, we are still in the early stages of "cognitive inclusion." The smartphone has come to rural Chhattisgarh like a tidal wave, but the mental life jackets-critical thinking and source verification are still being put together.

One of the most important things I've learned from the current literature is that misinformation isn't a "knowledge deficit" problem; it's a "social trust" problem. As we've said, the trust architecture in rural areas is based on strong social ties that have been around for a long time. Your reputation is your money in a village. People don't see a forwarded message as data from an unknown server; they see it as a personal recommendation from a friend or family member. This makes the information seem better than it really is. The information must be true if the person sending it is reliable. This completely skips the parts of the brain that do analysis. Our conversation shows that digital literacy programs will keep having problems until they learn how to deal with these social hierarchies. We can't just tell people to "distrust their phones" when their phones are the main way they talk to the people they trust the most.

In addition, the fact that people in rural Chhattisgarh speak different languages makes it harder for current fact-checking tools to work. Most automated systems learn from "clean" data, which is standard Hindi or English. But the false information that goes around in the rural heartland is often "messy"; it uses local slang, Chhattisgarhi idioms, and references to tribes. This makes it hard for AI monitors in Silicon Valley or New Delhi to see. This "vernacular vulnerability" may be the biggest hole in our current defense plan. We are

basically asking people in rural areas to fight a high-tech war with low-tech tools. For a farmer in a remote area, the "cost" of verification is just too high. It might as well not exist if they can't get a fact-check in their own language and on a platform they already use.

The "forwarding habit" also has an interesting psychological side. In many rural areas, being the first to share "important" news is a way to show that you care about the community or to gain social status. Sharing is based on a good impulse, whether it's a warning about bad weather in the area or a tip about a new government grant. The issue is that the digital world has turned this urge into a weapon. Fake messages are meant to make you feel "high-arousal," which means they make you feel angry, excited, or in a hurry. This "emotional hijacking" is what makes false information spread so quickly before anyone has a chance to do a "sanity check."

Lastly, we need to talk about the role of institutions in this crisis. Our review indicates that although governmental initiatives such as PMGDISHA have effectively facilitated internet usage education, they have yet to achieve proficiency in instructing individuals on how to navigate life online. Digital literacy needs to become a kind of "digital hygiene." We teach kids to wash their hands to keep them from getting sick, and we need to teach digital users to "wash" their information by checking the source, waiting before sharing, and being aware of emotional manipulation.

Chhattisgarh needs to decentralize in order to move forward. We can't wait for a central authority to put an end to every rumor in the area. We need to give local nodes like school teachers, Anganwadi workers, and Panchayat members the power to be the "first responders" in the fight against fake news instead. We can turn the smartphone from a source of weakness into a tool for real empowerment by making digital literacy a community-led, vernacular-first movement. The goal isn't just to teach people how to use technology; it's to teach them how to tell the truth in a world where things are getting more nd more dishonest.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that combating false information in rural India, particularly in a linguistically and culturally diverse region like Chhattisgarh, cannot be achieved solely through improved software. For years, we've been focused on "digital inclusion," which is great because more people now own smartphones and can get cheap data. But we've mostly ignored the "cognitive inclusion" side of things. The truth is that even though a farmer in Dhamtari or a student in Bastar might be a "power user" of WhatsApp, they haven't been taught how to question all the information that comes to them every day.

What this survey really shows is that "truth" in a rural setting is very social. People don't check facts by going to a government website; they check them by looking at who sent the message. If it comes from a trusted family member or a local leader, the content is automatically okay. This means that our digital literacy programs can't just be "how-to" guides that are general and only for people who live in cities. We need to start speaking the local language, both literally and figuratively. This means using Chhattisgarhi and tribal dialects and making these lessons a part of the village's social fabric.

The best way to move forward isn't from the top down; it's from the bottom up. It's about giving the local nodes of trust—like school teachers, panchayat members, and "digital champions" who are already part of the community's daily life—the power they need to do their jobs. We can make digital literacy a common social habit by adding critical thinking to schools and using familiar forms like folk media.

The main goal for Chhattisgarh and the rest of rural India is to create a "social vaccine" against false information. We need to get to the point where checking a source is as normal as locking your front door. We can make sure that the digital revolution stays a tool for empowerment instead of a source of weakness if we can close the gap between "being online" and "being informed."

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