

## Maximum Governance: Reaching Out through e-governance

*Ranjeet Mehta*



*e-governance reforms have been able to serve as a powerful platform for improving India's anti-poverty programs.*

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**E**governance is the application of information and communication technologies to transform the efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability of informational and transactional exchanges within government, between govt. and govt. agencies of National, State, Municipal and Local levels, citizen and businesses, and to empower citizens through access and use of information.

The rise of e-governance has been one of the most striking developments of the web. As the Internet supported digital communities and assuming that they do indeed grow to incorporate individuals around the country (and globe), they present the national governments with a number of challenges and opportunities. Governments in democratic states are primarily a representative mechanism whereby, the selected few debate and enact the legislation for and on behalf of the nation state's citizens. There are several aspects to this that might prove to be important in the context of e-governance.

Global shifts towards increased deployment of IT by governments emerged in the nineties, with the advent of the World Wide Web. The technology as well as e-governance initiatives have come a long way since then. With

the increase in Internet and mobile connections, the citizens are learning to exploit their new mode of access in wide ranging ways. They have started expecting more and more information and services online from governments and corporate organizations to further their civic, professional and personal lives, thus creating abundant evidence that the new "e-citizenship" is taking hold.

The introduction of e-governance in India started in the late 60s and early 70s with an emphasis on computerising applications for defence services, economic planning, national census, elections, tax collections, etc. However, from the early 90s, e-governance has taken on a broader dimension, using IT for wider sectoral applications with a policy emphasis on reaching out to rural areas and taking in greater inputs from NGOs and the private sector. While the emphasis was initially on automation and computerization, the later forays began to encompass connectivity, networking, setting up systems for processing information and delivering services. The implementation of the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) in May 2006 was with the vision of making all government services accessible to the common man in his/her locality through common service delivery outlets to ensure efficiency, transparency and reliability of such services at affordable costs.

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NeGP currently consists of 27 mission mode projects (MMPs) and 8 support components to be implemented at the Central, State and Local government levels. These include projects such as income tax, customs and excise and passports at the Central level, land records, agriculture and e-district at the State level and panchayats and municipalities at the local level.

The effective use of ICT services in the Government has greatly enhanced existing efficiencies, driven down communication costs and increased transparency in the functioning of various departments. It has also given citizens an 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.

Some of the steps in e-governance that have been taken by the Government in the recent past are:

#### **Pahal**

The PAHAL DBTL ambitious scheme was earlier launched on June 1, 2013 by the previous Government with the objective of giving cash subsidy on cooking gas and it covered 291 districts. The present government has comprehensively examined the PAHAL scheme and after reviewing the problems faced by the consumers, it modified the prior scheme and re-launched it in 54 districts on November 15, 2014 to cover 2.5 crore households. The second phase of this revised scheme started on January 1, 2015 to cover all the districts of the country. Under the previous scheme, it was mandatory to have the Aadhar number for all consumers who wanted to receive the LPG subsidy. However, this was a big problem for consumers who did not have the Aadhar Card, which meant that they could not avail of the subsidy.

Consumers who wished to join the scheme would have to either link their Aadhaar number into their bank

account and their LPG consumer or if they did not possess Aadhaar number, they would have to link their bank account directly with their 17 digit LPG ID. Once a consumer joins the scheme, he would get the cylinders at market price and would receive LPG subsidy directly in his bank account. A sum of Rs.568 was to be paid in advance to the consumer, who had joined the scheme, to his bank account, as soon as he made the first booking for a cylinder after joining the scheme to ensure that he had extra money required to pay for the first LPG cylinder at market price. This was in addition to subsidy that was paid on each cylinder.

To keep consumers informed about their status in the scheme, consumers received SMS at every stage in the scheme. To avail this feature, all LPG consumers were requested to register their mobile number with their distributor if they had not done so. They were also advised to receive cylinders only with cash memos to be assured of their subsidy transfer.

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The scheme was to cover over 15.3 crore consumers across 676 districts of the country. Currently, over 6.5 crore consumers i.e. 43 per cent have already joined the scheme and will receive subsidy in their bank account.

DBTL is designed to ensure that the benefit meant for the genuine domestic customer reaches them directly and is not diverted. By this process, the public money would be saved.

As on 30.12.2014, an amount of Rs.624 crore had been transferred to over 20 lakh LPG consumers since the launch of the scheme on 15<sup>th</sup> November, 2014. In this scheme, if one doesn't want the subsidy, he can

give it up voluntarily. Government of India started the 'Give it up' campaign in March 2015 and, as on April 2016 around 1 crore people, including the middle class and retired, had given up their LPG subsidy.

#### **Digital India**

The Digital India initiative is a renewed push to address the delays plaguing flagship programs that focus on universal broadband access and mobile connectivity. Direct spending via public-sector organizations like BSNL (Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd), Railtel, and PGCIL (Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd) will be limited, but significant indirect demand will result from many more of the 68 per cent of India's population that lives in rural areas coming online.

The vision of Digital India programme aims at inclusive growth in areas of electronic services, products, manufacturing and job opportunities, etc. It is centered on three key areas –

- Digital Infrastructure as a Utility to Every Citizen;
- Governance and Services on Demand; and
- Digital Empowerment of Citizens;

With the above vision, the Digital India programme aims to provide Broadband Highways, Universal Access to Mobile Connectivity, Public Internet Access Programme, E-Governance: Reforming Government through Technology, eKranti – Electronic Delivery of Services, Information for All, Electronics Manufacturing, Target Net Zero Imports, IT for Jobs and Early Harvest Programmes. Digital India comprises of various initiatives under the single programme each targeted to prepare India for becoming a knowledge economy and for bringing good governance to citizens through synchronized and co-ordinated engagement of the entire Government.

This programme has been envisaged and coordinated by the Department

of Electronics and Information Technology (DeitY) in collaboration with various Central Ministries/ Departments and State Governments. The Prime Minister as the Chairman of Monitoring Committee on Digital India activities under the Digital India initiative is being carefully monitored. All the existing and ongoing e-Governance initiatives have been revamped to align them with the principles of Digital India.

Digital India is composed of many pieces, but the largest piece is last-mile connectivity. While government is looking to connect all the gram panchayats (GPs) and common service centres through fibre optics, that's not the only thing that they need.

The government has appointed designated public sector companies to roll out fibre optics to bring connectivity to rural areas. However, what is missing is the business piece of it. Government is now looking for entrepreneurs who could set up ISPs (Internet service providers) in rural areas to reach the last mile connectivity goal. Once small businesses start getting ISP licences, it will further accelerate the process. It will take a couple of years to reach that stage. An ISP provides internet services leveraging digital infrastructure such as fibre optic networks.

Meanwhile, the private sector remains bullish about tech spending by Indian companies fuelled by the Digital India initiative and steadily growing Indian economy. India's tech purchases, which include computers and peripheral equipment, communications equipment software, tech consulting services, tech outsourcing and hardware maintenance, will grow by 12 per cent in rupee terms in 2016 and 2017.

Technology expenditure will reach Rs.2.32 trillion in 2016 and Rs.2.59 trillion in 2017 from Rs.2.08 trillion in 2015. A third of that spending will be on hardware, which remains the biggest area of expense for Indian companies. However, communications equipment spending will grow more

slowly than the rest as the market continues to mature and prices drop. This will occur even as Digital India gains traction and telcos launch newer and better communication networks, such as 4G.

In 2014-15, the Union government initially planned to connect 100,000 gram panchayats by fibre optics, which was later scaled down to 50,000. According to data up to March 2015, only about 20,000 gram panchayats had been covered under the National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN), which was later renamed BharatNet.

Till about December 2015, 32,272 GPs were covered with 76,624 km of fibre laid, according to government data. The Bharat Net project aims to establish a scalable network by 2017 towards providing an affordable broadband connectivity of 2 Mbps to 20 Mbps to all rural households and institutions.

#### Digital India: Key Projects

Several projects/products have already been launched or ready to be launched as follows:

1. **Digital Locker System** aims to minimize the usage of physical documents and enable sharing of e-documents across agencies. The sharing of the e-documents will be done through registered repositories thereby ensuring the authenticity of the documents online.
2. **MyGov.in** has been implemented as a platform for citizen engagement in governance, through a "Discuss", "Do" and "Disseminate" approach. The mobile App for MyGov would bring these features to users on a mobile phone.
3. **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) Mobile app** would be used by people and Government organizations for achieving the goals of Swachh Bharat Mission.
4. **eSign framework** would allow citizens to digitally sign a

document online using Aadhaar authentication.

5. The **Online Registration System (ORS)** under the e-Hospital application has been introduced. This application provides important services such as online registration, payment of fees and appointments, online diagnostic reports, enquiring availability of blood online, etc.
6. **National Scholarships Portal** is a one stop solution for end to end scholarship process right from submission of student application, verification, sanction and disbursement to end beneficiary for all the scholarships provided by the Government of India.
7. DeitY has undertaken an initiative namely **Digitize India Platform (DIP)** for large scale digitization of records in the country that would facilitate efficient delivery of services to the citizens.
8. The Government of India has undertaken an initiative namely **Bharat Net**, a high speed digital highway to connect all 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats of the country. This would be the world's largest rural broadband connectivity project using optical fibre.
9. BSNL has introduced **Next Generation Network (NGN)**, to replace 30 year old exchanges, which is an IP based technology to manage all types of services like voice, data, multimedia/ video and other types of packet switched communication services.
10. BSNL has undertaken large scale deployment of Wi-Fi hotspots throughout the country. The user can latch on the BSNL Wi-Fi network through their mobile devices.
11. To deliver citizen services electronically and improve the way citizens and authorities transact with each other, it is imperative to have ubiquitous connectivity.

The government also realises this need as reflected by including 'broadband highways' as one of the pillars of Digital India. While connectivity is one criterion, enabling and providing technologies to facilitate delivery of services to citizens forms the other.

### Policy Initiatives

Policy initiatives have also been undertaken (by DeitY) in the e-Governance domain like e-Kranti Framework, Policy on Adoption of Open Source Software for Government of India, Framework for Adoption of Open Source Software in e-Governance Systems, Policy on Open Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) for Government of India, E-mail Policy of Government of India, Policy on Use of IT Resources of Government of India, Policy on Collaborative Application

Development by Opening the Source Code of Government Applications, Application Development & Re-Engineering Guidelines for Cloud Ready Applications.

- **BPO Policy** has been approved to create BPO centres in different North Eastern states and also in smaller / mofussil towns of other states.
- **Electronics Development Fund (EDF)** Policy aims to promote Innovation, R&D, and Product Development and to create a resource pool of IP within the country to create a self-sustaining eco-system of Venture Funds.
- **National Centre for Flexible Electronics (NCFlexE)** is an initiative of the Government of India to promote research and innovation in the emerging area of Flexible Electronics.

- **Centre of Excellence on Internet on Things (IoT)** is a joint initiative of Department of Electronics & Information Technology (DeitY), ERNET and NASSCOM

To conclude, e-governance reforms have been able to serve as a powerful platform for improving India's anti-poverty programs. We believe that interventions like this may help the poor lead healthy and productive lives. The task now is to determine how to leverage this platform to maximize its impact on India's poorest. The merits and demerits of DBT are mixture of hopes and assumptions, but DBT is in good spirit and will definitely benefit all stakeholders i.e. govt, beneficiaries and private institutions. It will make sure right to economic equality by ensuring every beneficiary gets his share on time. □

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YE-17/2016