

Revamping the Administrative Structure and Processes in India for Online Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

There is a talk of e-governance all over the world. India has also not remained oblivious of these developments. E-governance implies a smoother interface between government and citizen. Peoples' expectations from e-government have gone up very high. They see the new technology as a panacea to improve their living conditions. With the application of IT initiatives in certain states of India and at the union level, there has been some overall improvement in the transparency and accountability of the government. However, it must be remembered that technology cannot deliver everything. It is only a tool and an enabler to accomplish certain objectives—perhaps more quickly. E-governance has both a narrow and a broad perspective. In a narrow sense, it is focused primarily on public service delivery through Web site and Internet, while in a broader sense, it stands for all kinds of ICT (information and communication technology) applications in different stages of policy making, formulation, implementation, and evaluation (Snellen, 2005). E-governance sometimes may also make it harder, rather than easier, to achieve more information-driven, boundary-crossing reform such as improved delivery of public services (Heeks, 2002).

THE BACKGROUND

One of the prerequisites for the success of e-governance is the issue of structural and procedural reforms in the existing system of government and administration. Such reforms must be an all-embracing endeavor, touching all aspects of government. Only then can it have any impact on the objectives sought to be attained through introducing e-governance. With the increasing complexity of human activities, growing population, consequent changes in demographic and socioeconomic structure, the forces and pressures of globalization, satellite and communication revolution, consumerist culture, and technology-savvy world, governmental functions can no longer be carried in the old traditional manner. Governments need to change themselves according to changed

times on a continuing basis. However, the change process is generally slow because of the vast dispersed government structure and functions and proverbial resistance to change. The government of India is no exception, where the reform processes are further complicated, due to divergent views and policies pursued by different sets of governments (federal, state, and local), and by different political groups sharing power in different coalitional set-ups. With low literacy levels and strong differences of caste, community, region, religion, and ethnicity and where people are not well informed despite a well-developed press and electronic media, problems of e-governance are further aggravated by the fact that in India, opinions are much more influenced by the glamour and personality of the individual leader rather than his vision or the ideology of the political party/parties competing for political power. Thus, the result is political compromises in policies, rather than a consensual policy perspective for the general public good. Consequently, the processes of reforms also get politicized.

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS AS A PRECONDITION FOR SUCCESSFUL E-GOVERNANCE

The system of administration in India has undergone a number of structural and procedural changes since its colonial days (see Jain, 1976, 2002). However, for achieving the goals of good governance at the present juncture of the Indian polity, the need of the hour seems to be to adopt a normative model of *good management approach* towards public administration. This should include (a) a more strategic or result-oriented (efficiency, effectiveness, and service quality) orientation to decision-making; (b) replacement of highly centralized organizational structures with decentralized management environment integrating with the new Panchayati Raj and municipal institutions, where decisions on resource allocation and service delivery are taken close to the point of delivery; (c) flexibility to explore alternatives to direct public provision which might provide more cost effective policy outcomes; (d) focusing attention on the matching of authority and

responsibility as a key to improving performance, including mechanism of explicit performance contracting; (e) Creating of competitive environments within and between public service organizations; (f) strengthening of strategic capacities at the center to steer government to respond to external changes and diverse interests quickly, flexibly and at least costs; (g) greater accountability and transparency through requirements to report on results and their full costs; (h) service-wide budgeting and management systems to support and encourage these changes; (i) breaking the growing nexus of bureaucrats, politicians and criminals to restore public confidence in public management system amongst the citizenry; (j) adapting of innovations and evolving suitable mechanism to eliminate corruption at both political and administrative levels and strengthen citizens' grievance redressal system; (k) downsizing of bureaucracy and improving the system of delivery at the cutting edge of administration by replacing the existing archaic bureaucratic procedures by absorbing some appropriate precepts inherent in the philosophy of new public management; (l) effectively utilizing the fruits of technical revolution and the information management system for an effective and quick public service delivery system; and (m) making improvements in the working atmosphere of the government institutions and offices to reflect a new work culture and a changed administrative behavior incorporating the principles of transparency, responsiveness, accountability, participative, and citizen-friendly management.

E-GOVERNANCE AS A TOOL TO ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

E-governance is an effective tool linked to the processes of administrative reforms. It can catalyze the reform process, reduce overheads, and enhance the credibility of government agencies, which can in turn bring more investments in various sectors that can directly or indirectly help the poor by providing education, ensuring good health and creating new jobs, apart from strengthening governmental transactions. E-governance, if implemented properly, can bring in efficiency, cut delays and red-tape, and improve transparency. However, it requires a strong political vision and courage by the top leadership to ensure reforms to revamp the existing structures and processes for the implementation of e-governance and bring about the necessary transformation (see Gupta et al., 2004).

Public governance consists of multiple networks: organizational, human, and electronic, which work together to produce policies, service and knowledge. Delivery of service and making and implementation of policies is

increasingly spread across various levels of government. Managing across levels of government is an increasingly important aspect of network management (Wolf, 2004).

As has been pointed out one of the basic objectives of e-governance is to make the government organizations flatter and leaner to ensure quicker decision making to respond faster to emerging situations and be productive and reliable. In many developing economies it is observed that the policies made by different sections or agencies of the government fail to gel with each other in the first go and therefore create confusions initially among the citizens. The e-governance model is likely to help achieve accountability of individuals and their post execution verification by the apex policy-making body of the government. A comparison between required attributes and the attribute of the present day processes would give the reformers an indication of what they should do to bring the necessary change (Gupta et al., 2004).

Among the prerequisites for e-governance is the requirement of achieving effective coordination in a dynamic environment, where authority, responsibility and among people are distributed. It involves a major organizational transformation. It brings changes of the types that are technology driven but which cover wider aspects of organization such as coping with new organizational structures and skills, new forms of leadership, and perhaps even a redefinition of purpose (Ibid).

A third requisite is to redefine administration's social technologies in order to remain relevant to a more participative more interactive and more informational era. A radical and effective reform becomes a necessity to prepare the government capable of adapting changes, which is not an easy task, because there are resistances at all levels. A strong leadership is needed with vision and commitment to spearhead reforms towards e-governance (Ibid).

Fourthly, in many democratic developing countries, the model of e-government will at least put a pressure on political parties to give priorities to an issue which is more important for well being of its citizens than meeting the narrow political objectives of the political parties. This is so because e-governance will make the decision-making process transparent as well as make government information accessible to the public (Ibid).

Perhaps the most important challenge for the construction of an efficient e-government is the management and funding of information technology. This includes recruitment of qualified workers, their retention and compensation. Employee empowerment and training of employees at all levels of organization is the precondition to introduce the new technologies. Insisting on the computer literacy is the need of hour at all levels of government. The most important performance criteria for computerization of administration would be levels of public

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