

DAWN OF DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT

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For the last seven decades, India has been struggling in making entitlements, citizen services and individual rights reach the public, especially in remote and rural parts of India, in an efficient and effective manner. Fortunately, there are now digital tools and ICT capacities that are being employed in large parts of the world for making these and other similar government-to-citizen services more efficient and effective. However, India still has a long way to use these tools successfully and innovatively.

About 70-80 per cent of the country is still not connected digitally. According to a recent study, 72 per cent of Indian women do not have access to mobile phones. Forget WhatsApp and Facebook, they don't even have the basic calling facility. It's actually only 40 per cent of India's population that is using one billion SIM cards. So even if we provide a lot of solutions, which have an ingredient of digital tools, we're not really certain if all the people, or even a majority of people, can avail the services, entitlements and benefits.

Having said that, digital tools can help achieve transparency, efficiency and accountability but for that to happen, it requires much more than just building a large digital infrastructure. For example, buying computers for schools isn't enough, the government must ensure that the same are being used in an effective manner. For this, training of students isn't enough, training of teachers is more important.

With these thoughts in mind, let us now look at the latest budget and see if the government has got the right approach or not.

The Union Budget 2016-17 was presented in Parliament by the Finance Minister Mr. Arun Jaitley on 29, 2016. It was this government's third Budget presentation.

While the Budget touched upon the usual

topics of taxation, finance, health, education etc., what drew particular attention was the introduction/revamping of schemes focused on leveraging information communication technologies (ICTs) towards development in various sectors, particularly with rural beneficiaries in mind.

The key sectors where ICT and digital tools for rural development made their presence felt strongly was in the areas of social development, education, entrepreneurship and agriculture.

Social Development

Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), Aadhaar, LPG and MGNREGA

It is proposed that DBTs will be extended on a pilot basis for subsidies on fertilisers in certain districts. DBTs on LPG have already been linked to beneficiaries' Aadhaar cards. It is expected that DBTs on fertilisers will also be linked to the Aadhaar system.

The government has also proposed introducing legal backing to Aadhaar card in the Budget speech. We hope the Aadhaar linked DBTs to reach beneficiaries directly, it would reduce the red-tape and time taken to deliver the service.

The government has stated that use of Aadhaar could save the taxpayer Rs. 20,000 crore by the way of effective targeting of the subsidies. Government has tried to address the privacy and data protection concerns raised by civil society. Also the government has made it clear that the possession of an Aadhaar number/card is not the proof of citizenship.

Additionally, the government has also planned to provide LPG connections on the name of women in the family, as opposed to the current trend of male members. We view this as a progressive move that would also increase the penetration of the Aadhaar

card among women, leading to greater gender parity.

Finally, the Budget has provided the highest ever sum of Rs. 38,500 crore for MGNREGA. **Payments under the MGNREGA have already been linked to the Aadhaar number. It is our hope that the proposed legal backing to the Aadhaar will serve to increase the rigour in validation of payments and reduce the chances of any potential corruption/duplication in the payment process.**

Automation in fair price shops (FPS)

To ensure the benefits of minimum support price reach farmers and to ensure reduction in pilfering in the stocks in the public distribution system, the government has proposed the automation of 3 lakh of the 5.35 lakh fair price shops (FPS) in the country. This automation will ensure that incoming and outgoing stock is properly weighed and catalogued. It is our hope that this will make it easier for consumers to make purchases at these shops. Additionally, we hope that these fair price shops will also embrace and encourage digital payment methods that would promote mobile wallets.

Under PDS, every BPL family is entitled for 35 kg of rice/wheat per month; and the APL cardholder for 15 kg. However, the research shows, - "The food grains supplied by the ration shops are not enough to meet the consumption needs of the poor or are of inferior quality. The average level of consumption of PDS grains in India is only 1 kg per person per month."

So how will automation tackle these issues? Will it ensure that every sack of grains and every canter of kerosene oil is digitally marked to allow its movement to be tracked in real time till it reaches its destination? Will the FPS automation mean that only eligible people would get ration? Can the automation mean that there would be no pilferage? Can we ensure that each and every ration shop would be geographically marked on the map and the distribution process recorded on camera and made available to authorities to view in real time? Besides finding answers to these questions, there are several other significant challenges that the government would face in the process of implementation of automation at every FPS.

Education and Entrepreneurship

National Digital Literacy Mission

The National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) was created with the aim to make impart digital literacy and IT training to 52.5 lakh individuals across the country. The NDLM was implemented with the aid of industry, civil society and educational partners.

This year, the NDLM has received a fresh lease of life with the mandate to expand to cover six crore additional households in rural India over the next three years, directly and indirectly supporting several other digital initiatives proposed by the government.

The National Digital Literacy Mission is one of the integral parts of prime minister's Digital India mission. However, six crore should not just be a target figure that has to be achieved by picking any random villager for digital literacy training, instead it should be institutionalised. **There are 30 lakh elected member of the panchayat, 10 lakh of them are women. Why not target all of them? There are 80 lakh teachers in India, why not include all of them? There are 20 lakh aanganwadis and 2.6 crore MSMEs, why not ensure that they are all made digitally literate?** Why not provide digital training to frontline health workers and self-help group members? Surely, if digital literacy is targeted through an institutional approach, the impact would be much higher than when random people in the village are selected and enrolled for digital literacy. Additionally, it will also be easier to track the beneficiaries and understand the impact of the project.

Another question that comes to our mind is whether the money being distributed for all NDLM centres includes the cost of support infrastructure such as generators — keeping in mind the lack of power supply that plagues most of rural and remote India — and if it does, is the money being utilised for the same purpose or is there any pilferage. There also needs to be a process to ensure that the study material being provided to students through NDLM is of a quality that they are able to imbibe easily without compromising on the quantity of information they should be taking in. The NDLM centres should also provide additional

vocational training for youth to open more job and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Digital Depository of School Certificates

The government has proposed the creation of a digital depository for school leaving certificates, college degrees, mark sheets, etc. This will help Indian students to access their academic documents in case they have lost their originals. This is an academically-focused project similar to the DigiLocker project initiated by this government. The DigiLocker already serves to save government documents like birth certificates, passports, PAN cards, etc. This would save time and money of thousands of students, who run from pillar to post if their documents are lost.

A cause of concern that arises with the launch of this project is the potential imbalance in benefits between urban and rural students. Also, does the idea of creating a digital depository of school certificates only applies to the CBSE board or does it also include government recognised ICSE board and the respective state boards? The government should commit additional resources to fulfil its commitments under the BharatNet project and provide optical fibre connectivity to all 2.5 lakh gram panchayats. These panchayats should be further empowered to provide connectivity to public access points in the area. Coupled with the expansion in the scope of the NDLM, this would serve as a force multiplier and would empower rural students to leverage the benefits of the digital depository.

Skill India Mission, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and Entrepreneurship Education and Training

The Skill India Mission and its sub-scheme, the PMKVY, work together and aim to encourage skill development for youth and provide a monetary benefit for trainees who are successfully trained and certified by affiliated training providers. It is defined as an outcome-based skill training scheme that rewards and aims to enable and mobilise a large number of Indian youth to take up skill training and become employable and earn their livelihood. The monetary reward for successful trainees, that range from Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 12,500, is disbursed to the trainees' Aadhaar linked bank account.

As of time of publication, there are 18.42 lakh individuals enrolled in the PMKVY of which just 40,327 are enrolled in the IT/ITeS sector and 55,289 are in the telecom sector. Together, they constitute roughly 4.5 per cent of the total number of individuals enrolled. The government has also proposed the creation of 1,500 multi-skill training institutes across the country which should increase the number of total enrolled individuals under the PMKVY. There has been an allocation of Rs. 1,700 crore for this endeavour.

The total number of enrolled individuals is a heart-warming statistic; however, to promote employment and entrepreneurship in the digital space, the percentage of individuals in the IT/ITeS and telecom sectors needs to increase.

Finally, the government has also pledged to provide entrepreneurship education and training in a total of 3,050 institutions (2,200 colleges, 300 schools, 500 government ITIs and 50 vocational training centres) through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These MOOCs, if delivered through the public access points connected to the BharatNet, can have an almost exponential reach across the country, in the most remote villages. Institutions like IGNOU and Khan Academy are already ahead, and have been providing MOOC content for a while. Media Lab Asia and even corporations have released digital literacy courses, which are available in the public domain for free-of-cost consumption. However, the question that arises is - if building and scaling up skill enough? What is the focus on quantity or quality of education? Won't the motivation among students to enrol for skill development increase if an almost equal number of job opportunities are created for them?

Agriculture Land Record Modernisation Scheme

Titles on land have frequently been a bone of contention across the country. It leads to disputes among friends, families and neighbours. These disputes are usually caused by inaccurate records maintained by the *patwari*. The use of geographical information systems (GIS) for the measurement of land holdings have been on the rise in the past few years. However, as the results

of these GIS-created land survey records may not be consolidated with the pre-existing land records, it may have led to continuing disputes.

The government has pledged to revamp the National Land Record Modernisation Programme under the Digital India Initiative and has provided Rs. 150 crore for this endeavour. While the citizen does not interface directly with the technology in this case, they do benefit greatly from this modernisation programme in terms of clear understanding of their titles and land holdings.

The *Bhoomi* project of Karnataka has been the first-of-its-kind project for online delivery and management of land records, which aims at providing transparency. However, nobody has heard about *Bhoomi* in the last decade. Maybe it would be a good idea to study the success and failure of this project before the Centre rolls out the Land Record Modernisation Scheme at a national level.

Unified Agriculture e-Marketing Platform

The government has proposed amendments to the state Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee Acts (APMC) and the introduction of a Unified Agriculture e-Marketing Platform. The amendments to the APMC Acts will empower state governments to use this electronic platform. As per the Budget announcement, 12 states have accepted the amendments to their APMC acts.

The platform aims to connect up to 250 *agri mandis* by September 2016, and up to 585 *mandis* by March 2018. State governments will be urged to launch the e-market platform to unify *mandis* in the state, thereby allowing farmers to sell their produce in any *mandi* of their choice. This unified platform will empower farmers with up-to-date information about the appropriate selling price for their produce, thereby ensuring fair remunerative prices and serving to double farmers' income over five years. Will it result in buying lakhs of PoS (point of sales) devices that will never be used for lack of training to use them? Or will it result in lakhs being spent in buying computer systems that will be left to catch dust?

Information asymmetry is one of the key drivers of under-development in the country.

The unified platform will serve to bridge that gap towards fair remuneration for farmers. We are pleased that the government is cognizant about the benefits of providing accurate and timely information to citizens but its efficiency is yet to be proved.

Conclusion

While this Budget has not treated technology in isolation with other schemes but tried to integrate the effective use of ICT across all important sectors, with the aim of a Digital India in mind, it is yet to be seen how all these plans will be implemented on ground. The mere installation of computers and connectivity is not the solution, the government must ensure that these facilities are utilised in an optimum manner by the people as well.

For example, out of the 2,50,000 panchayats, more than 50,000 have been provided computers and connectivity, but these facilities are almost never used. If automation facilities are being provided at every fair price shop (FPS), it is important to give training to FPS keepers.

Allocating a budget to impart digital literacy to six crore additional individuals is a welcome step, but it is also important to provide 'quality' training rather than simply providing some sort of a forced training. This means training of trainers is as important as the training of trainees. Thousands of our millions of schools have been provided with computer labs but, more often than not, teachers for various reasons never access those labs. Similarly, there are millions of pages of government orders, including details of hundreds and thousands of citizen entitlements, which have been scanned and converted into PDF files to be uploaded on several ministry websites – these files do not solve any purpose to any targeted audience as they are dumb papers, just stored online. Therefore, while digital interventions have massive strength in improving governance, the mere installation or introduction of technology is not enough. Right approach on the part of government, however, is what can make all the differences.

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