E-government in India: Opportunities and Challenges

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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.*

Keywords: *E-Government, India, Public Administration.*

1. INTRODUCTION

No doubt, India has introduced these global trends/ measures in 1990, 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, whereas 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 (Bhatnagar Subhash, 2004).

2. SCOPE OF E-GOVERNMENT

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 benefits, less time consuming and easy to carry out. Government to citizen initiatives also strives to enhance access to public information using 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.

3. E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

The Government of India kick started the use of IT in the government in the right earnest by launching number of initiatives. First the Government approved the National E-Governance Action plan for implementation during the year 2003-2007. The plan is an attempt to lay the foundation and provide impetus for long-term growth of e-governance within the country. It proposed to create the right governance and institutional mechanisms at the center, state and local levels to provide a citizen centric and business centric environment for governance. The Government has given approval in-principle to the plan and overall programme content; implementation approach and governance structure. While endorsing the plan, it was observed that: weight age must be given for quality and speed of implementation in procurement procedures for IT services; suitable system of motivating the states for quick

adoption be incorporated; provision of delivery of services to the citizens through a single window should be encouraged; Out sourcing of services wherever and whenever feasible; efforts be made to promote and develop public private partnerships to utilize the full potential of private sector investments; and connectivity should be improved and extended up to the block level in the states. Apart from the action plan, the following measures have also been introduced:

- Adoption of "Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000 by the Government of India to provide legal framework to facilitate electronic transactions. The major aims of this act are to: recognize electronic contracts, prevents computer crimes, and make electronic filing possible. The Act came into force on 17 October, 2000;

- Establishment of the National Taskforce of Information Technology and Software Development in May 1998;

- Creation of Centre for e-governance to disseminate the best practices in the area of e-governance for the use by the Central and State Governments and act as a nodal center to provide general information on e-governance, national and international initiatives, and IT policies of the government(s);

- Developing e-office solutions to enable various ministries and departments to do their work electronically. Modules such as Workflow for Drafts for Approvals, e-file, e56 notings, submission of reports, integrated personal information and financial accounting systems have been developed;

- Setting up of a High Powered Committee (HPC) with Cabinet Secretary as its Chairman to improve administrative efficiency by using Information Technology in Government;

- Designating a Joint Secretary level officer as IT manager in every Ministry/ Department; and

- Instituting websites by almost all Ministries and Departments and providing information on aspects such as their objectives, policies and decisions, contact persons, etc. Some of them have started their electronic newsletter for giving publicity to their activities on wider scale; and identifying departments, which have frequent inter-face with the citizens, and computerizing them on priority basis.

Thus, it can be inferred from the above that a good beginning has been made to make egovernment a reality in India, but still a lot needs to be done. Sincere efforts are required on sustained basis in future also to maintain the momentum.

4. E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES AT THE STATE LEVEL

Quite a number of state governments have initiated measures to introduce information technology and its tools in the

governance process. Most of these states are using these applications for improving service delivery to their citizens. They are moving from manual processes 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 multiple services are provided on-line at each location. Empirical evidence reveals that it has not been an easy task to implement ICT related reforms particularly at the state level and hence needs to be planned carefully for their successful implementation (Bhatnagar, 2004). In this regard, it is, therefore, of utmost importance to study and examine the various experiences for evolving effective strategies for future.

4.1. Project Basudha Kendra in the State of Bihar

Bihar is one of the first few States, which adopted the CSC Scheme soon after its launch. The State Government appointed the Service Centre Agencies (SCA) in October 2007 for setting up of 8463 CSCs - covering one CSC at each Gram Panchayat. The Services Centre Agencies viz, SREI Sahaj, Zoom Developers and Sark Systems have rolled out 7,196 CSCs as on April 2011.

Bihar is the first State in the Country to enable the RTI (Right to Information Act) services through web-based medium. The Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs) can access the website of RTI at http://www.biharonline.gov.in/rti/ and provide the details to the citizens who can avail the services through the CSCs at their doorstep. Bihar online is currently providing the Bill Payments (Electricity, BSNL, Airtel, Tata Indicom and Municipal services (Birth/ Death Registration and Property Tax) services.

Similarly, the service regarding public grievance to the Chief Minister (Bihar Public Grievance Redressal System) is also activated through the CSCs. Now the citizens can register the grievances to the Chief Minister of Bihar through the CSCs. The Rural Development Department is in the process of providing the Birth, Death, Caste, Income and residential certificates through the Vasudha Kendras. The Department has decided to outsource the Registration of unemployed youth and creation of database, Job Card Creation, Bank Account Opening and DTP work for Panchayat for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) via CSCs.

4.1.1. Success stories

(i). Ravishankar was running a PCO before he heard about the CSC Scheme. For him primarily the motivation came from the wide range of services he could provide through his CSC to the rural people. Ravishankar has put in three years into his CSC, and has gained popularity in his village.

He is providing computer-learning services, apart from some other basic services like internet surfing, form downloading, DLF Premedical etc. His average monthly income is Rs 50000. He only regrets limited power supply & net speed. He

feels, "Arrangement for alternative net connection for better connectivity needs is needed." He also wants to offer more services that would be useful for the villagers.

(ii). Anil Paswan resides in Madhampur Block in District Jehanabad in the State of Bihar. Previously, Anil ran an Ayurvedic medicine shop through which he earned Rs. 5000 per month. When he heard about the Vasudha Kendra Common Services Centre scheme, Anil was very keen to become a Village Level Entrepreneur. Anil's dream to increase his income was realized through the CSC scheme. The CSC is connected through a VSAT network which provides internet connectivity. Moreover, as the center has a backup generator, it is not entirely dependent on electricity. The CSC offers various e-Learning courses such as basic computer course, job training course for office assistants, as well as crucial services such as online railway reservation, life insurance, online job applications, digital photography, photocopying, CD writing etc.

Recently, Anil earned Rs 2000 on the day the Class 10th examination results were declared, when students verified their results online. Anil is thrilled about the income he earned in just 2 hours. Due to the immense success of his CSC, Anil is contemplating increasing the number of computers in his center and recruiting a computer teacher to impart computer training to villagers.

Thus, from the above it can be concluded that with the introduction of e-government applications, the service delivery mechanisms in India have made clear departure from the past - cramped spaces, shabby ambience, long queues, delaying tendencies of officials, procedural complexities, direct and indirect demands for bribe, and inefficiency in work. The introduction of Information Technology in the governance process has brought about a revolution in the quality of service delivered to its citizens. It has ushered in:

i. Transparency in the governing process;

ii. Saving of time and cost due to provision of services to the citizens through single window;

iii. Better decision making;

iv. Simplified office procedures;

v. Checking corruption; and

vi. Better office and record management.

5. CHALLENGES FOR E-GOVERNMENT 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:

i. Making a policy choice in favour of computerization to overcome radically the even if, it requires huge investments for the purchase of hardware and software;

ii. 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.

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