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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AT PANCHAYATH LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

The potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools for e-Governance in Panchayats make Panchayats more efficient, transparent and symbols of modernity to ensure transparency and accountability in their functioning through disclosure of information, social audit, efficient delivery of services and improving internal processes and management of Panchayats.

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is defined as a set of activities that facilitate by electronic means the processing, transmission and display of information. ICT is at the convergence of three specialized domains, namely Information Technology, data and information and socio-economic issues to develop a customized information system. The very structure and characteristics of ICTs enable itself in performing the functions of data processing, storage and intelligent decision making that are essential for the functions of a government. It is believed that developments in ICTs such as electronic document management, Electronic Data Interchange (EDI), Internet and intranet can lead to innovative administrative information systems to enhance policy formulation, promote participation, improve service quality and make planning more effective and become a means of empowering citizens.

Today the role of information and communication technology in local governance system is utmost significance. ICT has vast potential to ensure more accountable, responsive and citizen friendly PRIs. People can easily register their grievances through email. Software such as Rural Soft can be used in monitoring rural development programmes and projects. ICT can also help in reducing the corrupt practices in rural infrastructure development projects undertaken by the PRIs. With the aid of Geographical Information System (GIS) and satellite imagery, a detailed visual record of the projects can be maintained. Thereby application of ICT can increase legitimacy and acceptability of the PRIs among its stakeholders. Further, ICT shall provide relevant information while fulfilling local information needs of the people. ICT enabled initiatives will help in the successful realization of powers and responsibilities of PRIs through a lot of information input and their efficient analysis.

ICTs have the potential to provide comprehensive information and increase the speed and quality of this process. The application of ICT can lead to better resource mobilization and deployment, manpower management and technical support. ICT can make quick, comprehensive and transparent impact-assessment possible, which can enable better implementation of the projects and plans. Thereby, ICT makes decentralized and participatory planning a smooth and simple affair and helps in realizing its inherent benefits, i.e. efficiency, equality and empowerment.

- Experience of integrating ICT with the Central and States' tax administration shows more revenue collection and less corruption. The same can be replicated with tax administration and fiscal planning of PRIs.
- Panchayat centers equipped with ICT tools and services can become major hubs for educating people on a mass scale. ISRO has launched EDUSAT- world's first satellite dedicated to education to enable radio and TV broadcast, internet based education, data broadcasting, audio video interaction and video conferencing et al.

- ICT can help in easing the difficulties faced in the area of training through District Panchayat LAN (for local contents), internet, video conferencing, etc. It can also provide cyber platform to share variety of panchayat related experiences.

ICT within the government to achieve different objectives and goals and associated policies for promoting the use of ICTs were being collectively labeled as e-government. ICT applications from the perspective of the developmental functions of the government have been mainly categorized into three types viz., decision support to public administrators, improving services to citizens and empowering citizens to access information and knowledge. We shall now briefly examine these three categories.

Decision Support to Public: Administrators Decision Support systems for public administrators focus on improving planning and monitoring development programs. One example of such system is the use of Geographical Information System (GIS) to plan the location of rural facilities or to identify disaster prone areas. Decision Support Systems, could be employed to plan the positions of basic services such as education, drinking water, roads and telephones etc., in rural and urban areas.

Improving Service to Citizens: Improving service to citizens mainly focuses on automating the process of delivering services to citizens and thereby bringing in transparency. Examples of such systems are the use of ICT for collecting a variety_ of payments that citizens need to make to government agencies. This reduces the waiting time at collection counters, shortens queues, improves accuracy in billing and accounts receivable and provides immediate proof of payment to citizens.

Empowering Citizens to Access Information and Knowledge: ICTs help to empower citizens to access information and knowledge on various aspects of their lives. For example, access to information on markets is crucial for rural producers of all varieties of goods and services, as quite often middlemen who bring consumers and producers together extort disproportionate and exorbitant share as they have access to ruling prices in different markets.

National Policy on Information Technology (NPIT): This policy has been approved by Government of India on 14th September 2012 which visualizes India as a global IT hub by 2020. It also envisions the utilization of IT as an engine for rapid, inclusive and sustainable development of the Indian economy. It further envisages the use of ICT in all sectors and providing IT based solutions to citizen centric issues. These are the two central objectives of the policy, firstly to bring full power of ICT and make it accessible to whole nation and secondly to harness human resources of whole India.

This is the age of information and communication technology (ICT) and the application of ICT tools in various social, economic and administrative fields is on the rise. Recognizing the significance of e-Governance, the Government of India has introduced various administrative reforms and initiated many measures at the institutional level to further its prospect. The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) helps government institutions to enhance the ability to perform various tasks efficiently and effectively. Therefore there is a need to first create ICT infrastructure and capacity within the Panchayat administration followed by training of local citizens in the use of the ICT infrastructure and then integration of the ICT facility with the need and requirement of the end users. ICTs lead not only to increase in supply of information with economy and reliability, but also consequently, to better decision-making and innovations. It also leads to demand for greater openness and transparency in operations. It is a powerful tool of empowerment. One of the primary aims of ICT is to transform Panchayats into efficient units and to strengthen functions and processes with the ultimate goal of ensuring effective local area development and prompt and efficient service to common man. In brief, ICTs play an increasingly important role in helping policy makers and administrators to better manage the provision of public goods and services at the local level.

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