Chapter 55

Gender Evaluation of Rural E-Governance in India:
A Case Study of E-Gram Suraj (E-Rural Good Governance) Scheme[1]

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ABSTRACT

In the present chapter, the author seeks to identify the existing gender gaps in rural e-governance in India and has attempted to explore the factors responsible for these gaps with reference to a rural e-governance scheme in one of the most economically and socially challenged state of India as an illustration to support some of the points sought to be made in the paper. The author argues that in Indian context, where rural women are already less visible in the public sphere due to socio–cultural factors and men already dominate, e-governance is more available and accessible to men. Hence to avoid the emergence of a gender based digital divide in rural governance that would further marginalize the rural women, it is necessary that the potential of ICTs is exploited in such a manner as to address the existing gender issues in rural governance, which are still obstructing women's way to participate equally in the process. Women's abilities, needs, perceptions and building women's capacities to use the ICTs are other important factors that should be given due consideration while planning for rural e- governance to make it meaningful to women.

INTRODUCTION

India is a country dominated by rural population. But even after sixty years of Independence rural areas are marked by severe poverty, illiteracy, lack of health services, lack of employment opportunities and over all backwardness. The condition of women in rural areas is worse as the gender based discrimination with strong socio cultural roots are entrenched and pervasive. In 1993 the Panchayati Raj[2] (Village Level Local

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Self Governance) System was introduced as an instrument of rural self-governance. Described as a "revolution based on maximum democracy and maximum devolution", a key feature of the system is that 33 percent of elected seats are reserved for women in some 250,000 local government bodies that function below the district level. Seen another way, this quota means the empowerment of one million women—as India's Panchayats (Local Self Governance Units) are run by three million elected office bearers. These one million grass root women elected leaders are expected to influence the process of rural governance and rural development in the interest of women.

Due to the patriarchal character of the society, ability to participate equally in the process of governance has been a big challenge for the rural women. It has never been easy for them to make multiple trips to far off offices, chase officials, and humor them or to network with them. (Subramanian & Saxena, 2006). The provision of reservation (Article 243D & 243T of Indian Constitution) has given them an opportunity to hold formal positions of power and, in turn, participate in the decision making process. Women have got the opportunity to express their voice and shape policies on issues that matter to them most. In brief, reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has paved the way for making governance structures gender equitable and gender sensitive. But the question that still remains is … *whether this numerical strength of women has really brought any qualitative change in the lives of the women?*

So far, many studies have shown that even with 33% reservation the women Sarpanchas (Head of the Village Level Local Self Government Unit)) have not been able to equally participate in the process of rural governance. So far, this process has been undoubtedly male centric. (Subramanian & Saxena, 2006)

Introduction of ICTs is expected to bring in changes in the whole process of rural governance with Sarpanchas being the key persons. What dif- ference this emerging phenomenon of using ICT in rural governance or rural e-governance will be able to make in terms of women's relations to the realm of rural governance is a pertinent question.

In this context the present study seeks to address the following research questions through a gender evaluation of E-Gram Suraj[3] (Village Good Governance) Scheme of Chhatisgarh State[4] of India:

1.   Whether rural women Sarpanchas have been able to participate in the e-governance initiatives as equally as their male counterparts? If there is a gender gap what are the factors responsible for this?
2.   What impact this e-governance scheme has had from a gender perspective in terms of its outcome for rural women Sarpanchas?

METHODOLOGY

Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM)[5] for Information Communication Technology for Development Projects is used for conducting the study. A combination of methods was adopted to collect data that included Personal Interviews, story telling and focused group discussions with various groups of informants. A review of the government records is also done to gather relevant information.

The questionnaire based survey with 56 Sarpanchas in Dongargaon Block[6] of Chhattisgarh state was carried out during 31st May-6th June 2008.The questionnaire contained two sections. The first sections included the information regarding the profile of Sarpanchas. The second section consisted of project related questions, based on six indicators. Information from other informants like technology developers, software developers and government officers is also collected through personal interviews and online discussions. To understand the context and to analyze the data, earlier researches, government policy documents and reports have also been reviewed.

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