Chapter 16

Rural E–Governance through the "Panchayati Raj" Institutions in India:
Prospects and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In India, the administrative system, with roots in the colonial past, is largely perceived as unresponsive and insensitive to the citizens' needs particularly in its vast rural hinterland. The common citizens at the rural village level often find themselves at the receiving end of a cumbersome, iniquitous, and unfair service delivery system with very little involvement or inclusion in governance processes despite the best intentions of the government. It is believed that Information Communication Technology (ICT) enabled e-governance through the local self governing units (Panchayats) at the village level could simplify civic governance, improve the public services delivery system, make government and administration more democratic and inclusive, and more accessible to the citizens at the local village level. In this context, the chapter attempts to examine the challenges to, and dimensions of the task of electronic delivery of government services through the local self-government Institutions called "Panchayati Raj" in India.

INTRODUCTION

E-governance, refers to digital governance processes in which Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is used to induce changes in the delivery and standards of government services and more importantly, in the way citizens interact and participate in the governance sphere. (DigitalGovernance.org). It integrates various services between Government and Citizens (G2C), and Government and Business (G2B) through dissemination and exchange of information with the help of ICTs. This further involves an integration and networking of back office processes and interactions within the entire framework of Government requiring provisions of hardware,

software, networking, process-re-engineering and change management (Nath, 2008).

E-government which underlies e governance progresses through different modes and stages: First, the cataloging stage which is marked by online presence of government documents which offer public information relating to government services. Second, the transaction stage where the focus is on connecting the internal government systems to online interfaces making it possible for citizens to electronically transact with government institutions. This further calls for vertical integration, of federal, state and local governments to ensure compatibility and interoperability between various government databases. The most complex stage is horizontal integration where different services and functions within the same level of government are integrated to provide a one-stop-shop for all major services. This requires a transformation of how government functions are conceived, organized and executed and is more difficult to realize than the initial stages (Weerakkody & Dwivedi, 2006).

E-governance is seen as an opportunity to transform the nature of governance and revolutionize public administration in India. Its potential for delivery of service by government efficiently with, and across a wide geographical reach at high speed and low cost is officially acknowledged (Moily, 2007). However, for bringing about the desired changes with the help of Information Communication Technology (ICT) through the local self governing units (*Panchayats*) at the village level towards better civic governance, a fundamental change is called for in the organizational culture to design and solve problems based on grassroots level experiences. For this ICTs would have to be adapted and integrated with the local needs. However, the sheer size and diversity of the area and population to be covered, the number of village Panchayats to be e-enabled, the existing ground level realities and pre e-governance features of the legacy public administration at the local level are challenges to be reckoned with for achieving the aims of e-governance through the Panchayati Raj institutions in rural India. These challenges need to be examined to assess the contours of the problem which is the objective of this chapter.

BACKGROUND

The implementation of "e-governance" in India began with the National Informatics Centre's (NIC) efforts to connect all the district headquarters in the States through computers in the 1980s. This typically included connectivity, networking, and technology up gradation, selective delivery systems for information and services and an array of software solutions. The 90s saw a spate of experimental e-government initiatives in India in various States in the Indian federal structure that addressed issues such as land records management through digitisation, issue of government documents to public and collection of various dues via kiosk-based centres etc. at the local level (De, 2006).

E-Governance in India

In the more recent times the e-governance perspective has taken deep roots in India. Under the umbrella of the basic policy laid down by the Government at the Centre, every State has an IT policy in place and a huge budget for e -governance as well. The domains are clearly laid out. The overarching IT policy is laid down by the Central Government under which there are projects initiated by the Central Government and sub programmes by State Governments. There is also a domain of integrated projects with collaboration of both the Centre and the States. Accordingly the core policies, core infrastructure, and support infrastructure are in the domain of the Central government. Integrated services, technical assistance, manpower & training etc. are in the domain of the States.[1]

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