



E-governance: Success Story and the Way Ahead

Salil Khare¹

ABSTRACT

A recent New York Times article described how a fisherman working off the coasts of Kerala used a cell phone on the seas to obtain and compare information about spot market prices for fish at Cochin and Quilon (85 miles apart). This fisherman thus netted an additional \$1000 in annual income. e-Governance has thus started reshaping our society in ways unimaginable just even a decade ago. In spite of all that we have achieved or are achieving, several formidable challenges remain. Almost as many Indians are below the poverty line and illiterate as the entire population of India in 1950. We have entered the next millennium, therefore, with a great challenge. In this context e-governance can be used as a strategic tool for transforming Governance and improving the quality of services provided by the government to its people. This paper outlines how e-Gov has accelerated the development of India, the various initiatives taken by the government & private bodies in realizing the same, the challenges ahead and how in future it can be tapped to reach a developed country status by 2020.

Keywords: e-Gov, Drushtee, Sukhmani, CARD, Lokmitra, gyandoot, e-Mitra

1. Introduction

Our society is now being reshaped by rapid advances in information technologies—computers, telecommunications networks, and other digital systems—that have vastly increased our capacity to know, achieve and collaborate. Entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, and politicians are now advancing views about how India can ride the IT bandwagon and leapfrog into a knowledge-based economy. Imagine an illiterate farmer in a remote village in Madhya Pradesh sitting at a desktop wired up to the WWW through a small VSAT link powered by a small power generator by its side and surfing away to glory, downloading invaluable information about weather forecasts and sowing trends or even checking prices for Soya beans at the nearest government-run market, or even on an International commodities exchange. E-governance is thus citizen-centric governance that covers all of its services and respect everyone as individuals by providing personalized services. It is aptly an effective government that delivers maximum value for taxpayers' money (quick and efficient services).

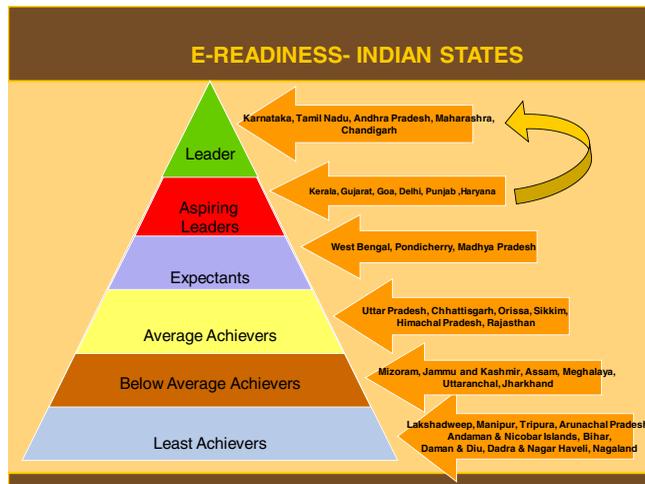
If the benefits of IT have to reach the common man, it is obvious that the common man should have access to IT services in the remotest part of the country. With the convergence of various forms of information delivery systems, such as TV, Radio, Newspapers, Telephones, PC and Internet, into one unified environment, it is now becoming possible to enable common man to have access to IT services. The present level of such facilities in the country as given below is, however, highly deficient in enabling reach of IT services to common man.

¹ Inderprastha Engineering College, 63 Site-IV, Suryanagar Flyover Road, Sahibabad, Ghaziabad, India.
(E-mail : kharesalil@yahoo.co.in, Telephone: +91 9899163181)

| | |
|-----------------------|------------|
| TV households | 70 million |
| Cable connections | 35 million |
| Telephone connections | 24 million |
| Telephone households | 8 million |
| Internet connections | 1 million |

2. E-governance: The Present Scenario

Indian government has started recognizing the emergence of e-government. The ability to obtain government services through non-traditional electronic means, enabling access to government information and to completion of government transaction on an anywhere, any time basis and in conformance with equal access requirement offers potential to reshape the public sector and build relationships between citizens and the government.



(Source: NCAER E-Readiness Report 2004)

Figure 1: e-readiness of Indian State.

At the same time, concerns have already been expressed about the gap between the technology haves and have-nots, and more popularly known as "the digital divide." In order to ensure that countries avoid creating a digital divide and create conditions to ensure that growth of the knowledge economy contributes to carrying out a democratic process of efficient, equitable and sustainable development, expanded dialogue and new patterns of cooperation among public, private and civil society organizations are needed. Information Technology (IT) affects our everyday lives at both an individual and organizational level. It is clear that we cannot avoid the use of technologies, and it is important that we know how to live with those technologies fittingly. At a country level, many countries accept the importance of IT and intend to utilize IT to improve the quality of life of their citizens and to facilitate economic growth. The development of the Indian IT industry, in particular, has been attributed to many factors—a large pool of low-cost, technologically competent, English speaking manpower being one of the principal ones.

One of the most promising aspects of e-government is its ability to bring citizens closer to their governments. Enabling conversation between citizens and government is not the only way to bring citizens and government closer together. Making government more easily accessible is another component of this endeavour. There are few features that make this possible. One of them is the ability to search a particular web site. Another is to offer live broadcast of important speeches through the web. Another way is by enabling citizens to cater available information to their particular interest.

The last couple of years have seen e-governance drop roots in India. IT enables the delivery of government services as it caters to a large base of people across different segments and geographical locations. The effective use of IT services in government administration can greatly enhance existing efficiencies, drive down communication costs, and increase transparency in the functioning of various departments. It also gives citizens easy access to tangible benefits, be it through simple applications such as online form filling, bill sourcing and payments, or complex applications like distance education and tele-medicine.

Improved access to information and services has provided economic and social development opportunities, facilitated participation and communication in policy and decision-making processes and empowerment of the weakest groups. This has led to fostering a sense of ownership and building of social capital, which in turn, constitute a basis for local revitalization. For instance health care is a sector in India where e-gov in particular and IT in general can bring about magnificent and much awaited changes. e-Gov can play a large role in addressing key issues that have been of concern of the health industry for many decades such as:

- Simplification of administrative processes
- Strengthening population-based public health systems

Health infrastructure is concentrated in urban areas (as 30% Indians stay in urban centres) resulting in concentration of about 68% hospitals and 80% beds in urban areas. Among the major gaps there is low density of doctors in India with only 43 doctors for every 10,000 people, as compared to the US which has 2,340 doctors per 10,000. Here e-gov or a web-enabled country would have advantages. Not only will it prove to be advantageous in removing this urban-rural divide but also Doctors in villages could get wired to big hospitals in any major city and consult online with senior doctors in case of medical emergencies. Similarly, doctors in big cities would benefit by connecting to super-specialty hospitals around the world.

Railway Management System (RMS), and online ticketing system that is within easy reach of the common man is another example of e- gov in the railway spectrum.

The Indian Railways provides

- Anywhere to anywhere reservation from anywhere, this means that customers can have their reservations done right from their houses.
- Electronic Booking of tickets on select sectors.
- Online Information on Railway reservation on Internet.
- Apart from providing reservation there are numerous important customer utilities on the railway web portal.
- This includes information about trains between two stations. The RMS has around 17 modules, and has facilities for online access to information about the locations of various KR trains with a scant 5-minute delay.

Moreover this has also brought transparency in the system and reduced black ticketing to the extent of almost removing it. In short every information on railways has just become a click away.

3. e-Gov : Cost Vs Returns

E-gov if implemented properly will provide benefits far outreaching the initial cost of investment. This has been proven without doubts. For example Kalyan Dombivli Municipal Corporation in Mumbai (KDMC) has set-up Citizen Facilitation Centres (CFCs) as a part of an e-Governance project to create citizen-centric administration bringing accountability and transparency in operations. (Network Magazine, 2005).

The project has resulted in benefits such as better tax revenue and empowered citizens. The uniqueness of the project secured it the Intelligent Enterprise Award in the government vertical category. At KDMC, a unique Citizen ID is created for every citizen, which helps both organisations and citizens conduct transac-

tions. Every service application or complaint received is handled through the system in a time-bound manner.

The time taken for processes and the manpower used has reduced significantly. Assessment of property now takes just 21 days, with just 24 people working on it as compared to 62 previously. Further benefits include objections on bills, that have reduced considerably from 25 to 2 percent of new assessments. After the CFC launch, collections happen at CFCs spread over 12 months. Therefore, revenue collection has also increased from Rs 38.63 crore in 2003 to Rs 54 crore in 2005. The total investment in the project is about Rs 6.79 crore with a revenue increase of approximately Rs 25 crore for over three years. KDMC expects more than Rs 2 crore from the government of Maharashtra towards replication of urban local bodies (ULB). It provides enhanced productivity and thus better utilisation of the existing manpower and helps in creating an effective Management Information System. (Network Magazine, 2005).

Even in judiciary which is one of the strong pillars of Indian democracy e-gov has strikingly helped in many innovative areas.. In the Mumbai High Court, video conferencing is regularly used by the Chief Justice and other judges. It is mainly used to interact with judges of the High Court Bench at Aurangabad and Nagpur. This is done by providing point-to-point ISDN lines from Mumbai to the two cities. Video conferencing is also used regularly between the Mazgaon Court and Arthur Road jail in Mumbai. The City Civil Court and Esplanade Court also use video conferencing for trials. Even district courts such as the Thane District and Sessions Court, and taluka courts, now use video conferencing.

Other obstacles are geographical distances, lack of trained human resources, and lack of ICT penetration in remote areas. For instance, a good e-governance application will not benefit anybody in remote areas if there is no supporting infrastructure such as electricity, computers and connectivity. When e-governance initiatives are successful, people start talking about them. The tell-tale sign of success is that more and more people use the e-governance facilities, and the news of the success travels by word of mouth, the fact that citizens are able to carry out a particular transaction or job in considerably less time than before is one sign of success.

George Paul, Executive Vice-president, Marketing, HCL Info systems, feels that the growth curve of the e-governance segment has followed the pattern where the initial period sees slow growth, and this is followed by a period where there is a leap. "Thankfully, today it has reached a level where almost every state has an IT policy in place, and the target has moved from an IT-aware to an IT-enabled government," he says. The typical nature of an unsuccessful e-governance initiative is that in the beginning the staff will start to work on the new system with a lot of interest. However, with time, its usage will come down and a parallel manual system will emerge which somewhat resembles the legacy system. Another sign that the e-governance initiative is not working is that, as Saxena puts it, the staff keeps talking about 'the good old days' of non-IT."

The most important success factor for an e-governance project is that the focus should not be on the technology but on the pain areas and the strategies that are needed to use IT to resolve the pain aspects. E-governance does not mean proliferation of computers and accessories; it is a political decision which calls for discipline, attitudinal change in officers and employees, and massive government process re-engineering

4. Concluding Remarks

It's been said that the only way to discover the limits of the possible is to go beyond them into the impossible. Those of you reading this room are well acquainted with this truth. The very character of cyber technology and the Internet age has been defined by those who have gone beyond what is seen, who have tested

the limits of the possible and in doing so have enriched our society and transformed our way of life. Our computers have connected us as a nation, as a people and as a global community in ways unimaginable even just a generation ago. And it is this type of connectivity that also defines our vision of nation's development. However, the function is always more important than the format. When governance is good, e-Governance can increase its effectiveness manifold. And if governance itself is poor; it does not help. It rather magnifies how poor that governance is. As academicians and researchers, our sole objectives would not have been to make money. We would have tried our best to change Governance first and then implement e-Governance. Otherwise we would not have hesitated to withdraw from the projects even, without caring much for our consultation fees. For global and local private bodies; it has become a gold mine as they know it too well that e-Governance without basic good governance would fail. And that means more and more assignments, and unending projects which will be paid by all Indians for many more years.

As of now, e-governance projects are being run only in certain departments. This approach will gradually be extended to all departments eventually, leveraging the power of IT to streamline administrative functions and increase transparency. The government benefits from reduced duplication of work. In addition, the processes of data collection, analysis and audit are simplified, and become less tedious. E-governance holds advantages for the business community too, playing the role of a catalyst and a channel for e-business, a fact evidenced by developments in the US and Singapore. But perhaps the single-largest benefit of e-governance is its potential to give .India could well be on the way to becoming an information and knowledge society and contrary to popular perception, its impact will be far-reaching, down to the villages and could bridge traditional divides. E-Governance is the next step - it promises to provide karmic relief from corrupt officials and politicians and gives birth to an entire web-based economy.

References

1. 'Capacity Building For e-Governance in India' S.R. Das & R. Chandrasekhar, 2007. Available at: www.mit.gov.in, accessed during the months of May-July 2008
2. E-Governance Strategy in India, December, 2002. Sameer Sachdeva, Available at: <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan014672.pdf>, accessed during the months of May-July 2008
3. Nirmaljeet Singh Kalsi, 2006. E-Governance Strategy, Government of Punjab., Available at: www.punjabinfotech.org.
4. A New Window for citizens, Network Magazine, Nov 2005. Available at: <http://www.networkmagazineindia.com/200511/coverstory04.shtml>, accessed during the months of May-July 2008

About the Author

Salil Khare is a final year Electronics & Communications Engineering student at Inderprastha Engineering College, Ghaziabad. His area of interest includes 'Endowing Technology to the disadvantaged people in India'. He has authored various papers on providing high end Technology based solutions for the same. He can be contacted at khare-salil@yahoo.co.in & www.salil-khare.blogspot.com.