E-GOVERNANCE: A Case Study of Gyandoot Project

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ABSTRACT

The Information Technology (IT) revolution in India as elsewhere has had it's impact on the way the business of managing public services is conducted. The Governments both at the Centre and in the States including various Government agencies have realized that IT and Internet can be used in a highly effective manner to improve the Government to Citizen inter-face. This paper discusses the various developments initiatives in India in general and Gyandoot Project of Dhar district of Madhaya Pradesh in Particular.

E-Governance or electronic Governance may be defined as "delivery of government services and, information to the public using electronic means. Such means of delivering information is often referred to as information technology or 'IT' in short. Use of IT in government facilitates an efficient, speedy and transparent process for disseminating information to the public and other agencies and for performing government administration activities". Another definition of the e-governance refers to the use by government agencies of Information Technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and Mobile Computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient Government Management. The resulting benefits can be less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth and cost reductions. Traditionally, the interaction between a citizen or business and a Government agency took place in a Government office. With emerging information and communication technologies it is possible to locate service centers closer to the clients. Such centers may consist of a unattended kiosk in a Government

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agency, a service kiosk located close to the client, or the use of a personal computer in the home or office.

A world of change is sweeping across the business world and the Governments alike in the way they go about conducting their businesses. The single major factor for such change is IT- the Information Technology. Economist Joseph Schumpeter's Fifty-year model refers to technology waves in the modern history – 1780s-1840s-Steam power, 1840s-1890s-Rail, 1990s-1930s-electric power and 1930s-1980s-oil and automobiles. Now the IT represents the Fifth wave. The IT as we know of today is not of recent origin. Computers in their earlier avtars have been there since the 50s.

However, it was only during 80s after the introduction of Personal Computers for the SOHO (Small Office and Home Office) segment which led to the e-revolution. There has also been a sea change in the processing capability of the computers to deliver the increasing demands of the business and governance. (It is estimated that the processing power of computers doubles up every 18 months at present).

All this has led to a situation where computers affect everyone's lives. Related to this has been the development of the INTERNET – The Network of the Networks – The technology which is changing the way we conduct business, entertain or the way the Governments govern.

The networking activity in the government sector in India started with the setting up of the NIC (National Informatics Centre) in the mid 80s. The NIC in turn undertook a major networking activity by linking up all Districts in the country through WAN (Wide Area Network) on UNIX based systems. Even though online exchange of information on these systems were limited and mostly one way, the NIC centers in the Districts paved way for the acceptance of computers and related technologies in the working of the Government at the grass root levels. The NIC is still in the forefront of assisting in the government initiatives in the use of IT –setting up of web site of the ministries and running of the servers linking government departments and agencies to the Information gateways.

A lot of IT activities in the Government sector have been happening since then. States like Andhra and Karnataka were the first to catch up with the IT boom followed by others. Most of the States have now undertaken the process of reaching out to the citizens through e-initiatives. States now have their own IT policies and most have separated IT Ministries. The Govt. of India has set up a separate IT Ministry – The Ministry of Information Technology (MIT) last year.

Minimum Agenda for E-Governance in the Ministries/Departments of the Central Government

The Website of the Ministry www.mit.govt.in lists the following as the minimum agenda for e-governance in the Ministries/Departments of the Central Government:

- Each Ministry/Department must set up LANs and provide PCs with necessary software up to the Section Officer level.
- 100 percent training of all staff who have access to and need to use computers for their office work should be ensured.
- Each ministry/Department would start using the Office Procedure Automation software developed by NIC with a view to keeping a record of receipt of dak, issue of letters, as well as movement of files in the department.
- Pay roll accounting and other house-keeping software should be put to use in day-to-day operations.
- Notices for internal meeting should be sent by e-mail to the officers and also put up on online notice boards of the Ministry/ Department.
- Ministries/Departments should use the Web-enabled Grievance redressal Software developed by Department of AR & PG.
- Each Ministry/Department should have its own website.
- All Acts, Rules, Circulars should be converted into electronic form and along with other published material of interest or relevance to the public, should be made available on the internet and be accessible from the Information and Facilitation Counter.
- The websites of Ministries/Departments/ Organisations should specifically contain a section in which various forms to be used by citizens/customers are available. The forms should be available for being printed out or for being completed on the computer itself and then printed out for submission. Attempts should also be made to enable completion and submission of forms online.
- The Hindi version of the content of the websites should be developed simultaneously, as far as possible.
- Each Ministry/Department would also make efforts to develop packages so as to begin electronic delivery of services to the public.
- Each Ministry/Department should have an overall IT version or strategy for a five year period, within which it could do detail specific action plans and targets (including the minimum agenda) to be implemented within one year.

ROAD MAP FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Due to limitation of resources, the whole exercise of computerization has, necessarily to be phased to cover various areas of Government operations. In order to have an impact of use of IT in Government for citizen service, those services which have a direct interface with the public should be taken up for computerization on a priority basis. Government should have an internet for ensuring smoother flows of data, communications and access to information by different govt. agencies. The site of the Ministry of Information Technology also mentions following as the road map for future developments in the area:

1. Computerisation

Transactions between various departments of the Government of India and other Government organizations should be networked so ;that a substantial part of transfer of files and paper can be replaced by an internet within the Government.

- All departments & agencies should have web sites which provide up to date information, forms, leaflets etc.
- E-mail to be incorporated into the normal range of contact methods and departments and agencies should have arrangement for rapid response to e-mail queries.
- Each Department/Ministry should form a standing panel of IT consultants for seeking advice on various technical issues. In fact it is possible for some of the mentors and champions to lead the process after making it successful in one department to another.
- Redesigning the Manual of Office Procedures.
- Cyber laws and their implementation.

2. Use of Local Languages:

The access of information must be permitted in the language most comfortable to the public user, generally the local language. There are already existing technologies such as GIST and language software by which transliteration from English into other languages can be made.

3. Spreading Awareness:

Perhaps the most important aspect of computerization and spreading of IT is bringing a change in the mindset of the government servants who have been accustomed to work only in the manual mode. It is necesxsary to train all employees in basis computer usage.

4. Defining a Working Model for E-Governance:

Governments require this new model so they can perform effectively in a networked, global economy. Businesses need this model so they can define and win emerging public sector markets for

digital-era products and services. A handbook should be prepared that will integrate key project findings into a comprehensive model of E-governance.

5. Information KIOSKS:

Communication of data to public accessibility and retrieval of data by public through citizen I.T. interface (Information Kiosks) in Public Places such as shopping centers, post office, railway station, libraries. PCOs (Upgraded to manned public access terminals) selected STD/ISD booths at prominent places can be converted into Information Kiosks. Government departments which have maximum interaction with the public must be identified for the use of IT. Listed below are a few such areas:

a) Public Grievances:

Electricity, Water, Telephone, Ration Card, Sanitation, Public Transport, Police.

b) Rural Services:

Land Records, Below Poverty Line (BPL)/EWS Families' lists.

c) Social Services:

- Pension for Old Age, Widows, Handicapped. Ex-gratia Scheme
- Acquisition/Rehabilitation & Compensation
- Registration of Licenses and Certificates
- Ration Cards, Birth Certificates, Death Certificate, Domicile Certificate, Caste/Tribe Certificate, Arms Renewal, Registration of Documents, School Registration, University Registration, Motor Vehicle Registration, Driving License.

d) Public Information:

Employment Exchange Registration, Employment Opportunities, Examination Results, Hospitals/ Beds Availability/Services, Railway Time Tables, Airline Time Tables, Road Transport Time Tables, Charitable Trusts, Government Notifications, Government Forms, Government Schemes.

e) Agriculture Sector:

Pesticides, Fertilizers, Crop disease, Weather Forecast –short range/District wise, Market Price.

f) Utility Payments/Billing:

Electricity, Water, Telephone.

g) Commercial:

Taxation & Return Filing, Income Tax, Corporate Tax, Custom Duty, Central/State Excise Duty, Sales Tax, House Tax, Property Tax, Octroi, Road Tax, Company Returns etc.

h) Government:

Electronic Procurement, Education University Model for E-Governance etc.

Mention must also be made of the celebrated Gyandoot project, a Stockholm challenge IT award winning e-initiative in the Dhar District of Madhya Pradesh which has since been replicated elsewhere as well.

A Case Study of Gyandoot Project:

The Dhar district in central India has a population of 1.7 million; 60 percent live below the poverty line. The goal of the Gyandoot project has been a establish community-owned, technologically innovative and sustainable information kiosks in a poverty-stricken, tribal dominated rural area of Madhya Pradesh. During the design phase of the project, meetings were held with villagers to gather their input. Among the concerns highlighted by villagers was the absence of information about prevailing agriculture produce auction centre rates. Consequently, farmers were unable to get the best price for their agricultural produce. Copies of land records also were difficult to obtain. A villager had to go out in search of the patwari (village functionary who maintains all land records), who often was difficult to get hold of as his duties include extensive travel. To file complaints or submit applications, people have to go to district headquarters (which can be several kilometers away, resulting in loss of wages/earnings).

The Gyandoot project was launched on January 1, 2000 with the installation of a law cost rural Intranet covering 20 village information kiosks in five Blocks of the district. Later, 11 more kiosks were set up. Villages that function as Block headquarters or hold the weekly markets in tribal areas or are located on major roads (e.g., bus stops) were chosen for establishing the kiosks. Seven centers are located in towns (urban areas), 08 in large villages with a population of 5,000-6,000, another 07 in medium sized villages with a population of 1,000-4,000, and the rest are in small villages with population less than 500. Each kiosk caters to about 25 to 30 villages. The entire network of 31 kiosks covers 311 Panchayats (village committees), over 600 villages and a population of around half a million (nearly 50% of the entire district).

Kiosks have been established in the village Panchayat buildings. Information kiosks have dialup connectivity through local exchanges on optical fibre or UHF links. The server hub is a Remote Access Server housed in the computer room in the District Panchayat. User fees are charged at the kiosks for the services provided. Local rural youth act as entrepreneurs, running these information kiosks along commercial lines. At the inception of the project it was decided that further expansion of kiosk centres will take place only when local youth come forward to start new centres as private enterprises.

A local person with a ten-year schooling (matriculate) can be selected as an operator. He/

she needs only maintenance, limited typing (software is menu driven) and numeric data centry skills. For the initial kiosks, each village committee selected three candidates to receive training at the District Council. At the end of the training, the best trainees were selected to run a kiosk.

The following services are now offered at the kiosks:

1. Agriculture Produce Auction Centres Rates:

Prevailing rates of prominent crops at the local and other recognized auction centres around the country are available on-line for a nominal charge of Rs.5/-. The volume of incoming agricultural produce, previous rates, etc., are also provided on demand.

2. Copies of Land Records:

Documents relating to land records including khasra (record of rights) are provided on the spot at a charge of Rs.15/-. All of the banks in the district have agreed to accept these kiosk documents. Approximately 0.2 million farmers require these extracts at every cropping season to obtain loans from banks for purchanging seeds and fertilizers.

3. On-line Registration of Applications:

Villagers had to make several visits to the local revenue court to file applications for obtaining income/caste/domicile certificates. Now, they may send the application from a kiosk at a cost of only Rs.10/-. Within 10 days, notification about the readiness of the certificate is sent via e-mail to the relevant kiosk. Only one trip is needed – to collect the certificate.

4. On-line Public Grievance Redress

A complaint can be filed and a reply received within 7 days for a cost of Rs.10/-. These can include complaints regarding drinking water, quality of seed/fertilizer, scholarship sanction/disbursement, employee establishment matters, functioning of schools or village committees, etc.

5. Village auction site

This facility began in July 2000. It makes auction facilities available to farmers and villagers for land, agricultural machinery, equipment, and other durable commodities. One can put one's commodity on sale for a charge of Rs.25/- for three months. The list of salable commodities can be browsed for Rs.10/-.

6. Transparency in government

Updated information regarding beneficiaries of social security pension, beneficiaries of rural development schemes, information regarding government grants given to village committees, public distributions, data on families below the

poverty line, etc. are all available on the Intranet, which makes the government functioning more transparent.

Other services offered at the kiosks include on-line matrimonial advertisements, information regarding government programs, a forum for school children to ask questions, ask an expert, e-mail (free for information on child labour, child marriage, illegal possession of land belonging to Scheduled Tribes, etc.). Some kiosks also have added photocopy machines, STD PCO, and horoscope services.

The enthusiasm for the e-governance across the States and government at different levels is primarily because e-initiatives can help in large measure in cutting down hierarchy and dependence on govt. employees for simple tasks like seeking information, online registration and form filling, paying bills and taxes, registering complaints, knowing the status of applications and so on.

There are several such examples from different States of the country – Computerised Registration of land (CARD) in Andhra Pradesh, Online delivery of Municipal services in Vijayawada (A.P.). Computerised Interstate checkposts in Gujarat, Video conferencing facilities with Districts in Andhra Pradesh, W. Bengal and U.P., Lok Mitra e-Project for Panchayats in Hamirpur (Himachal), Warna e-Project of Maharashtra, Information kiosks doubling up as Traffic Aid Centers in Haryana etc. Some of the State governments e.g. Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, U.P. and W. Bengal have entered into MOUs with Microsoft Corporation for Technology Partnership and for developing State specific solutions for e-governance including developing local language software. There is increased emphasis on computer training for govt. employees and the Central Govt. has now stipulated that by 2003, everyone seeking Govt. employment will have to be computer literate.

There are examples where concerned citizens themselves have taken initiative to set up e-governance tools. In the Bellandur village of Karnataka near Bangalore, the villagers with their own contributions and help from a software firm have developed a kannada software for e-governance. The compute system has data base of all the villagers, births and deaths, land and property details, list of beneficiaries of various govt. schemes, ration card details and resolutions passed by the Panchayat. The Panchayat corresponds to govt. officials in Bangalore through e-mails. The villagers have set up their own website – www.ego-india.com/bellandur.

Conclusion

The e-governance and G2C (Government to Citizen) initiatives also mean good news for the

Indian business. Firstly, as the ITC initiative indicates private sector can help in empowering and enriching rural consumers. This is true specially for companies relying on farm produce or rural markets primarily. Secondly, there is going to be a large demand for IT related products and services gradually as there is mass implementation of such projects in the Govt. sector. Simila4rly, there is large potential in G2B (Govt. to Business) transactions in future in form of online tax payments, online submission of business information, online clearances etc.

There are still a lot of issues that need to be sorted out before e-governance tools can make a difference to the lives of the citizens –the e-government is not an answer to every ill that besets the government systems. It is only a tool for good governance. Then there are high cost involved in computerization of public systems. With a literacy rate of 65 percent and very few computer literates, it is long way ahead before Indians can meaningfully enjoy the benefits of IT and e-governance. The Internet connectivity in India is still very low with 2.5 million connections and 6 Million user base. However, these numbers are growing rapidly and that is very encouraging news for the future of the e-initiatives being undertaken in the public domain.

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