

## E-Governance in India: Critical Issues & Challenges



### Commerce

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### ABSTRACT

*E-Governance is an ambitious project of the central Government of India (GOI) for nationwide deployment of e-governance application to bring about radical change in service delivery to the citizens. The e-governance projects have been a major component of tenth five year plan of Government of India, extended to sixth five year plan as well. The e-governance projects has been hailed successful in several states and changed the way the government functions, reducing corruption and allowing free flow of information. E-Government is the transformation of public sector internal and external relationship through Internet – enabled operations, information and communication technology in order to optimize government service delivery and governance. E-Governance is the distinct contribution of the private sector. One of the reasons for this development has been the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the last two decade and the emergence of Internet and the Information highway. Business corporations have discovered over the last two decades that information technology can make the value chain more efficient and lead to quality increase and cost savings. Similarly Government, have discovered that information technology can make the provision of the services to the citizen more efficient, transparent, can save costs and lead to a higher level of efficiency. This application of information technology enabled processes and system is called e-Governance.*

### Introduction :

In the past, service delivery mechanisms of the government departments left much to be desired 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 features of the working of the government departments. Consequently, a visit to government department by a citizen to make use of any service used to be a harrowing experience. With the 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 more pronounced. The infusion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has played a prominent role in strengthening such a demand. The metamorphosis in the quality of delivery of services to the citizens by the government has been more pronounced in recent years with the advent of e-governance. 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 Union as well as State Government Level in India.

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. It is so because it tended to be rigid, laid too much emphasis on red-tapism, sap creativity, thwarted initiative, wore out dynamism and denied justice as of resultant delays. In addition the focus was more on following procedures and keeping records. Consequently the government moved at snails pace, that too, after guzzling scarce public resources. This criticism seems to be

harsh and overstated, but it brings the sordid and murky picture of the system to light. The clarion call is revamp the government and the archaic governance system.

Most of the advanced countries including United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada, Newzeland, and United States of America (USA) have adopted series of measures under a new model based on market principles. This new model has several names such as: 'managerialism', 'new public management', 'market based public administration', 'the post bureaucratic paradigm', or 'entrepreneurial government'. Though these appear to be different terms yet they convey the same message i.e. replace the traditional bureaucratic model with a new model. Have faith in market principles: cut costs, reduce budgets, improve public managements, simplify rules and procedures, check corruption, inject transparency, and strengthen market forces by minimizing the role of the state. To make the new system more effective and ensure efficacy, the use of information technology in the governance process is emphasized.

No doubt, India has introduced these global trends/ measures in 1999, but no sincere exercise has been undertaken in the corresponding 15 years to examine the effects of these reformative measures, especially the role of the information technology, in the governance process. 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 e-governance. Governance is not the exclusive preserve of the government. It extends to civil society and the private sector. It covers every institution and organization from family to the state. It involves exercise of political, economic and administrative authority to manage the affairs 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, "the complex mechanisms, processes, relationships and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations and mediate their differences".

The two terms- e-government and e-governance are independent of each other, but are at times used alternatively,

there by the major distinction between e-government and e-governance is 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 to information, and make government more accountable to citizens, where as governance is a wider term which covers the state's institutional arrangements, decision making processes, implementation capacity and the relationship between government officials and the public. E-governance 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 the process of governance of these institutions. Thus, e-government can be viewed as a subset of e-governance, and its focus is largely on improving administrative efficiency and reducing administrative corruption.

#### Scope of e-Governance :

While e-government encompasses a wide range of activities, we can identify three distinct areas. These include Government-to-Government (G to G),

Government-to-Citizens (G to C), and Government to Business (G to B).

Each of these represents a different combination of motivating forces. However, some common goals include improving the efficiency, reliability, and quality of services for the respective groups.

In many respects, the Government to Government (G to G) sector represents the backbone of e-government. It is felt that governments at the union, state and local level must enhance and update their own internal systems and procedures before electronic transactions with citizens and business are introduced. Government to government e-government involves sharing data and conducting electronic exchanges between various governmental agencies. There are number of advantages with government-to-government initiatives. One benefit with this is cost savings, which is achieved by increasing the speed of the transactions, reduction in the number of personnel necessary to complete a task, and improving the consistency of outcomes.

Another advantage, which flows from this, is improvement in the management of public resources. Government to Citizen (G to C) facilitates citizen interaction with government, which is primary goal of e-government. This attempts to make transactions, such as payment of taxes, renewing licenses and applying for certain benefits, less time consuming and easy to carry out. Government to citizen initiatives also strives to enhance access to public information through the use of websites and kiosks. Further, one of the main goals of implementing these initiatives has been to create a "single window" where citizens can carry out variety of tasks, especially those that involve multiple government departments, without requiring the citizen to initiate contacts with each government department individually. Thus, the G to C initiatives is driven by an urge to provide "better government" through improved efficiency and more reliable outcomes.

Government to Business (G to B) sector includes both the procurement of goods and services by the government as well as the sale of surplus government goods to the public on line. There are two motivating forces behind G to B. Currently, the business community prefers to carry out its activities such as sales, procurement, and hiring through

electronic means. There are large numbers of software companies, which are producing number of products focusing on performing routine business activities on line. Thus, many companies like to extend the cost savings realized through Business to Business (B to B) transactions to their business with union, state and local level governments. The second reason for the growth of G to B is the demand for cost cutting and efficient procurements in the government. Developing countries, where there is great pressure to minimize costs due to shortage of funds, G to B are being encouraged by the governmental agencies.

#### e-Governance Initiatives in India :

More than 80 per cent of the world population lives in developing countries, where socio-economic progress is slow. India is a developing country with a population of 1.2 billion spread over 28 geographically uneven states. Interestingly, transparency and citizen-centric government, which is the expected broad outcome of e-Governance, is not new to India. Perhaps the rock edicts of Ashoka, the emperor of 3rd Century BC provides an excellent sample of the interface - unambiguous and transparent government information available at a public place for citizen convenience. In most of the states in the Indian federation, people speak different languages and dialects; have different literacy levels and distinct socio-cultural attitudes that have affected not only economic progress, but also legislature/However, over and above, these fragmented population, there is an overlying layer of information technology professionals or 'knowledge workers', who seem to have indirectly pioneered e-Governance initiatives. The Central and State administrations, customs, ports, the public tax system and education system were the pioneers in e-Governance India. A number of state governments implemented e-Governance initiatives aimed at cost effectively taking various facilities to citizens. Innovations in the area of land records, taxation, procurement etc were witnessed in the sector with the Internet pervading significant government transactions. Government of India issued guidelines that 2-3% of every ministry or department plan budget was to be utilized in achieving e-Governance using IT. Many state governments have taken initiatives to provide 'one-stop shops' to deliver a host of services to citizens such as domicile certificates, driving licenses, property tax payments, electricity and water bills, etc. In parallel, to achieve mass customization, Government of India decided to set up a National Institute of Smart Government as a tripartite venture between government, business and community.

#### Challenges for e-Governance in India :

The governments both-the Union and the states must make earnest efforts to complete the daunting, but formidable task of quicker and effective e-government programs by:

- Making a policy choice in favor of computerization to overcome radically the even if it requires huge investments for the purchase of hardware and software.
- Serious efforts would be required to mobilize resources for this arduous job. One way to deal with the situation could be that governments enter into arrangements for leasing of computers. This would reduce initial heavy capital investments. There are a large number of agencies which would like to fund the leasing to the departments. Ministry of Finance can be asked to provide concessions to these agencies.
- Establishing complete connectivity between various ministries and departments so that transfer of files and papers could be done through Internet thereby choosing effi-

acious speed as an alternative to manual labour. To make this really effective, there is a need to make databases of various departments compatible with one another. Thus, interoperability of e- governance projects is of vital importance if the citizens are to feel the benefit of IT in day to day life.

- Supplying information to the public in a language that they understand and are comfortable with, and generally, it is the local language. As technology is available by which transliteration from English into other languages can be made. Therefore, the problem is manageable provided there is enough motivation to do this onerous task.
- Changing the mindset of the government employees who are used to working only in the manual mode. This is a big task and needs patience and careful planning. Workshops, seminars, and training programmes are required to be organized to spread awareness among the employees at all levels.
- Making cyber laws available to the public as early as possible so that the IT systems and information documents stored in the systems has the same legal validity as the documents stored today on paper, and
- Build supporting infrastructures of power and all weather surface transport system to bridge the digital divide between the rural and urban India Last of all the Government must address on urgent basis: the two major concerns in the IT implementation- the security and privacy. Steps must be initiated to generate confidence among the individuals and organizations to conduct on-line transactions and communications.

#### **Critical Issues for e-governance India :**

e-governance is a big challenge and a far big opportunity to bring services to all citizens. The most significant characteristic of any successful e-government application is its *quality* and accessibility. The issue (Cost, Time) of integration of legacy systems comes onto the scene. As the information collected by governments may be politically sensitive, installation of appropriate security mechanisms may be an important technical consideration. At the same time, many other policy issues need to be resolved, such as authentication and confidentiality.

#### **i. Technical issues:**

IT infrastructure is the backbone of E-governance. Interoperability with existing software and hardware platforms is a key success factor. It is unlikely that available resources can support a full replacement of existing application. Hardware should be fully compatible with future technologies as well. Finally, some legal aspect, like security and privacy, must be considered, as personal data are processed and stored, and financial transactions must be executed. To cope with such requirements appropriate technical changes must be done. Multi-model application can make it more successful.

#### **ii. Privacy:**

Citizens' concern on privacy of their life and confidentiality of the personal data need to be technically supported. Privacy and confidentiality has to be highly valued in establishing and maintaining websites. An ideal Cyber policy and strict appliance of it is the backbone for citizen's support.

#### **iii. Security:**

The financial transaction demands for transactional security. Few recent cases have raised the issue once again. All

support for full security is necessarily needed to maintain. An ideal Cyber Security Policy will ensure the existence of a sound and secure e-governance and critical infrastructure base in India. The security and safety of various ICT platforms and critical infrastructures in India must be considered on a priority basis before any e-governance base is made fully functional.

#### **iv. Social issues:**

Acceptance and usability by a large variety of people make e-governance successful. Since the social disparity is very high in India, so this issue needs a careful observation. This implies that interface must be usable by rich or poor, disabled or elderly people, understandable by low literacy or non-native language people, etc.

#### **v. Infrastructure:**

Social, geographical and economical disparity issues have to be removed and proper infrastructure is required to establish e-governance. The ICT facilities need to be developed and should be available to one and all citizenry. Internet connection through satellite, phone lines or through cable or Television should be accessible for all specially to the people in rural areas.

#### **vi. Accessibility :**

Any service should be accessible by anybody from anywhere at anytime. Even if Internet population is exponentially growing in India, still there is a significant portion of the people who may not be able to access services for various reasons like limited access to ICT technologies and devices, low literacy, or phobia for Computer etc. Therefore, universal access is still a mirage.

#### **vii. Political will power:**

E-governance means less interaction with government servants, it will be helpful in reducing bribery issues. The strong objections of the government officers also need a careful and wise approach. This task may require an honest and strong will power of the politicians and leaders. Evoking concept is not acceptable to politicians.

#### **viii. Economical issues:**

Economical issues are mainly concerned with return of investment and safeguard of the previous ones. Cost of implementation, operational and evolutionary maintenance must be low enough to guarantee a good cost/benefit ratio.

#### **ix. Maintainability:**

Maintenance of ICT is a key success factor for long living systems in rapidly changing technical regularity environment. A well skilled labour force and strong will is need of the hour for timely and regular maintenance.

#### **x. Reusability:**

Full-fledged e-governance is for the whole nation. Some modules at least should be re-usable.

#### **xi. Portability:**

Independence from hardware/software platforms is primary requisite for portable application, to help in possible reuse by other administrations.

#### **xii. Legal Issues:**

Strong and effective rules related with IT has to be formulated and strongly implemented. This presupposes the adoption and use of security measures more particularly empowering and training judiciary and law enforcement manpower with the knowledge and use of cyber forensics and digital evidencing.

**xiii. Usability:**

People especially in rural areas are often non-expert users and need guidance and support for their transaction. Governmental websites must be user friendly, to be effective. In India English speaking percentage is very low, so the web sites should also have the facility to access in native or local language.

**xiv. Acceptance:**

A reconceptualization of government services is mandatory for successful implementation and to get social acceptance. This will happen only if government processes will be organized for citizens' convenience instead of the convenience of the government. A relevant issue will be to have all the citizens well aware and acquainted of the facilities offered by the e-government infrastructure, and have them to trust in it. The demand is appropriate marketing actions and education for less skilled people.

**Conclusion :**

e-governance is an evolutionary phenomenon, and requires a change in the mindset of one and all - citizen, executives or the government. With the support of the Internet, the government processes defined by specializations can be made efficient, effective, and citizen friendly. There are many challenging issues lying ahead. Security is the main concern for the citizen, and redefining rules and procedures, information transparency, legal issues, infrastructure, skill and awareness, access to right information, inter-departmental collaboration, tendency to resist the change in work culture, are the main concerns for the government to address. Other than all these factors, the government needs to make significant investments in areas such as government process re-engineering, capacity building, training, assessment and awareness. The beneficial impact of ICT and of e-governance on the rural economy and quality of life is now widely recognized. An apex committee under the Cabinet Secretary is already in place for providing the strategic direction and management oversight. The need is to maintain a proper database of all the citizens and well-developed infrastructure. Security issues need to be tackled very carefully supported by technical security. Most important is the strong political will power and the social acceptability of e-governance not only in urban areas but rural areas as well.

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