E-GOVERNMENT IN INDIA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

(with Special reference to Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh)

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Abstract : Public administration, governed by bureaucratic structures built on rationale principles, that dominated the twentieth century, has failed to respond to the changing requirements of the present times. E-governance, which is a paradigm shift over the traditional approaches in public administration, means rendering of government services and information to the public using electronic means. This new paradigm has brought about a revolution in the quality of service delivered to the citizens. It has ushered in transparency in the governing process; saving of time due to provision of services through single window; simplification of procedures; better office and record management; reduction in corruption; and improved attitude, behavior and job handling capacity of the dealing personnel. The present study substantiates these theoretical assumptions about e-governance by analyzing some experiences at the local, state and federal levels of government in India.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, service delivery mechanisms of the government departments left much to bedesired in India. Cramped spaces; shabby ambience; discourteous dealing personnel and their chronic absenteeism; demands of gratification; inefficiency in work; long queues;procrastinating officials; procedural complexities; etc., were some of the undesirable featuresof the working of the government departments. Consequently, a visit to governmentdepartment by a citizen to make use of any service used to be a harrowing experience. Withthe rising awareness amongst the citizens and their better experiences with the private sector– the demand for better services on the part of government departments became morepronounced. The infusion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has playeda prominent role in strengthening such a demand. The metamorphosis in the quality ofdelivery of services to the citizens by the government has been more pronounced in recentyears with the advent of e-governance.

E-governance, which is a paradigm shift over thetraditional approaches in Public Administration, means rendering of government services andinformation to the public using electronic means. This new paradigm has brought about arevolution in the quality of service delivered to the citizens. Thepresent study substantiates these theoretical assumptions about e-governance by analyzingsome experiences at the Union as well as State Government Level in India.

Reformative measures, especially the role of the information technology, in the governanceprocess. The present paper is an attempt to fill this gap in the existing literature.The term governance needs to be understood before we move on to e-government and egovernance.Governance is not the exclusive preserve of the government. It extends to civilsociety and the private sector. It covers every institution and organization from family to thestate. It involves exercise of political, economic and administrative authority to manage theaffairs in, and "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's

economic and social resources for development". It can be better understood as, "thecomplex mechanisms, processes, relationships and institutions through which citizens andgroups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations and mediate theirdifferences".

The two terms- e-government and e-governance are independent of each other, but are attimes used alternatively, there by the major distinction between e-government and egovernanceis missed out. E-government is understood as the use of Information and

Communication Technology (ICT) to promote more efficient and cost effective government,facilitate more convenient government services and allow greater public access toinformation, and make government more accountable to citizens, where as governance is awider term which covers the state's institutional arrangements, decision making processes,implementation capacity and the relationship between government officials and the public. Egovernance

is the use of ICT by the government, civil society and political institutions to

engage citizens through dialogue and feedback to promote their greater participation in theprocess of governance of

these institutions. Thus, e-government can be viewed as a subset ofe-governance, and its focus is largely on improving administrative efficiency and reducingadministrative corruption (BhatnagarSubhash, 2004).

EGOVERNMENT

A reality in India, but still a lot needs to be done. Sincere efforts are required onsustained basis in future also to maintain the momentum.

E-Government Initiatives at the Sate LevelQuite a number of state governments have initiated measures to introduce informationtechnology and its tools in the governance process. Most of these states are using theseapplications for improving service delivery to their citizens. They are moving from manualprocesses to on-line delivery by using conveniently located service centers in public places.

Counters at these service centers are manned by public/ private agencies and multipleservices are provided on-line at each location. Empirical evidence reveals that it has not beenan easy task to implement ICT related reforms particularly at the state level and hence needsto be planned carefully for their successful implementation (Bhatnagar, 2004). In thisregard, it is, therefore, of utmost importance to study and examine the various experiences

for evolving effective strategies for future.

Project "Bhoomi" in the State Of Karnataka

As noted before, this project has been successful in computerizing over 20 million land records and provides copies of these records to the applicants within 15 minutes. It also ensures online real time updation of all land transactions. It also enjoys support from the political and bureaucratic leadership and other government departments involved in registering land transactions. However, the project has also led to increased corruption and delays due to centralization of processes for delivery of services and taking away of power from the village level functionaries.

Karnataka, being an agrarian state, was faced with the problem of maintaining immense landrecords and the work was done manually by the revenue officials. The records regarding thecurrent ownership of land, cropping pattern and village maps etc. for three to four villageswas the duty assigned to 'Patwari', who was also entrusted with registering transfers of landdue to sales or other reasons. He had to update the land records as per procedure, whichcould take years for obvious reasons.

The recently launched project 'Bhoomi' facilitated computerizations of entire 20 millionrecords of land ownership of 6.7 million farmers in the state of Karnataka. At present,computerized land record kiosk popularly called "Bhoomi Center" is functional in all the177 talukas in the state. These kiosks are used to provide RTC on line to farmers at a fee ofRs. 15.

Consequently, a request for change in land ownership due to sale or inheritance can be madeat these 'Bhoomi Centers'. The computer on receiving application generates notices.

Automatically, and is handed over to the 'patwari'. The process of issuing notices by 'patwari'to interested parties remains the same. However, the revenue inspector is expected toapprove these changes in a specified time i.e. within 30 days after serving the notices. As theapproval reaches the 'Bhoomi Center', it is scanned and 'patwari' present at each centermaintains the record. The new owner can receive a copy on demand.With this techno savvy system, it is very easy to determine the number of executed andpending mutations orders besides fixing responsibility and holding officials accountable, thereby curtailing corruption, where as "Before Bhoomi, the process took weeks and was riddledwith corruption.

Farmers claimed they had to pay anywhere between Rs. 100 and Rs. 200in bribes to officials" (Kaushik, 2004). In addition, the project has also improved therevenue contributions to the state treasury:" What's more, the project has already startedearning large revenue for the state as much as 7 – 7.5 million rupees every month (ibid.)".Being difficult to introduce this scheme in all 177 talukas spread throughout the state, theGovernment of Karnataka launched the scheme in phases. Initially, it was introduced only infour talukas on a pilot basis and later on it was extended to one pilot taluka in each of thetwenty-seven districts. Finally, it was implemented in all the 177 talukas in the state. Thedaunting task of implementation of the project, in spite of poor work culture and theoppositional attitude of the revenue staff, was achieved successfully with the activeinvolvement of the private data entry agencies. Further, the selections of the officials(patwaris) were done very carefully. Youngsters/ fresher from the colleges were recruited

and trained to regulate the Bhoomi Centers under the project leader-additional secretary ofthe department.

Thus, project 'Bhoomi' came to be a success, as it resulted in: simplification of procedures;reduced the hardships of the poor farmers: in terms of delays; put an end to corruption; andensured a more accountable, transparent, and responsive system.Project "Gyandoot" in the State of

Madhya Pradesh"Gyandoot" was launched on 1 January 2000, in poverty stricken, tribal-dominated ruralareas of Madhya Pradesh after gathering information from the villagers regarding their

problems. Lack of information about the rates of agricultural produce, difficulty in accessinginformation on land records; and absence of grievance redressal mechanism were their mainproblems. The Government selected villages, which function as block headquarters, or whereweekly markets were held, or villages along the major roads, for establishing informationkiosks equipped with computers connected through Internet. These information kiosks wererun by rural educated youth having matriculation with working knowledge of computers. Theservices provided at these kiosks include:

(i) supplying information regarding current rates of crops at the local and other auctioncenters in the country at a very nominal fee of Rs. 5;

(ii) all documents containing information of land records to be given on the spot at a fee of Rs. 15.

(iii)all applications with regard to domicile or income or caste certificates can be sentthrough e-mail at a cost of Rs. 10.

(iv)complaints of poor quality of seeds/fertilizers, drinking water, functioning or nonfunctioningof schools or panchayats, village committees, etc can be lodged at a cost of Rs. 10.

(v) auction facility for land, machinery, and any other durable commodities at a fee ofRs. 25 for three months; all information on government development programmesand grants on various development projects.

(vi)data regarding families below poverty lines. Some of these centers were also

rendering miscellaneous services including online matrimonial advertisements;

Photostat STD, PCO and horoscope services.

'Gyandoot' is instrumental in establishing a link between government and the localpopulation residing in the remote villages. It has also provided an opportunity tomarginalized tribal citizens to have an access to knowledge at a little cost.

The awards such as the Stockholm Challenge IT Award 2000 in the Public Service andDemocracy category and the CSI-TCS National Award for Best IT usage for the year 2000,are signs of its success which are attributed to over coming the biggest hurdle evidenced inthe lack of reliability by efficacious build up of dial-up connection as most of the ruraltelephone exchanges came to be functional with optical fiber cables, with support frommember parliament of the area. The local Member of Parliament, being fully convinced ofthe value of the project, helped by allocating 25 percent of the development fund for eeducation in the district. The role of the kiosk manager has also turned out to be of criticalsignificance in the success of the project.

Project Smart Government in the State of Andhra Pradesh

The Government of Andhra Pradesh, in its endeavor to provide simple, moral, accountable,responsive and transparent governance to its people, launched **'SMART GOVERNMENT'**

(Smartgov) at the secretariat level. This project resulted in an automatic workflow in thesecretariat and ensured not only internal efficiency but also provided an effective tool forperformance evaluation. With it the leitmotif came to be efficacy. In Smartgov, on receipt ofa document, it is scanned to generate a number for the file and is e- mailed to the concernedofficer. The official nothings are done electronically. The system being automatic enforces thedesired checks and balances. It curtails negativism and over rides all hurdles of resistance and

opposition to change.The project Smargov has helped in introducing paper less file processing system in theAndhra Pradesh secretariat. It has not only helped in reducing the time consumed inprocessing the files, but also significantly improved the quality of decisions besides curbingcorruption.That the new governance improvisations/systems because of their faster, efficacious, efficientand effective remedial implications have evoked a positive response from the public ingeneral and the administrative set up in particular speaks volumes for its acceptability. It can,thus, be safely inferred that the total success of effecting changes can only be ensured if it ispreceded with requisite training and orientation programmes for the end users. This willminimize resistance.

Successful e-Government Projects Require Complete Backend Computerization

The successful experience of Bhoomi shows that backend computerization is essential for cutting-edge online service delivery to citizens. As noted before, this was one of the major reasons for the failure of Gyandoot. This points to the need for focusing on the transformation required for achieving the goals of the project

and not just merely on supplying more ICTs.

CONCLUSION

This study clearly shows the importance of analyzing and understanding the sustainability of e-government projects along its multiple dimensions. Employing two different analytical frameworks, it shows the importance of identifying the critical factors responsible for a project's failure or success and understanding the sustainability of a project along financial/economic, social/cultural, technological, political/institutional, and environmental dimensions. The case studies of four widely known e-government projects in different parts of India clearly show the importance of ensuring sustainability of such projects so that the objectives of the project are met for all the stakeholders over the entire duration of the project and merely in the beginning. The general lessons drawn from them show that successful e-government projects require full back-end computerization to improve service delivery, effective disintermediation, and locally relevant content in the local language. Creating suitable ICT infrastructure, coordination among supporting institutions for service delivery, and sustained leadership are also very important.

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