

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF E-GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

E-governance is about delivering improved services to citizens, businesses and other members of the society through drastically changing the way governments manage information. In the framework, E-governance is defined as a great application of ICT to get a better governance and develop a healthy communication between the government and various parts of the society. The purpose of this paper is to explore E-governance in Rajasthan. However, it's a typical task to explore integrated E-governance in Rajasthan, but this paper will try to represent every aspect of E-governance of Rajasthan in a summarized manner. The government of Rajasthan is taking E-governance as a key resource to develop a paperless model of administration. The state government is attempting to leverage information-technology not only as a tool for improving governance and employment opportunities, but more significantly as a means to enhance the quality of life and bridging the socio-economic divide in the state and level out the skewed development in state.

Introduction

E-governance is the commitment to utilize appropriate technologies to enhance governmental relationships, both internal and external, in order to advance democratic expression, human dignity and autonomy, support economic development and encourage the fair and efficient delivery of services. E-governance offers a large opportunity for serving the citizens in a better way. Information Communication and Technology (ICT) promises lots of advantage in governance process but at the same time require a change in process, building infrastructure, capacity enhancement etc. E-governance is about delivering improved services to citizens, businesses and other members of the society through drastically changing the way governments manage information. In the framework, E-governance is defined as a great application of ICT to get a better governance and develop a healthy communication between the government and various

parts of the society. The purpose of this paper is to explore E-governance in Rajasthan. However, it's a typical task to explore integrated E-governance in Rajasthan, but this paper will try to represent every aspect of E-governance of Rajasthan in a summarized manner.

Rajasthan is a progressive state of India. A large number of planning projects are being implemented through E-governance initiatives. Due to some critical problems like incomplete awareness, limited resources, weak infrastructure, lack of ICT knowledge etc. it is very difficult to implement E-governance projects successfully.

The concept of E-governance

E-governance or electronic governance refers to the use of information and communication technology to provide and improve government services making possible real-time transactions and exchange of

information. Internet has become the most visible arm of E-governance in the countries across the world, India being no exception. It is helped by modern means of communications and processing such as cellphones, laptops and fax machines to name a few.

The online passenger reservation system of the Indian Railways has become a shining example of E-ticketing across the country including Rajasthan. Last year, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh set up the National Knowledge Commission and the Unique Identification Authority of India, to usher in a new platform of E-governance in the country.

With internet accessible on the mobile phones and laptops the governments are in a position to take decisions even on the move. E-governance has evolved over the years with the improvement in communication technology and the advancement in the internet and communication technology.

Decisions made at a gram panchayat can be relayed across the state live with the help of modern means of communication. The high-end technology has now made it possible for the government to monitor the public issues and address their grievances from the district and state headquarters through live video-conferencing with officials and elected representatives in the villages.

E-governance in Rajasthan

Genesis

Rajasthan Government under the previous Chief Minister, Vasundhara Raje has taken various measures in introducing IT in various departments of the state. The people of Rajasthan are the prime priority for the government and the state is committed to provide them with better governance. The idea is of SMART (Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent) governance.

In the last one year fast inroads have been made in the area of expansion of E-mitra project, Rajasthan State Wide Area Network (RSWAN) local area

network in Secretariat (SecLAN), creation of State Data Centre (SDC) and projects have been initiated with a view to implement the E-governance system effectively. Computerization of procedures in different departments are also being done for E-governance.

Projects are in progress in all sectors which are directly associated with common man like the Revenue, Police, Medical and Health, Education, Power and PHED departments. The common man is also being provided respite and facilitating environment through Lok Mitra services. Decision has also been taken to set up knowledge corridor and knowledge park with a view to promote investment in information and technology sector in the state.

Computer education is being imparted in schools and colleges and more and more I.T. institutes are being opened in the State. Similarly, Information technology is adding new dimensions in technical education and the state is taking new strides in optical fiber communication. Leading companies of business processing outsourcing industry (B.P.O.) are looking into Rajasthan for investment. The State Government is also providing land on concessional basis on services connected with Information technology.

In Rajasthan, the Lok-Mitra kiosks became the first successful model of E-governance in which the people were involved directly. Until then, the E-governance was mostly limited to the exchange of information or procurement of goods and contracts within the government departments and their sister concerns.

The Lok-Mitra was first introduced in Jaipur in 2002. It offered the people a centralised solution to bill payments which was until then done only at the departments where the bills were generated. For instance, a person would have to reach the BSNL office in his area to pay the monthly phone bill. The huge number of consumers meant a long wait in the queue.

But, Lok-Mitra changed the concept and billing centres connected with internet were established throughout the city. Now, a consumer can pay utility bills like electricity bills, telephone bills, water bills at any of the Lok Mitra outlets in the city. Lok Mitra is now successfully running in Ajmer, Bikaner and Udaipur also.

E-governance now extends to a whole new dimension. The governments are procuring services and issuing contracts online. Tender process for sanctioning of works in government departments is being carried out online.

New services have been added to the delivery system based on the internet. People can now download the lease deeds for their land or the revenue map of their area from an E-kiosk at the village. They need not go to the district collectorate to collect the records.

The Price Water House Coopers has identified four basic requirements for successful implementation of E-governance in Rajasthan: citizen centric service delivery, backend computerization, IT infrastructure creation and Human Resource Development.

Services

IAS officer Rohit Kumar Singh who was involved with the development of the IT infrastructure in Rajasthan says that the Unique Identification, UID, being introduced by the union government is the first serious attempt to integrate the delivery of various developmental initiatives of the government. The UID will provide a unique identification number to every citizen of India like a PAN number which will be used for all online transactions, tax deposits, bill payments, social security deposits among others.

Rajasthan, unlike the rest of the country, thrives on tourism industry. Every third foreign tourist landing in India arrives in the state. A robust E-governance system assists in boosting the tourism products as well as enhances the goodwill of the state in the foreign countries where delivery of services is based on a technologically advanced IT-enabled platform.

For example, a tourist arriving in the state can now book his stay at any of the hotels owned by the Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation. Just as a person books a railway ticket from anywhere in India similarly a tourist in France can book a hotel room in Jaipur or Ranthambhore online and pay for his accommodation.

Similarly, the Palace on Wheels, the luxury train operated by the state government has tourist bookings till 2012. How? Simply by going on the Rajasthan tourism website which provides online booking services for tourists.

Among the major services which are planned in the pipeline in state are: digitalising the employment exchange, collection of taxes particularly Value Added Tax and other commercial taxes, agriculture marketing for farmers, registration of properties online and classification of land records in the cities and in villages.

The district collectors have already started mapping the digital records of the revenue land under their jurisdiction in the state. In near future it would be possible for a farmer in Chaksu to download a detailed revenue record of a land from a E-mitra centre without having to check the records at the tehsildar's office or at the district collector in Jaipur.

In the study it came out that the revenue earning departments like the commercial taxes, excise, stamps and registration are computerised to a great extent.

The land development agencies like the Jaipur Development Authority, the Rajasthan Housing Board and the local municipalities have already initiated a number of important E-governance initiatives. The www.jaipurjda.org and the www.jaipurmc.org are some of the initiatives that offer the people online redressal system, information on their new projects and the fiscal spending on Jaipur city.

These departments have been equipped with informative web sites, downloadable forms, procedures and timelines for procuring services on the internet.

Some of the government departments which have been funding infrastructure works, like the Rajasthan Urban Infrastructure Development Project, RUIDP, have adopted the process of E-procurement to purchase, supply and order sales of equipment and services online.

E-governance Challenges

"E-governance is not really the use of IT in governance, but as a tool to ensure good governance. E-governance does not mean proliferation of computers and accessories; it is basically a political decision, which calls for discipline, attitudinal change in officers and employees, and massive government process re-engineering," Ravi Kant (Special Secretary, IT, Govt of West Bengal) on the functional role of electronic governance or paperless governance.

All implementers and drivers of E-governance initiatives agree that the biggest challenge of deploying E-governance is not technology but change management. Change management is important not only in terms of cultural change but also in terms of changing operations and processes workflow that the automated environment will introduce.

"It's important to educate people at all levels about the benefits of technology. The various benefits and advantages of E-enabling the system should be communicated clearly right at the beginning to ensure popular support which will lead to greater chances of success," explains Dr G D Gautama, Secretary, IT, Government of West Bengal.

It is important to explain to people that the introduction of IT will not take away existing jobs but will make them easier, and if less manpower is required for operations the staff can be deployed

elsewhere with no threat to their career growth path.

The key challenges with electronic governance are not technology or internet issues but organisational issues like redefining rules and procedures, information transparency, legal issues, infrastructure, skill and awareness. Other obstacles are geographical distances, lack of trained human resources, and lack of ICT penetration in remote areas. For instance, a good E-governance application will not benefit anybody in remote areas if there is no supporting infrastructure such as electricity, computers and connectivity. Many pilots have been successfully implemented in almost all areas of E-governance, but, says Ravi Kant, "Rather than having an obsession to undertake pilot projects, we should capitalise on the existing successful examples in the country and customise them for our use."

The challenges of connectivity have also reduced over the years with the falling prices of bandwidth and increased reach of connectivity service providers. Major VSAT service providers already have established large footprints in India, and telecom service providers have stepped up their leased line offerings even in previously unrepresented territories.

Many state governments have developed state wide area networks (SWANs), customised applications, and data banks. But the interconnectivity of the servers is an issue which calls for the establishment of state data centres. The NIC, which is promoting E-governance in the country, has established VSAT connectivity in all the districts of the country. There remain however issues such as standardisation, interoperability, security, and propriety vs. open source.

The other set of challenges lie in extending the reach of E-governance services to 70% of Indian population that lives in villages. These include:

- Assessment of local needs and customizing E-governance solutions to meet those needs
- Connectivity
- Content (local content based on local language)

- Building human capacities
- E-Commerce
- Sustainability
- E-governance and challenges specific to India

We list down some of the challenges, which are specific to India - (Some of the inputs are taken from an officer from NIC).

Lack of Integrated Services: Most of the E-governance Services being offered by state or central governments are not integrated. This can mainly be attributed to lack of communication between different departments. So the information that resides with one department has no or little meaning to some other department of Government.

Lack of Key Persons: E-Governance projects lack key persons, not only from technological aspect, but from other aspects as well.

Population: This is probably the biggest challenge. Apart from being an asset to the country it offers some unique issues, an important one being: establishing 'person identities'. There is no unique identity of a person in India. Apart from this, measuring the population, keeping the database of all Indian nationals (and keeping it updated) are some other related challenges.

Different Languages: A challenge due to the diversity of the country. It enforces need to do governance (upto certain level), in local languages. Ensuring E-Governance in local language is a big task to achieve.

According to an officer from NIC, the success factor of E-Gov projects depends on:

- 10% Technology
- 60% Process
- 20% Change Management
- And the rest is luck

New information and communication technologies can make E-governance efficient and more effective,

and bring other benefits too. This paper outlines the three main contributions of E-governance: improving government processes (E-administration); connecting citizens (E-citizens and E-services); and building external interactions (E-society). Case studies are used to show that E-governance is a current, not just future reality for developing countries. However, most E-governance initiatives fail. Countries therefore face two challenges. First, the strategic challenge of E-readiness is preparing six identified pre-conditions for E-governance. Second, the tactical challenge of closing design-reality gaps is adopting best practice in E-governance projects in order to avoid failure.

“The purpose of implementing E-governance is to enhance and to achieve success. A vision for change is therefore outlined of which more details are given in a related good governance. Good governance is generally characterised by participation, transparency and accountability. The recent advances in communication technologies and the Internet provide opportunities to transform the relationship between governments and citizens in a new way, thus contributing to the achievement of good governance goals.”

– The UNESCO

A future perspective

In the budget for 2009-10, the Rajasthan government decided that 3 per cent of total financial allocation to every department will be spent on strengthening the infrastructure for electronic-governance. It was a simple decision that reflected on a policy shift within the government to improve its delivery of services through information technology.

As Neil Armstrong had once said that a small step (on the moon) is a giant leap for mankind, on a similar note, the dedicated spending on E-governance in the state budget shows the commitment of the government towards transparency in public dealings while recognising the urgency of building a platform of administration where services can be delivered and decisions taken 24X7, all round the year.

More recently, Rajasthan became the first state in the country where the government departments will reply online to questions raised by public representatives inside the Vidhan Sabha (State Assembly). Until, now the bureaucrats in government department. Several times there was a delay in response and sometimes the questions were never answered.

But, with the implementation of online answering system the government has extended the E-governance facility in state. It also empowers the people because answers given by government to questions raised by MLAs will be made public on the website so that people may know about the status of schools, water supply, construction of roads and electricity connections in their area, at the click of a mouse.

Ideally, this is a more transparent mode of governance while it also strengthens the Right to Information Act in the state. It also signifies the transformation in E-governance since the beginning of the new millennium.

The state government has recently provided laptops to all the MLAs and the ministers in the cabinet to enable them to take decisions even if on the move because the delivery of services and facilitating of business with the people should be possible without the consumer having to physically go to the offices.

The government is now encouraging public private partnerships (PPP) in the field of IT investments. E-mitra and Lok Mitra are examples of flowering PPP in the state. The private models can function better to provide services to the people.

“This is the start of a journey and we expect resistance. But people are open and receptive to change. We see a better climate for change now than 20 years ago,”

– Sam Pitroda, Chairman, National Knowledge Commission

Conclusion

The government of Rajasthan is taking E-governance as a key resource to develop a paperless model of administration. The state government is attempting to leverage information-technology not only as a tool for improving governance and employment opportunities, but more significantly as a means to enhance the quality of life and bridging the socio-economic divide in the state and level out the skewed development in state.

The government has made its intent to pursue an enhanced technological platform for administration in state by allocating three per cent of the state budget to engineer a model of E-governance in all functioning departments. IT experts, government officials and the stakeholders of social sector are unanimous in their belief that E-governance can be effectively employed is a tool to counter corrupt measures and bolster the idea of a transparent government.

The barometer to gauge successful implementation of any project is the ability of the scheme to reach out to the people. E-governance, with its unlimited applications is the most suitable tool to achieve this end. Already, most government departments are uploading information pertaining to their policy initiatives and their implementation on their websites. The websites of the state finance department and the department of personnel exemplify how E-governance can provide ease of access to government information to the common man while reducing consumption of time and money.

Several state government services like the Rajasthan State Road Transport Corporation are employing IT initiatives like online ticketing for their bus services to increase revenue and plug losses. The government is already 'practicing' E-Commerce to carry out major infrastructure projects through its agencies. For instance, the Rajasthan Urban Infrastructure Development Project, a government agency that executes Asian Development Bank projects in state

sanctions contracts online through E-tendering process.

Where the government is trying to weave technology into administration for effective governance, it faces limitations like lack of trained manpower, dedicated

delivery system and core infrastructure that are restricting its initiatives from flowering into full potential. It is now time for the government to tie up the loose ends and take E-governance to the next level where it can harness its power to benefit the people and streamline administration.

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