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TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL INDIA THROUGH E-PANCHAYAT

Abstract

India is a country of villages. According to Census, 2011 there are more than 6 lakh villages in India. And for the development of these villages the Indian government has launched Gram Panchayat. The Panchayat is an elected village council in India. The word Panchayat means "assembly" (ayat) of five "panch" and raj means "rule". Traditionally these assemblies settled disputes between individuals and between villages. But now to improve the quality of governance of these villages the Panchayati Raj Institutions has initiated the e-governance scheme known as E-Panchayat. E-Panchayat is a functional and dynamic digital platform and working station designed and created for each Panchayat. The Information and communication technologies play an important role in rural development. So, E-Panchayatis is the need of the hour to improve the governance. In this regard, the present paper discusses the overview of the E-panchayat and its role in rural development. The paper also highlights the major strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of E-Panchayat in India. And throw light on the major challenges faced in implementation of E- Panchayats in India.

Key Words : Panchayat, Rural, ICT, E-Panchayat

Introduction

The Information Technology plays an important role in rural development. So E-Panchayat is a need of the present scenario. The E-panchayat system is web-based and functions like an Application Service provider enabling digital services for all the stakeholders of Panchayat level. The citizens, representatives, gram-Panchayat officials, the government and the knowledge workers are the different stakeholders in this system. In this regard in 2002 the Government of India declared a comprehensive program to improve efficiency, transparency and accountability for effective government-citizen interface.

In India, 70% of the population lives in village and rural parts of the country in this regard it becomes important to utilize such tools for their social, economic, administrative and effective governance. After identifying the necessity of e-Governance, the Government of India has introduced various administrative reforms and initiated many interventions under policy level and at institutional level. In India the National Internet Exchange of India (NIXI) and the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) has initiated and put forward the concept of Digital Panchayat (DP) programme. The meaning of Digital Panchayat is a web-based dynamic digital interface created for each and every Panchayat in India, for providing information about particular Panchayat. The objectives are to facilitate and improve the functioning of Panchayat by two-way flow of information and content. The web portal

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would will act as a information and communication platform to showcase local content, culture, best practices, advocate local issues, e-Commerce to the villages under the panchayat system in India.

History of Panchayat in India

The term Panchayat means an assembly of five people elected by the villagers. The Panchayati Raj is a system and process of governance in the country. The term Panchayati Raj was coined by Jawaharlal Nehru and it came into existence in 1958. The major objective in establishing this system was to build democracy to the village level, by assigning powers to the local people. Among all the states of the country Rajasthan was the first state to adopt Panchayat Raj in 1958.

Role of Information Technology in Panchayat

The E-Panchayati Raj aims to progressively support all the state governments and Panchayats in the country to make effective utilization of information technology in various activities. The important role of information technology in various activities of panchayats is as follows:

- To improve internal management processes and decision making in the panchayats.
- To assure that panchayats are using information technology as a tool for transparency, disclosure of services to citizens and for the purpose social audit.
- To enable that panchayats are delivering its directed services to the people through information technology.
- Also to ensure that panchayats are using information technology for electronic tagging and tracking of funds transferred to panchayats from higher level of governments.

E-panchayat Meaning

The E-Panchayat has been designed by government of India for taking into consideration all the information and knowledge management which are required in a Gram Panchayat. The E-

Panchayat means a web based dynamic digital interface which is created for each panchayat in India. The objective is to facilitate and improve Panchayat functioning on day-to-day basis, through two way flow of information and content (Jindal and Ojha, 2017). In India the first E-panchayat village was Ramchandrapuram near Hyderabad enabling village to settle disputes through web-enabled system.

Vision and Purpose of E-panchayat

The following vision and purpose have been identified as part of the strategy for e-Government:

Vision: Inclusive development of India through creation of shared and affordable e-service infrastructure and to facilitate e-delivery of public services in order to transform India into a truly developed and empowered society by 2020.

Purpose: To leverage Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in all aspects of governance including its internal business processes, external interfaces with the citizens and the businesses, for delivery of government services.

Implementation of E-panchayat

As the E-panchayat is developed in each village, it would be possible to know how government schemes are being implemented through the local bodies. To be integrated directly with Panchayats portals at state and national levels, it would provide complete data like infant mortality rate and maternal mortality rate, child enrolment at the primary level, status of rural infrastructure like roads, land development, rural electrification, community assets, woman and child development, drinking water supply, poverty alleviation programmes etc. (Jindal and Ojha, 2017).

Empowerment of Rural Through E-panchayat

The National e-Governance Plan was built with an objective to make government services accessible to the people through common service delivery outlets. Now, e-Panchayat, is a component of Mission Mode Projects (MMP), has been launched

by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. The project envisages empowering people in villages by improving governance at the third tier of government for rural local bodies at gram panchayats, block panchayats and district panchayats (Shashidharan, 2016).

The main aim of E-Panchayat is to transform panchayat functioning effectively by the application of cost effective integrated technological solutions to overcome the challenges faced by panchayats like inadequate physical infrastructure, poor human resources and poor power supply etc. and other issues like weak political, economic, and social power structures; and gender, age, caste, communal and other divisions.

In India states like Gujarat, West Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Goa have taken steps in implementation of Information technology at the panchayat level. The aim of E-Panchayat programmes is to ensure that all the citizens living in villages should participate in the decision-making process for the betterment of system. The E-Panchayat system must be able to integrate state and central software to enable effective monitoring, transparency, rule of law, and accountability to ensure effective functioning at nation level.

Swot Analysis of E-panchayat

An analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats with regard to the long term outcome goals and results of e-panchayat are as follows: (Jindal and Ojha, 2017)

Table 1 : SWOT Analysis of E-panchayat

Strengths	Weakness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experience of over 4 years of e-Governance project implementation and program management under NeGP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experience of over 4 years of e-Governance project implementation and program management under NeGP.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Widespread willingness to take up e-Governance initiatives within and outside governments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Widespread willingness to take up e-Governance initiatives within and outside governments.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manifold increase in the outreach of mobile telephony has opened up the possibility of utilizing these technologies as alternate channels for public service delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manifold increase in the outreach of mobile telephony has opened up the possibility of utilizing these technologies as alternate channels for public service delivery

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DIT has established a National e-Governance Division (NeGD) at the central level and several State e-Mission Teams (SeMTs) across various states/UTs. This institutional structure is already assisting the State IT Departments in planning, execution and project management of their e-Govprogrammes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DIT has established a National e-Governance Division (NeGD) at the central level and several State e-Mission Teams (SeMTs) across various states/UTs. This institutional structure is already assisting the State IT Departments in planning, execution and project management of their e-Govprogrammes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An increasing amount of funds are becoming available at the disposal of central and state government for carrying out e-Governance initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An increasing amount of funds are becoming available at the disposal of central and state government for carrying out e-Governance initiatives

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The cost of hardware is continuously decreasing. This will promote the growth of ICT at the grass root level. This growth can then be leveraged by the Government in providing public services to the citizen. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The manpower costs are continuously increasing.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low cost of mobile telephony is strengthening the outreach of mobile telephony at the rural level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The access cost for the broadband and other network access services need to come down. Without these the internet penetration levels may not increase and hence the real benefits of e-Governance will be difficult to realize.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A model for financial inclusion of the rural poor using mobile technology has already been approved by the Government. This model can now be implemented in order to take the banking and other government services to the citizen's door step. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In order to implement a uniform policy/framework, a consensus from a number of ministries / departments / external stakeholders is required. In the absence of such a consensus, the policy/framework may not get implemented.

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With the increased media coverage and multiple channels for awareness building, the expectations of citizens from the Government are very high. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low availability of local language content and delays in the project implementation may negate the expectations and affect acceptability.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The overall sphere of e-Governance is expanding at a fast pace and an increasing number of private sector players are showing interest in partnering with the Government. This will propel competition and will bring the necessary competencies to the Government. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contracting difficulties may scare away the private sector.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is an increasing amount of talent available in the private sector that can be utilized by the Government for building necessary capacities at various levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Computer and English Literacy has still not been picked up as part of school education curriculum in India, more so at the village level. The job opportunities at the rural level may therefore remain limited.

Source : Jindal and Ojha, 2017

Challenges in E-panchayat

The major challenges in the implementation of E-Panchayat system at village level are as follows:

- The Indian villages lack continuous supply of electricity. Also still the most of Indian rural households are still not connected with electricity.
- Also there is lack of literacy in rural areas and most of the village Panchayat representatives are not having computer knowledge.

There is lack of trained personnel in rural areas.

Another challenge is of content creation in local language and as there English is still not preferred language for communication.

- Lack of High Capacity Building
- In rural areas there is no backend support at all levels for making computerization of services operational.
- There is lack of Centralized decision support system (MIS) for monitoring the effective implementation and working of system in rural areas.
- There is lack of schemes and there is no way of taking informed decisions.
- The other challenges like lack of infrastructure etc. which are fundamentals for E-panchayat in rural India.
- The application of information and communication is considered as a political issue as it has the potential to change the socio-political dynamics of nation.

Action Taken by Indian Government

The Indian governments at both central and state levels is making effort to successfully implement information technology in rural areas by providing adequate infrastructure in rural areas to increase the capacity of Panchayats. Also in the Bharat Nirman Programme, the Government of India has emphasized in strengthening the connectivity and other basic facilities in rural areas

for overall upliftment. The another scheme implemented by ministry of power has introduced that aims to provide electricity in all villages so that all rural households can have access to electricity.

Conclusion

The Information Technology (IT) can play a very important role in strengthening the Indian gram panchayats leading to digitalization. The E-panchayat system aims to empower the rural people of every panchayat with complete information content. The E-panchayats also aims to improve the development and public service delivery at Panchayat level by providing information on policy programmes and implementation. As E-panchayat system could help in providing data on Panchayat working, budget allocation, developmental projects, names of office bearers, funds utilized and resource created etc. Also the internet services could revolutionize information sharing, governance, transparency and accountability of elected representatives at all levels. In the world of digitalization E-Panchayat system is the need of the hour as people in rural areas are still deprived of basic facilities for having better standard of living. So, they should be provided with adequate technological resources in order to be able to play a meaningful role in the course of development. But at present there are various challenges faced in implementation of E-panchayat system in rural areas in this regard effective measures need to be taken for overcoming the challenges faced in the implementation of E-Panchayat in India to strengthening the growth of rural society.

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