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Rural development through E-Governance in India: *Initiatives and Challenges*

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Abstract
E-Governance is an evolutionary path, whose effective implementation requires a complete understanding of its various elements and at the same time taking a holistic view to stay focused on its overall objectives. E-governance journey encounters several milestones that need to be identified and modeled so that efforts invested can be assessed and an appropriate course of action are taken by both the central and state governments to further its way on the path of e-governance. In this context, the paper explains about various issues and challenges of e-governance in India.

Keywords: e-governance, rural development programmes, issues, challenges

Introduction
E-Governance has become the key to good-governance in a developing country like India. To be at par with developed countries, the government of India had made out a plan to use Information and Communication Technology extensively in its operation to make more efficient and effective and also to bring transparency and accountability. In every developing country, E-Governance has been talked about a lot, E-Governance is nothing but use of internet technology as a platform for exchanging information, providing services and transacting with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. E-governance provides a sound strategy to strengthen overall governance. It can not only improve accountability, transparency and efficiency of government processes, but also facilitate sustainable and inclusive growth. E-Governance also provides a mechanism of direct delivery of public services to the rural areas of any nation, without having to deal with intermediaries.

India is a nation with 70% of population lives in rural areas. With such large rural population government is required to make concrete efforts for the development of rural areas. Undoubtedly government of India has made considerable efforts to reduce the digital divide and ICT has proved to be a tool for its successful implementation. As per Chambers rural development is strategy which enables people to benefit themselves and their families by fetching more of what they need. The percentage of rual population in India is decreasing since last two decades but still it accounts for major proportion of total population. In 1991 the percentage of rural population was 74.3% which reduced to 72.2% in 2001 leading to 69.9% in 2011. This decrease in rual population could be understood as an indication that there is a need to provide better facilitates in rual areas. To provide opportunities, information and easy access of the rual development schemes to all citizens in rual India, several efforts at various levels have been taken by the Government of India.

Government of India has undertaken many projects for the benefit of rual India. Many of these projects have been successful. Still more initiatives can be taken and the one which are currently working can be improved further keeping in mind the problems being face by the people in accessing these projects. E-Governance in India is not uniform. Some states are advanced and some are very backward technologically. In Central Government, some Departments had initiated steps to adopt E-Governance long back while some departments are lagging behind. In this context it would be useful to highlight some of the important E-Governance initiatives implemented by the Union and State Governments in the last 10 to 15 years and assess their strengths and weaknesses. Some of these projects are discussed below:

Warana Wired Village Project in Maharashtra
Warana "Wired Village" project was launched in 1998 as collaboration between the National Informatics Centre (NIC), the Government of Maharashtra, the Warana Vibhag Shkshan Mandal (Education Department) and the WGC. This project uses ICT to streamline the operations connected with sugar cane growing and harvesting. This benefits small farmers, both in terms of transparency and time saved on administrative transactions, as well as the cooperative in terms of monetary gains. The rights conditions to bring ICT to Warana exist both in terms of human development and of infrastructure, as, for instance, there is uninterrupted power supply in the area. The project aims at bringing agricultural, market and education information to 70 villages around Warana Nagar and intends to simplify other business operations of the co-operative. Warana is well-developed rural areas located 30 kilometers northwest of the city of Kolhapur, in one of the richest states of India, Maharashtra.

Bhoomi (Online Delivery of Land Records): Karnataka
Bhoomi is a self-sustainable e-Governance project for the computerized delivery of 20 million rural land records to 6.7

million farmers through 177 Government –owned kiosks in the State of Karnataka. It was felt that rural land records are central conduits to delivering better IT enabled services to citizens because they contain multiple data elements: ownership, tenancy, loans, nature of title, irrigation details, crops grown etc. In addition to providing the proof of title to the land, this land record is used by the farmer for a variety of purposes: from documenting crop loans and legal actions, to securing scholarships for school-children. These records were hitherto maintained manually by 9000 village offices. Through this project, computerized kiosks are currently offering farmers two critical services- procurement of land records and requests for changes to land title. About 20 million records are now being legally maintained in the digital format. To ensure authenticity of data management, a biometric finger authentication system has been used for the first time in an e-Governance project in India. T o make the project self-sustaining and expandable, Bhoomi levies user charges. During project implementation, all the officials involved were assigned well-defined roles and responsibilities, down to the grass roots level. However, in the initial stages, in spite of elaborate and detailed guidelines, these were not percolating down. This was finally achieved through State level workshops and intensive trainings for bringing about changes in the attitude among departmental staff. The Bhoomi project is a noteworthy effort and sets an example for other projects in its approach towards piloting a project, as well as its rolling out and sustenance. It may be mentioned here that manually written Records of Right, Tenancy and cultivations (RTC) have been declared illegal. Based on the success story of this project and its innovations, the Union Ministry of Communication and Information Technology has announced that Bhoomi would be a national model for computerization of land records and replicated throughout the country.

Gyandoot - Madhya Pradesh

Gyandoot is an Intranet based Government to citizen (G2C) service delivery initiative. It was initiated in the Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh in January 2000 with the twin objectives of providing relegating information to the rual population and acting as an interface between the district administration and the people. The basic idea behind this project was to establish and foster a technologically innovative initiative which is owned and operated by the community itself. Initially, computers were installed in twenty village panchayat centers and connected to the District Rural Development Authority in Dhar town. These were called Soochanalayas which were operated by local rual youth selected for this purpose. No fixed salary or stipend was paid to them. Later, 15 more Soochanalayas were opened as private enterprise. The Soochanalayas are connected to the Intranet through dial-up lines. The services offered through the Gyandoot network include Daily agricultural commodity rates, Income certificate, Domicile Certificate, Caste Certificate, Public grievance redress, Rural Hindi email, BPL family list and Rural Hindi newspaper. There is a prescribed service charge for each service which is displayed at each kiosk along with the information about the expected delivery time. The citizen generally submits his application online (with the help of the Soochak) and has to go back to the Soochanalaya to collect the response. If the service is related to obtaining some certificates or documents, the citizen will have to collect them by visiting the government department. Alternatively, they are mailed to the citizen. The implementation of this project assumes significance as it throws light on the issues involved in taking e-Governance to rural areas.

Friends in Kerala

FRIENDS (Fast, Reliable, Instant, Efficient, and Network for the Disbursement of Services) is Single Window Facility providing citizens the means to pay taxes and other financial dues to the State Government. It was launched in Thiruvananthapuram in June 2000 and replicated in other district headquarters during 2001-02. The services are provided through FRIENDS Janasevana Kendrams located in the district headquarters. This project is a classic case of achieving front end computerized service delivery to citizens without waiting for completion of back end computerization in various government departments. This project thus tries to avoid the complex issues involved in business process re-engineering in the participating departments. In fact, the FRIENDS counters are not even networked with the participating departments/entities. Print – outs of payments made through the counters are physically distributed to participating entities for processing. To remove bottlenecks at the time of processing, a government order was issued to treat a receipt from a FRIENDS counters as equivalent to a receipt from the concerned government entity. Owing to the success of the project, efforts have been initiated to develop FREES (FRIENDS Re-engineered and Enterprises Enabled Software) which would incorporate the 'Any centre Any Payment Mode'.

E-Mitra in Rajasthan

e-Mitra is designed upon the experiences gained through the Lok Mitra and Jan Mitra pilot projects launched in 2002. While Lok Mitra was centered in the city of Jaipur, Jan Mitra was piloted in Jhalawar district to provide information and services under one roof to urban and rural populations. E-Mitra is an amalgamation of these two projects in all the 32 districts using PPP model. There are two major components – back office processing and service counters. Back office processing includes computerization of participating departments and establishing an IT enabled hum in the form of a mini data centre at the district level (e-Mitra data centre). All participating departments and service centers hook up to this data centre. It is managed by the facility Management Service Provider on behalf of the district e-Governance Society (under chairmanship of the district collector). Private partners (Local Service Providers) run the kiosks/centres. In case of collection on account of payment of utility bills and government levies, the Local Service Provider does not charge the citizen, but gets reimbursement from the concerned organization through the e-Mitra Society. In case of other sercivs, the transaction fees are prescribed by the Society. Thus, this project is an improvement on earlier schemes as it also involves back office computerization. Further, th citizen is not required to pay any fees for availing of the facility for making payment for government utilities.

E-Seva in Andhra Pradesh

e-Seva project is designed to provide 'Government to citizen' and e-business to citizens services. Originally, it was implemented in the form of the TWINS (Twin cities Integrated Networ Secundrabad Services) project in 1999 in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Se. The highlight of the e-seva project is that all the services are delivered online to consumers/ citizens by connecting them to the respective government departments and providing online information at the point of service delivery. The network architecture is designed as an Intranet on a Wide Area Network (WAN). The network is designed in three tiers, each tier being physically located in different places. The first tier for the client – end is located at the e-Seva centers. The second tier consists of the data servers and the application servers. The third tier comprises Departmental servers as the backend in the concerned departments (Electricity, Municipality, Passport Office, Transport Department, Registration, commercial Tax, etc). These servers keep consolidated databases. The services include online payment of untility bills, issuing certificates, issuing licenses & permits, e-forms etc. Payments can be made by cash/cheque/DD/credit card/Internet. The project has become very popular among the citizens especially for payment of utility bills. In fact, it has been asserted that the success of this project is largely based on payment of electricity bills. This project exemplifies the potential for integration of delivery of Union, State and Local Government services at one point.

Challenges

E-governance was introduced for the better communication between citizens and government. But there are a large number of obstacles in implementation of e-Governance in India. Few of the problems or challenges faced by government are listed below:

1. **Different Languages:** India is a country where people with different cultures and different religions live. People belonging to different states speak different languages. The diversity of people in context of language is a huge challenge for implementing e-Governance projects as e-Governance applications are written in English language. And also, English may not be understandable by most of the rural people. They are using their local language for getting services. Therefore, it becomes a challenge for the government to write e-Governance applications which are to be implemented for the whole nation in more than one language.
2. **Poverty and Low Literacy Rate:** Internet access is too expensive for the poor in developing countries like India. Installing the necessary telephone lines needed for internet or email or email access is equally unaffordable in most poor countries. Literacy can be defined as the ability to read and write with understanding in any language. A person who can merely read but cannot write cannot be considered as literate. Literacy rate in rural areas stand at 67.7% with rural male literacy rate 77.15% and rural female literacy rate 57.93%. whereas literacy rate in urban areas stand at 84. 11%.
3. **Low IT Literacy:** Much of the Indian people are not literate and those who are literate, they do not have much knowledge about Information Technolgy (IT). Most of the people in India are not aware about the usage of Information Technology. So in India, having such low level of IT literacy, how can e-Governance projects be implemented successfully? We can say that IT illiteracy is a major obstacle in Implementation of e-Governance in India. So, first of all Indian people must be made aware about the usage of Information Technology.

Some of challenges briefly

- Lack of effective project management tools and methods.
- Absence of proper planning, various ad hoc tasks are taken up by the project team due to which the focus on critical activities is lost.
- Inadequate training of how the project is being implemented, tasks causing delays.
- No monitoring of Cost and Schedule at project checkpoints. And it is not easy to grass level rural people spending on money.
- There is no strong administrative set-up for implementing the project.
- A critical obstacle in implementing e-Governance is the privacy and security of an individual's personal data that he/she provides to obtain government services.

The e-governance initiative in the rural areas should be taken by identifying and analyzing the grass root realities. The states that the strategy devised for the implementation of e-governance should be comprehensive; approach should be citizen centric and should follow multiple channels of communication for dissemination of e-services. Although, the Government of India is acclaiming its success in the area of e-governance but the scenario at the grass root level is not overwhelming and seamless efforts of the government seems to go in vain. Therefore, it's the high time to adopt and imbibe motioned preventive measure in order to conquer intended objectives of e-governance.

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