INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS LAW REVIEW
An International Open Access Double Blind Peer Reviewed, Referred Journal

Volume 5 | Issue 3 | 2026 Art. 8

A Critical Study of Digital Arrest Scams and the Erosion of Online Trust: A Socio-Legal Analysis of Cybercrime Regulation in the AI Era

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Recommended Citation
Disha, *A Critical Study of Digital Arrest Scams and the Erosion of Online Trust: A Socio-Legal Analysis of Cybercrime Regulation in the AI Era,* 5 IJHRLR 100-115 (2026).
Available at www.humanrightlawreview.in/current-issues/.

A Critical Study of Digital Arrest Scams and the Erosion of Online Trust: A Socio-Legal Analysis of Cybercrime Regulation in the AI Era

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and online communication platforms has significantly transformed the nature of cybercrime, giving rise to a new form of technology-enabled fraud popularly known as "digital arrest scams." These scams involve cybercriminals impersonating law enforcement agencies, judicial authorities, telecom regulators, or financial institutions through video calls, AI-generated voices, forged digital documents, and deepfake-assisted communication to create fear and compel victims to transfer money under the false pretext of legal action. The growing prevalence of such scams has emerged as a serious threat to online trust and digital governance in India. According to data reported through the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (NCRP), incidents of digital arrest scams increased from approximately 39,925 cases in 2022 to 1,23,672 cases in 2024, while reported financial losses escalated from nearly ₹91 crore to around ₹1,935 crore during the same period. Recent Ministry of Home Affairs and Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) reports further indicate that Indians lost more than ₹22,845 crore to cyber fraud in 2024 and approximately ₹22,495 crore in 2025, with digital arrest scams accounting for a substantial share of psychological and financially motivated cybercrimes. Karnataka alone recorded losses exceeding ₹468 crore between 2023 and early 2026, demonstrating the alarming scale of victimisation despite increased awareness initiatives. The integration of artificial intelligence, voice cloning, synthetic identities, and deepfake technologies has further complicated investigation, attribution, and prosecution, exposing significant gaps within existing cybercrime regulatory frameworks. This study therefore undertakes a socio-legal analysis of digital arrest scams by examining their operational patterns, impact on public confidence, legal and regulatory inadequacies, and the emerging challenges posed by AI-driven deception. The research highlights the urgent need for robust cybercrime governance, technological safeguards, public awareness mechanisms, and adaptive legal reforms to restore trust within the digital ecosystem and ensure effective protection against evolving cyber threats.

KEYWORDS

Cybercrime, Trust, Deepfakes, Fraud, Governance

1. CONCEPTUALISING DIGITAL ARREST SCAMS

Digital arrest scams represent a sophisticated form of cyber-enabled fraud wherein perpetrators falsely impersonate police officers, officials of investigative agencies, telecom regulators, customs authorities, or judicial officers to create the illusion that the victim is implicated in a criminal investigation. Victims are often informed that their Aadhaar number, mobile number, bank account, or courier package has been linked to illicit activities such as money laundering, drug trafficking, or terrorism financing[1]. The fraudsters then coerce individuals into remaining under continuous virtual surveillance through video calls and compel them to transfer funds for purported "verification" or "safe custody" purposes. Unlike traditional fraud schemes, digital arrest scams exploit the authority and legitimacy associated with state institutions, thereby undermining public confidence in digital communication and law enforcement processes. The phenomenon has emerged as a significant challenge within the broader landscape of cybercrime and digital governance.

The origins of digital arrest scams can be traced to earlier forms of cyber-enabled impersonation crimes, including phishing, vishing, and business email compromise schemes. However, the increased digitisation of governance, widespread adoption of online banking, and expansion of digital identity systems have provided new opportunities for cybercriminals to imitate official authorities with greater credibility. In India, the rapid growth of digital public infrastructure and mobile connectivity has coincided with an increase in impersonation-based frauds targeting individuals across age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. The legal framework governing such offences is dispersed across provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, particularly those concerning cheating, personation, criminal intimidation, extortion, and forgery, alongside provisions of the IT Act, 2000 relating to identity theft and computer-related offences[2].

The contemporary manifestation of digital arrest scams is closely linked to advances in artificial intelligence and emerging communication technologies. Fraudsters increasingly employ caller-ID spoofing, AI-generated voices, manipulated videos, forged warrants, and deepfake-enabled video conferencing to enhance the authenticity of their deception. Such technologies create a convincing simulation of official authority, making it difficult for victims to distinguish between genuine and fraudulent communications. The dangers associated with manipulated digital content have been judicially recognised in contexts

[1] Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), *Citizen Financial Cyber Fraud Reporting and Management System Report* (2024).
[2] Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000, §§ 66C, 66D (India).

involving privacy, reputation, and informational integrity. The Supreme Court's recognition of informational privacy as an aspect of Article 21 underscores the broader constitutional implications of technological misuse and digital manipulation[3].

A defining feature of digital arrest scams is the deliberate use of psychological manipulation and social engineering techniques. Cybercriminals exploit fear, urgency, isolation, and authority bias to induce compliance from victims. Individuals are frequently instructed not to communicate with family members or legal advisors and are threatened with immediate arrest, passport cancellation, or asset seizure[4]. Such tactics mirror established behavioural patterns identified in cybercrime research, where emotional pressure often overrides rational decision-making. Elderly persons, professionals, students, and financially secure individuals are particularly vulnerable because scammers tailor their narratives to exploit personal circumstances and perceived social status. The resulting harm extends beyond financial losses and often includes emotional distress, reputational damage, and diminished trust in public institutions.

Globally, digital arrest scams have evolved into transnational criminal enterprises operating across jurisdictions and leveraging encrypted communication platforms, cryptocurrency transactions, and AI-assisted fraud mechanisms. Countries such as the United States, Singapore, Australia, and the United Kingdom have reported comparable scams involving impersonation of tax authorities, immigration officials, and law enforcement agencies. In India, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre have repeatedly issued public advisories highlighting the increasing sophistication of these scams and their connection to organised cybercrime networks operating beyond national borders[5]. The transnational character of such offences underscores the need for coordinated regulatory responses, international cooperation, and adaptive legal frameworks capable of addressing emerging threats in the age of artificial intelligence and digital deception.

2. DIGITAL ARREST SCAMS AND THE EROSION OF ONLINE TRUST

Trust constitutes the foundational pillar of the contemporary digital ecosystem. The success of online banking, e-governance services, digital payments, telemedicine, e-commerce, and virtual communication

[3] *See* Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India, (2017) 10 S.C.C. 1 (India).
[4] Susan W. Brenner, *Cybercrime and the Law: Challenges, Issues, and Outcomes* 84–89 (3d ed. 2019).
[5] U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Study on Cybercrime: Emerging Threats and Criminal Ecosystems 112–18 (2025).

depends upon citizens' confidence that digital interactions are secure, authentic, and protected by law. Digital arrest scams directly undermine this confidence by exploiting the perceived legitimacy of state institutions and public authorities. When fraudsters impersonate police officers, judicial officials, or government agencies, they not only deceive individual victims but also weaken institutional credibility[6]. As digital societies increasingly rely on technology-mediated transactions, trust becomes a public resource that requires legal and regulatory protection. The erosion of this trust has broader implications for democratic governance, economic participation, and citizen engagement in digital platforms.

One of the most significant consequences of digital arrest scams is their adverse impact on citizens' confidence in digital governance initiatives. India's digital transformation has been marked by the widespread adoption of Aadhaar-based services, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), DigiLocker, e-Courts, and various online public service delivery mechanisms. However, when cybercriminals exploit these very systems to fabricate allegations of criminal misconduct or misuse of digital identities, public confidence in government-backed digital infrastructure is adversely affected[7]. Citizens who become victims of such scams often develop skepticism towards official digital communications, thereby reducing their willingness to engage with legitimate online services. This challenge is particularly concerning in a country pursuing ambitious goals of digital inclusion and paperless governance under the Digital India framework.

The economic consequences of digital arrest scams are substantial and extend beyond immediate financial losses. Victims are frequently coerced into transferring large sums of money under the pretext of legal verification, investigation, or temporary asset freezing. In many instances, individuals exhaust their savings, liquidate investments, or borrow funds to comply with fraudulent demands. Beyond monetary harm, victims often experience severe psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, humiliation, and a prolonged sense of vulnerability[8]. The emotional impact is intensified because the deception exploits fear of criminal prosecution and social stigma. Courts have increasingly recognized the importance of protecting individuals from technological abuses that threaten personal dignity and autonomy, both of which are essential components of the right to life under Article 21 of the

[6] OECD, *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Main Findings from the 2024 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions* 18–23 (2024).
[7] Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, Government of India, *Digital India Annual Report 2024–25* 31–37 (2025).
[8] *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, (2015) 5 S.C.C. 1 (India).

Constitution.

Digital arrest scams also present serious challenges to the continued growth of digital payments and online communication networks. India's remarkable success in promoting cashless transactions through UPI and mobile banking depends upon public confidence in electronic platforms. As cyber fraud incidents become more sophisticated, individuals may become reluctant to adopt digital financial services, thereby affecting broader economic objectives relating to financial inclusion and digital innovation[9]. Moreover, the misuse of video conferencing platforms, caller identification systems, and encrypted communication channels complicates efforts to distinguish legitimate interactions from fraudulent ones. The resulting atmosphere of uncertainty imposes additional compliance costs on service providers and necessitates stronger cybersecurity safeguards throughout the digital ecosystem.

The societal impact of digital arrest scams is particularly pronounced among vulnerable populations, including senior citizens, students, migrants, homemakers, and first-time internet users. These groups often possess limited digital literacy and may be less capable of identifying sophisticated deception techniques involving spoofed numbers, forged documents, or AI-generated communications. The digital divide therefore creates unequal exposure to cyber risks, transforming cybersecurity into a question of social justice and inclusive governance. From a legal perspective, the Information Technology Act, 2000 and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 provide mechanisms for prosecuting impersonation, identity theft, cheating, and cyber fraud; however, enforcement remains challenging due to jurisdictional complexities and the transnational nature of cybercrime[10]. Addressing these concerns requires not only legal reforms but also sustained public awareness campaigns, digital literacy initiatives, and victim-support mechanisms aimed at restoring public trust in the digital environment.

3. LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK GOVERNING DIGITAL ARREST SCAMS IN INDIA

The rapid proliferation of digital arrest scams has exposed the need for a robust legal and regulatory framework capable of addressing technology-enabled frauds. Although Indian law does not presently recognize "digital arrest" as a distinct statutory offence, the conduct associated with such scams falls within a combination of cybercrime, cheating, impersonation, extortion, criminal intimidation, identity theft, and forgery offences. The legal response is therefore derived from

[9] Reserve Bank of India, *Report on Currency and Finance 2024–25: Digital Payments and Financial Stability* 142–48 (2025).
[10] Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000, §§ 66C, 66D (India).

multiple statutes operating concurrently to prevent, investigate, and prosecute cyber-enabled deception. As cybercriminals increasingly exploit digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and telecommunications infrastructure to impersonate public authorities, regulatory institutions are required to adapt traditional criminal law principles to the realities of the digital environment[11].

The Information Technology Act, 2000 remains the principal legislation governing cyber offences in India. While enacted prior to the emergence of digital arrest scams, several provisions are directly applicable to such conduct. Section 66C criminalizes identity theft involving the fraudulent use of electronic signatures, passwords, or unique identification features, whereas Section 66D penalizes cheating by personation through computer resources. These provisions are particularly relevant where fraudsters misuse Aadhaar details, spoof telephone numbers, or impersonate government officials through electronic means[12]. Additionally, intermediary liability provisions and cybersecurity obligations imposed upon service providers contribute to the broader regulatory architecture designed to prevent misuse of digital platforms. Judicial interpretation has consistently emphasized that technological advancements must be accompanied by safeguards protecting citizens against unlawful exploitation and cyber-enabled harm.

The enactment of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 has strengthened the criminal law framework applicable to digital arrest scams. Various provisions relating to cheating, personation, extortion, criminal intimidation, forgery, and the use of forged electronic records may be invoked depending on the factual circumstances of each case. Fraudsters frequently threaten victims with fabricated criminal proceedings, arrest warrants, or regulatory investigations in order to obtain unlawful financial gain. Such conduct may attract offences involving extortion and criminal intimidation in addition to cheating. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita reflects a legislative recognition that conventional criminal offences increasingly occur through digital means, thereby requiring investigative authorities to integrate cyber-forensic techniques with traditional criminal law enforcement mechanisms[13].

Telecommunications regulation also plays a significant role in combating digital arrest scams. Fraudsters often rely upon caller-ID spoofing, international virtual numbers, bulk messaging systems, and internet-based communication platforms to conceal their identities and simulate official communications. The Telecommunications Act, 2023, together

[11] Law Commission of India, *Report No. 282: Harnessing Artificial Intelligence for Effective Governance* 95–102 (2023).
[12] Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000, §§ 66C, 66D (India).
[13] Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, No. 45 of 2023, §§ 308, 318, 319, 336 (India).

with regulations issued by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) and the Department of Telecommunications (DoT), seeks to strengthen subscriber verification, curb fraudulent communications, and improve accountability among telecom service providers. Simultaneously, digital platforms are increasingly expected to implement due diligence measures, reporting mechanisms, and technological safeguards to identify suspicious activities. These regulatory interventions recognize that effective cybercrime prevention requires collaboration between law enforcement agencies, telecommunications operators, and digital intermediaries[14].

Institutional mechanisms have become central to India's response against digital arrest scams. The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) functions as the national cybersecurity incident response agency, while the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) facilitates intelligence sharing, capacity building, and cybercrime investigations. The National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (NCRP) provides citizens with a centralized platform for reporting cyber offences and enables rapid coordination between financial institutions and law enforcement agencies. Despite these initiatives, significant jurisdictional and enforcement challenges persist. Cybercriminals frequently operate across state and national boundaries, employ encrypted technologies, and utilize anonymous financial channels, thereby complicating attribution and prosecution[15]. In this context, the Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasized the necessity of balancing technological innovation with effective regulatory oversight and constitutional safeguards. Strengthening international cooperation, cyber-forensic capabilities, and inter-agency coordination remains essential for ensuring an effective legal response to evolving forms of digital deception.

4. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, CYBERCRIME, AND REGULATORY GAPS

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into digital systems has transformed economic activity, public administration, and communication, but it has simultaneously created new opportunities for cybercriminals. AI-enabled cybercrime refers to the use of machine learning algorithms, generative AI tools, automated bots, and predictive technologies to facilitate unlawful activities at an unprecedented scale and sophistication. Unlike conventional cybercrimes that often require substantial technical expertise, modern AI tools enable criminals to automate phishing campaigns, generate convincing fraudulent

[14] Telecommunications Act, No. 44 of 2023 (India).
[15] *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India*, (2020) 3 S.C.C. 637 (India).

communications, and personalize attacks based on publicly available data. In the context of digital arrest scams, AI significantly enhances the ability of offenders to simulate official communications and manipulate victims through highly convincing digital interactions[16]. Consequently, the growing convergence between artificial intelligence and cybercrime has exposed significant regulatory gaps within existing legal frameworks that were not designed to address autonomous or semi-autonomous forms of technological deception.

One of the most concerning manifestations of AI-enabled cybercrime is the proliferation of deepfakes, voice cloning technologies, and synthetic identities. Deepfakes utilize artificial intelligence to create realistic but fabricated audio, video, and image content capable of impersonating public officials, law enforcement officers, corporate executives, and even family members. Similarly, voice cloning systems can replicate an individual's speech patterns using only a few seconds of recorded audio. These technologies have significantly increased the credibility of digital arrest scams, where victims are often confronted with forged warrants, manipulated video calls, or synthetic voices purporting to represent government authorities. The legal challenges posed by deepfakes extend beyond financial fraud and encompass concerns relating to identity, reputation, misinformation, and democratic integrity[17]. As a result, traditional concepts of impersonation and forgery are increasingly being tested by technological innovations that blur the distinction between authentic and fabricated digital content.

The emergence of AI-driven deception has also generated complex evidentiary and investigative challenges for law enforcement agencies. Digital evidence is often fragmented across multiple jurisdictions, encrypted platforms, cloud-based infrastructures, and anonymized communication networks. Investigators must now determine not only whether a fraudulent communication occurred but also whether AI technologies were used to manipulate the content. Establishing authenticity, chain of custody, and evidentiary reliability has become increasingly difficult in cases involving deepfakes and synthetic media. Indian courts have consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining evidentiary integrity in relation to electronic records, particularly under the framework established by the Indian Evidence Act and its successor provisions under the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023. The growing sophistication of AI-generated content necessitates corresponding advancements in digital forensic methodologies and

[16] U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Cybercrime: Emerging Technologies and Criminal Innovation* 145–52 (2025).
[17] Robert Chesney & Danielle Citron, Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge for Privacy, Democracy, and National Security, 107 Calif. L. Rev. 1753, 1758–66 (2019).

evidentiary standards[18].

The socio-legal implications of AI-enabled cybercrime extend beyond fraud to encompass privacy, surveillance, and accountability concerns. The widespread collection and processing of personal data by both public and private entities create opportunities for malicious actors to exploit digital profiles for targeted deception. At the same time, governmental efforts to strengthen cybersecurity often involve increased surveillance and data-monitoring mechanisms, raising questions regarding proportionality, transparency, and constitutional safeguards. The challenge lies in balancing technological innovation and public security with individual rights to privacy, dignity, and informational autonomy[19]. In India, the constitutional recognition of privacy as a fundamental right has established an important normative framework for evaluating emerging technologies and their potential impact on civil liberties in the digital age.

A comparative analysis of international regulatory approaches reveals an emerging consensus that AI governance must incorporate safeguards against cybercrime and digital manipulation. The European Union's AI Act adopts a risk-based regulatory framework that imposes enhanced obligations on high-risk AI systems and mandates transparency for certain AI-generated content. The United States has relied primarily upon sector-specific regulations, executive actions, and enforcement mechanisms, while jurisdictions such as Singapore, Australia, and the United Kingdom have introduced specialized frameworks addressing online harms, digital fraud, and AI accountability. In contrast, India currently relies upon a combination of cybercrime laws, intermediary regulations, data protection norms, and policy initiatives rather than a dedicated AI statute. While this flexible approach encourages innovation, it may prove insufficient to address the unique challenges posed by deepfakes, synthetic identities, and automated deception[20]. A comprehensive regulatory strategy integrating technological safeguards, legal accountability, and international cooperation is therefore essential to effectively govern AI-enabled cybercrime in the future.

5. STRENGTHENING CYBERCRIME GOVERNANCE AND RESTORING ONLINE TRUST

The increasing sophistication of digital arrest scams demonstrates that conventional cybercrime laws alone are insufficient to address emerging forms of technology-enabled deception. While the Information

[18] Arjun Panditrao Khotkar v. Kailash Kushanrao Gorantyal, (2020) 7 S.C.C. 1 (India).
[19] *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India*, (2017) 10 S.C.C. 1 (India).
[20] European Parliament & Council Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, Artificial Intelligence Act, 2024 O.J. (L 1689) 1.

Technology Act, 2000 and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 provide mechanisms for prosecuting offences such as cheating, impersonation, identity theft, and extortion, they do not specifically address AI-generated fraud, deepfake-enabled impersonation, or synthetic identity manipulation. As cybercriminals increasingly exploit artificial intelligence to simulate governmental authority and deceive citizens, legislative reforms must move beyond reactive criminalization toward preventive regulation[21]. A comprehensive cybercrime framework should expressly recognize AI-assisted fraud, establish enhanced penalties for impersonation of public authorities, and introduce expedited procedures for digital evidence preservation and cross-border investigations. Such reforms would enhance legal certainty while strengthening deterrence against rapidly evolving cyber threats.

A crucial dimension of future cybercrime governance lies in the development of effective AI regulation and platform accountability mechanisms. Digital platforms, telecommunications providers, financial intermediaries, and AI developers occupy a strategic position within the modern digital ecosystem and therefore share responsibility for preventing technological misuse. Regulatory frameworks should require platforms to deploy advanced fraud-detection systems, verify high-risk communications, identify synthetic media, and implement robust content authentication measures. Additionally, transparency obligations concerning AI-generated content and algorithmic decision-making can help reduce opportunities for manipulation. International regulatory developments, particularly within the European Union, increasingly emphasize risk-based governance and accountability obligations for providers of advanced AI systems[22]. Similar principles could inform the development of India's future AI governance architecture while preserving innovation and technological growth.

Legislative reforms alone, however, cannot eliminate the risks posed by digital arrest scams. Public awareness and digital literacy initiatives remain essential components of any comprehensive cybercrime prevention strategy. Cybercriminals frequently succeed not because of technological superiority but because they exploit gaps in public understanding regarding digital communication, online verification, and cybersecurity practices. Awareness campaigns should therefore focus on educating citizens about common indicators of fraud, official verification procedures, reporting mechanisms, and safe digital behavior[23].

[21] Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, No. 45 of 2023; Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000 (India).
[22] European Parliament & Council Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, Artificial Intelligence Act, 2024 O.J. (L 1689) 1.
[23] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Digital Literacy Global Framework* 25–31 (2018).

Particular attention must be given to senior citizens, students, rural populations, and first-time internet users who may be disproportionately vulnerable to social engineering tactics. The success of digital governance initiatives ultimately depends upon creating an informed citizenry capable of recognizing and resisting emerging forms of digital deception.

An equally important reform priority is the strengthening of institutional capacity within law enforcement agencies, regulatory bodies, and the judiciary. The investigation of AI-enabled cybercrime requires specialized expertise in digital forensics, data analytics, cybersecurity, blockchain tracing, and artificial intelligence systems. Traditional investigative techniques are often inadequate when confronting transnational cybercriminal networks operating through encrypted platforms and anonymized digital infrastructures. Judicial officers must likewise be equipped to evaluate complex electronic evidence and address emerging questions relating to authenticity, admissibility, and algorithmic manipulation. The Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasized the importance of maintaining evidentiary reliability in relation to electronic records, highlighting the need for specialized training and technological competence within the justice delivery system[24].

The restoration of online trust ultimately requires a holistic governance model grounded in law, technology, institutional cooperation, and citizen empowerment. Future policy responses should integrate stronger cybercrime legislation, AI accountability frameworks, real-time fraud monitoring systems, international cooperation mechanisms, and victim-support services. Greater collaboration between CERT-In, the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), financial institutions, telecommunications providers, and technology companies is necessary to facilitate rapid threat detection and response[25]. At a broader level, cyber resilience must be viewed not merely as a security objective but as a prerequisite for sustaining digital democracy, economic innovation, and constitutional rights in the information age. Building a trust-based digital ecosystem therefore requires continuous adaptation of legal frameworks to technological change while ensuring that security measures remain consistent with principles of privacy, accountability, transparency, and the rule of law.

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- National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).
- Reserve Bank of India (RBI).
- Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI).
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- European Union Artificial Intelligence Office.
- International Telecommunication Union (ITU).
- INTERPOL Cybercrime Directorate.