Communication Model for Promoting e-Governance Through the Right to Information (RTI) Act in India

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Abstract: Public administration through the conventional method of governance with bureaucratic structures built on the rationale principles which was dominated in the twentieth century has failed to respond to the changing requirements of the present times. e-Governance which is a paradigm shift from the traditional approaches in public administration, renders government's services and information to the public using electronic means. The new pattern has brought about a revolution in the quality of service delivered to the citizens. It has helped in transparency in the governing process; saving of time due to provision of services through single window; simplification of procedures; better office and record management; reduction in corruption and improved attitude, behavior and job handling capacity of the dealing personnel. (doitc.wordpress.com). The concept of electronic governance popularly called e-Governance Singh will help to serve well than any another concept. Right to Information Act (RTI) 2005 enables timely response to citizen requests for information on public affairs. This Act has given people the right to actually participate in governance. With the help of this Act, common citizens are empowered to know the political and actions of the government. RTI and e-Governance can be made effective if a model of communication flow is derived. Indian government has already taken initiative for publishing the updates on RTI on every department and institution websites. When people could communicate to the authorities for obtaining information using e-Technology, the purpose of e-Governance can be fulfilled.

Key words: e-Governance, right to information, communication model, window, India

INTRODUCTION

India has been reaping the benefits provided by the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to provide integrated governance, reach to the citizens faster, provide efficient services and citizen empowerment through access to information. The aim is to redefine governance in the IICT age to provide smart governance. Several significant initiatives have been taken at the centre and the state level in this direction (Indiaegovernance.blogspot.in).

For effective implementation of e-Governance, the government must equip the nation with infrastructure, computerization and being on digital mode is extensively carried on by every government department and they should also promote infrastructure like Internet cafes, information and interactive Kiosks. Apart from building technical infrastructure, the government needs to build its institutional capacity. This can be achieved by training of government employees and appointment of experts. For better implementation of e-Governance, the government will need to frame laws which will fully incorporate the established as well as emerging technology. Changing technology has changed many pre-established notions; similarly the technology is growing and changing rapidly. It is important that the government makes laws which incorporate the current technology and has enough space to incorporate the changing technology (indiaegovernance.blogspot.in).

Good patronage of any such system would require training of civil servants and provision of incentives to reform. There are many factors, e.g., class, race, ethnicity, geography, etc. which can severally or interactively, disenfranchise the disadvantaged sections/groups. The digital divide is the chasm between those who have internet access and those who have not (shaktishaliawaaz.blogspot.in). The have not's can not learn essential computer skills and cannot have benefits of e-Governance. e-Government must address this digital divide by working towards the bridging of this gap.

Bridging the digital divide entails much more than merely addressing the race, caste and class issues. If such a technology programmes has to succeed then it must attempt to create new opportunities for the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, particularly the women, the aged and the most downtrodden people who are traditionally

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Table 1: Readiness of Indian government

Government programs promoting use of ICT	Worldwide ranking (out of 134)
Government success in ICT promotion	23
Availability of Govt. services online	49
ICT use and Govt. efficiency	33
Presence of ICT in Govt. offices	67
e-Participation index (quality, usefulness, relevance)	47

World Economic Forum, Executive Opinion Survey (2007, 2008)

isolated from the government programmes (shaktishaliawaaz.blogspot.com). There are a few successful e-Governance projects in India. Their characteristics show the development of e-Governance is significant. The readiness of Indian government improves the acceptance of e-Governance in India (Table 1).

RTI-Act of India is considered as one of the most advanced freedom of information legislations in the world. The common factor of masses is that they are ignorant about how the government decisions are made. This lack of transparency acts as a barrier which prevents the masses not only from actively participating in the governmental functioning but also from raising questions and protecting from impaired or ill-advised decisions. Non-transparency also promotes and disguises official graft and favouritism. It is where the e-Governance can play an essential role in bringing the governmental policy and processes to light. Government transparency should be embedded in the decisions of all ICT Systems. For example, official corruption can be reduced by re-organizing activities such as licensing, giving permit, etc. and creating an Online Monitoring System to track each application whereby officials could be identified and held personally accountable for any action or inaction at any stage. It was felt that highly-placed public officials can accelerate transparency and accountability efforts by making their offices positive examples of openness. While putting services online, citizens should be given the ability to track the status of their applications.

e-Governance in the context of Right to Information Act (RTI) is nothing but the systematic approach for communicating with the people. This study discusses how it can be achieved by adopting a communication model and integrating the e-Governance model for the effective usage of RTI.

LITERATURE REVIEW

e-Governance: Bhatnagar (2003) in his study on 'Transparency and Corruption: Does e-Government help?' says that the term e-Government is defined as the use of emerging ICTs like internet, World Wide Web and mobile phones to deliver information and services to citizens and businesses. Information about any institution is published on its web site and citizens can interact with the site to download application forms for a variety of services. On a broader usage the ICT is widely used in service such as filing a tax return, renewing a license, etc. More sophisticated applications include processing on-line payments.

By understanding the definition of e-Government, it is necessary for us to understand the existing paradigm of e-Governance in India. This was discussed by Das and Chandrashekhar (2007) in their study on 'Capacity Building for e-Governance in India', according to them India is a land of diversity. This diversity spans across culture, tradition, language, geography and the economic condition of the people. This nation has a substantial number of people who are below the minimal socioeconomic benchmarks which includes rural and urban poor, women in rural areas, street children, people belonging to historically disadvantaged castes and people living in less developed areas. The liability of these sections of society has increased with globalization and this section is prone to become even more marginalized-economically and socially.

While Das and Chandrasekar discuss on how one needs to carter the e-Governance by understanding different type of people in the country, Shah (2007) in her article on "e-Governance in India: Dream or reality?" analysed the challenges faced in the implementation of e-Governance. She says that it is a big challenge and a far big opportunity to bring services to all citizens. The e-Government is made successful with two significant characteristics such as quality and accessibility. The issue (cost, time) of integration of legacy systems comes onto the scene. As the information collected by governments may be politically sensitive, installation of appropriate security mechanisms may be an important technical consideration. At the same time, many other policy issues need to be resolved such as authentication and confidentiality.

e-Governance and corruption: India's ex-chief vigilance commissioner N Vittal in his article on "Musings on Governance, Governing and Corruption" suggested a three-point formula to combat corruption. His three points are simplification of rules and procedures, greater transparency and empowerment of public and effective punishment to the corrupt.

While Vittal is clear in saying greater transparency will combat corruption, Yisheng comments that it is the honesty and integrity that e-Governance provides. He

also added that e-Governance helps prevent corruption and uphold integrity in public administration and overall helps to promote democracy and rule of law. When researchers get an idea to combat corruption, a research survey conducted by Center for Media Studies in which 4500 citizens from five metros such as Hyderabad, Delhi. Mumbai, Calcutta and Chennai show that e-Governance has brought down corruption in India. The study covered the basic services, electricity, municipal corporations, urban development, transport, civil supplies, hospitals, water supply and railways. According to this report, in Hyderabad where e-Seva centers are operational, the presence of middlemen and corruption has declined from 63% in 2000-27% in 2004. In Kolkata and Chennai, the corruption has come down to 19 and 18% compared to 51 and 38% in 2000, respectively. In Mumbai the corruption level remained static and in Delhi the corruption spurted from 40-49%. The reasons for decline in corruption in Hyderabad, Kolkata and Chennai were attributed to the successful functioning of e-Governance projects (Economic Times, 2004).

While Bhatnager (2004) analysed several case studies of e-Government applications from developing countries report some impact on reducing corruption. Many governments have chosen to go on-line in departments such as customs, income tax, sales tax and property tax which have a large interface with citizens or businesses and are perceived to be more corrupt.

e-Governance and Right to Information Act: Gurstein and Singh (2006) in their article on '"Bottom Up" Perspectives on ICTs and the Right to Information' says that in India, there is the additional issue that if the RTI were to be fully executed it is likely that the current governance system would be unable to cope. The scope of RTI is enormous and its potential impact is very substantial, given the very high cost of servicing even a single request for information. Digital technologies which provide the means for very low cost publishing and information distribution are quite evidently the necessary supports for the RTI and without them the promise of any RTI law or similar ascribed right cannot be optimised. The costs of e-Governance, i.e., broadly, digitising records and processes though expensive has to be seen in the context of the overall cost of government and particularly for the Indian governments which runs a quite expensive establishment. This establishment however is one with low levels of efficiency and high levels of wastage and one which would almost certainly be very positively impacted through the widespread introduction of ICTs. While the above study explains the potential usage of ICT

in RTI and e-Governance, Singh (2010) in her study on "Promoting e-Governance through Right to Information: A case-study of India" described the existing practice of e-Governance enabled by RTI. In the first phase e-governance is marked by web presence of public institutions and dissemination of information. This will be expedited by the Right to Information Act 2005 (RTI) and this has been developed as a basic feature of all public services where type of service and service provider details are made available in a practical manner. This information is also being combined for citizen access through the National and State Portals which provide basic information on government programmes and services. Web presence can range from basic and static information to access databases, documents, policies, etc. with the aid of help features and site map.

COMMUNICATION MODEL

There are many communication model derived by the media experts for effective transmission of message. The pioneers in the field of communication designed several model such as Shannon and Weaver, Osgood and Schramm, Gerbner, Continous innovation loop, Newcomb, McLeod and Chaffee, Cuilenburg and Noomen, Rogers and Kincaid, Westley and MacLean, Maletzke, DeFleur, Katz and Lazerfield, Comstock, Rogers, Ferdinand de Saussure, Galtung and Ruge, Peirce. Out of these models the most suitable for implementing e-Governance is the continuous innovation loop model (Fig. 1).

The continuous innovation loop says that the message is the core idea a sender wants to communicate. The sender should carefully decide upon the precise message that he wants to communicate and its purpose.

He should take into consideration the context of his communication and the attitude of the receiver. Based on these factors, the sender should choose the code and the medium for transmitting the code. The receiver should be familiar with the code and be competent to access the medium of transmission. The sender cannot e-mail a message to a receiver who is not computer savvy nor can he write a letter to an illiterate. The choice of the medium also depends on the urgency of the message. If the sender wants an urgent feedback, he should choose the oral medium. It is impossible to write long memos or letters to a workman on the shop-floor. Instead a face to face meeting with brief instructions will produce the desired results.
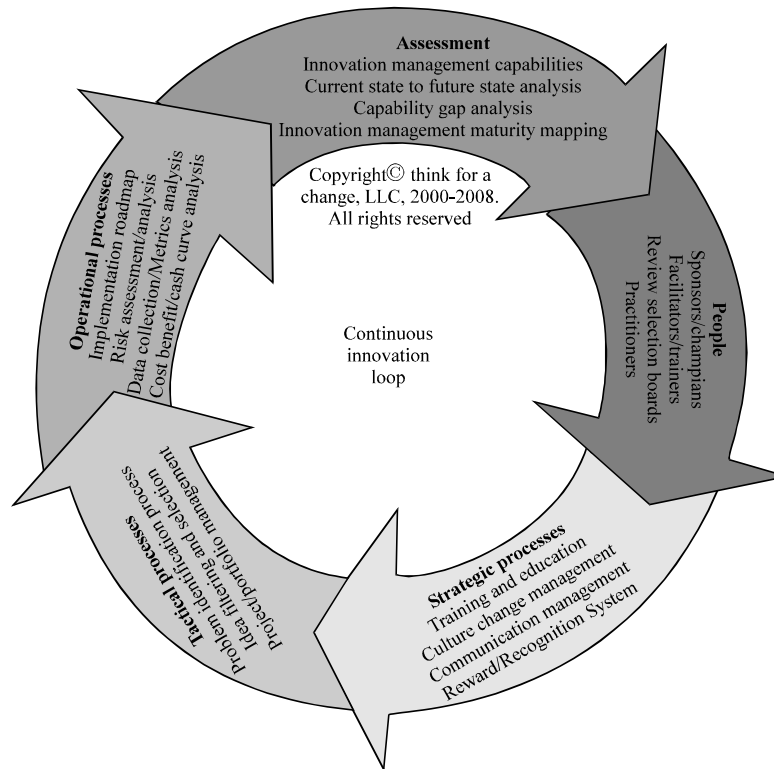
Fig. 1: Continuous innovation loop model

E-GOVERNANCE MODEL USING CONTINUOUS INNOVATION LOOP

The easiest way in which everyone in India could approach is through mobile. This model uses the medium as the mobile phone as everyone in the country possesses a mobile phone. That is why the system of booking gas compulsorily moved to mobiles from landlines and other modes. This model suggests that a similar way could be adopted to file RTI on the mobile. A mobile phone can be an access point for users to make calls to a call center run by the government for filing right to information. Push down SMS from a central server to reach registered users who seek specific alerts/information. There exist two way interactions using an SMS service to enquire and receive responses from a Government agency. A mobile can replace the internet access point for delivering services in an assisted mode to clients. In such an example the mobile functions as a computing and data communication device. The model thus obtained is seen in Fig. 2.

Currently, the process of filing RTI application is done by writing a request letter to the concerned Public Information Officer (PIO) with a court stamp fee or postal order of ten rupees. This is a time consuming process hence there are chances of the delay in delivering the post
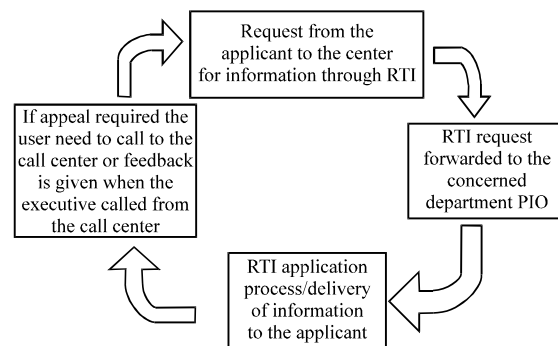

Fig. 2: The communication model for e-Governance through RTI

to the applicant. This proposed model uses technology of Internet or telephone for the process which is instantaneous and effective than the existing method. Since, the technology of internet and telephone can be used by all the PIOs this model can be made easy to file the request to the PIOs as the call centre executives can forward the request to them and they can give the applicant a request number for further reference. Also, tracking of the filing can be done by the applicant since he/she can call to the call center number to know the status of the application.
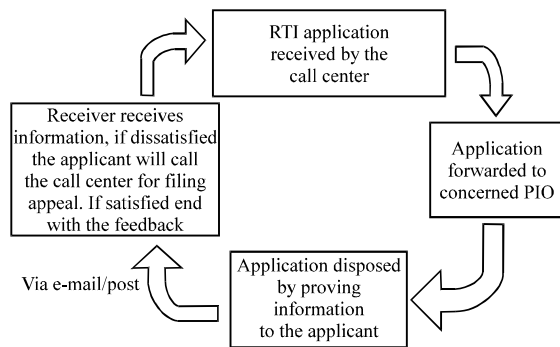
Fig. 3: Processing of RTI application

Once the request is obtained by the PIO and he despatches the request, this can be intimated to the user via SMS so that the applicant can know that he is going to receive the information. If the applicant provides his e-mail id the information can even be sent to him on the e-mail since the information are made available on digital format now and this is the cost effective mode.

When the applicant has no access to Internet, the information needs to be sent as hard copy by post. On receiving conformation from the postal service that the information is given to the applicant, the call center executives may call the applicant and get the feedback of the process and complete the job. If the applicant is dissatisfied and he wants to go for an appeal the call center executive may help the applicant in providing information on how to file the appeal and help the applicant to move the request further from Fig. 2, it is found that the process keeps goings on a continuous loop and takes the concept of continuous loop model of communication.

Figure 3 explains the process of providing information to the applicant which starts from the call center executive forwarding the request to the concerned PIO via Internet. The PIO will take the necessary information as per the request and he either provide the information on e-mail to the applicant or the copy of information is taken and sent via post and the necessary charges of taking print may be collected at the time of delivery. On receiving the information if the applicant is satisfied with the information, he may give a feedback

through SMS to the toll free number. If the information is not satisfactory, the applicant may call again to the call center number to make an appeal.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating new processes built around the appropriate and effective use of the new ICTs, both at the government end and at the community end is absolutely essential for this purpose and overall for achieving good governance at both the local and the national levels. The RTI is widely accepted to be very progressive and carries the means to build a popular movement for re-claiming and reenabling the institutions of citizen based governance and real democracy. From this study, it is found that the model is best suited for implementing e-Governance in India.

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