# 6. The Plausibility of E-Governance as a Public Service Delivery Mechanism in India

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## Abstract:

*Public administration is the backbone of the governance system of any nation. The rapid advancements in information and communication technologies and their incorporation in public administration have given rise to the practice of e-governance all over the world. E-governance is regarded as a crucial aspect of citizen-centric governance and has gradually evolved in India. In the due course of time it has acquired one of the centre stages in the programme of administrative reforms. It has come a long way in the country. Considering the need for having a national level plan for promoting e-governance and increasing public accessibility of all government services, the Government of India approved National e-Governance Plan in May 2006. Keeping in view the advantages accruing from use of information and communication technologies in governance process, the central and state governments have embarked upon numerous e-governance initiatives. The thrust on e-governance has increased with successive governments. Recognizing e-governance as one of the thrust areas, the Government of India launched its flagship programme Digital India in July 2015. State governments have their official websites and some of their projects have become popular among the masses in terms of service delivery. There is no doubt that wherever e-governance projects have been conceived, designed and implemented with due regard to the needs of the people there positive outcomes have been visible. However, it has to be acknowledged that most of the projects are facing multiple challenges which are reducing their success rate. A serious consideration must be given to all the issues which are hampering their efficiency. At the same time measures must be taken up to maintain the human face of these initiatives.*

## Key words:

*Public administration, e-governance, information and communication technologies, public service delivery, citizen-centric governance.*

# The Plausibility of E-Governance as a Public Service Delivery Mechanism in India

## Introduction:

Public administration is the backbone of the governance system of any nation. Public administrators, manning the public administration machinery, are viewed as the saviours of common men. Through their actions they actively work for transforming the quality of life of people. Since public administration is indispensable for efficient public service delivery so numerous reforms have been introduced in it from time to time for scaling up its capacity to withstand the intense hardships of real life and facilitate its smooth functioning. Developing the capability of public administrators has always remained a priority concern of all reform measures because unless and until public administrators are competent enough no robust governance system can be designed, developed and adopted.

Public service delivery basically involves downward, upward and lateral communication of its relevant facets to all concerned stakeholders. Public administration employs various facilitating mechanisms to improve the viability of communication networks of public service delivery system. Technology has always played a key role in this exercise. (ICTs) The rapid advancements in information and communication technologies and their incorporation in public administration have given rise to the practice of e-governance all over the world.

E-governance implies the use of information and communication technologies by government and public agencies for the purpose of carrying out public governance. E-governance is regarded as a crucial aspect of citizen-centric governance as it enables the government and public agencies to improve their citizen interface and enhance manifold the quality, dependability, reliability, delivery, perceptiveness and reach of their services. Further, its application paves the way for cooperative participative governance which makes it possible to forge close collaboration between public, private and voluntary sectors as well as with civil society. The increasing use of information and communication technologies in public governance enables the public authorities to meet the citizens' expectations in realistic manner and, thereby, bringing public administration closer to people.

The *Second Administrative Reforms Commission* in its Eleventh Report - *Promoting e-Governance, the SMART Way Forward* (2008) - has pertinently explained the significance of e-governance in the following words:

"The emergence of information and communications technology has provided means for faster and better communication, efficient storage, retrieval and processing of data, and exchange and utilization of information to its users, be they individuals, groups, businesses, organizations or governments. So far as governments are concerned, the coming together of computerization and increasing internet connectivity / web-enablement, in association with process re-engineering, promises faster and better processing of information leading to speedier and qualitatively better decision making, greater reach and accountability, better utilization of resources, and overall good governance. In case of citizens, it holds the promise of enhanced access to information and government agencies, efficient service delivery, and transparency in dealings and interactions with governments."[1]

## E-Governance in India:

E-governance has gradually evolved in the country. In the due course of time it has acquired one of the centre stages in the programme of administrative reforms. Need for more and more application of information and communication technologies in public governance was primarily felt to improve public service delivery mechanisms and make quality public services easily accessible to the people. It was realized over a period of time that there was a need to streamline administrative work procedures and information and communication technologies could be highly valuable aids in this regard. The widespread and fruitful growth of e-governance initiatives all over the world highly influenced its growth in the country. The emergence of world as a global village as well as the necessity of providing services in every nook and corner of the country made the need for seamless connectivity from global to local level an apparent requirement. E-governance has introduced e-centric dispensation in public governance and is, thus, leading to re-discovery of more sound and dependable work propositions.

E-governance has come a long way in India since the establishment of Department of Electronics by Government of India in 1970s. The department has evolved into a full-fledged Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. The ministry has three departments – Department of Electronics and Information Technology, Department of Posts, and Department of Telecommunications. The Department of Electronics and Information Technology has adopted the vision of e-development of India and the mission of promoting e-governance. To assist the department in realizing its vision and mission, it has National Informatics Centre, Standardization,

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[1] Second Administrative Reforms Commission, Government of India, New Delhi, December 2008, Eleventh Report, Promoting e-Governance, the SMART Way Forward, Chapter 2, page 7,
http://arc.gov.in/11threp/ARC_11thReport_Ch2.pdf

*Special issue on E-Government:*
**'Future of E-government: learning from the Past'**
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**ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)**
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Testing and Quality Certification, Unique Identification Authority of India as attached offices; National E-Governance Division as a division; and Centre for Development of Advanced Computing, Education and Research Network as autonomous institutions. The objectives of the department are to promote e-government, e-industry, e-innovation, e-learning, e-security, e-inclusion and internet governance.

Considering the need for having a national level plan for promoting e-governance and increasing public accessibility of all government services, the Government of India approved **National e-Governance Plan** in May 2006. The objective of this multi-stakeholder plan is to transform traditional processes and service delivery mechanisms, and create an environment that is citizen-centric with rights based approach to governance while making interaction with government easier, effective and transparent. It has expanded its reach to all strata of society especially at the grassroots. Plan's endeavor has been to improve the quality of life, by facilitating socio-economic development across the nation by giving access to crucial services and information in particular to the underserved population.[2] The *main elements* of the plan are: *common support infrastructure* comprising State Wide Area Networks, State Data Centres, Common Service Centres and Electronic Service Delivery Gateways; *suitable arrangements for monitoring and coordinating* the implementation of plan; *centralized initiative with decentralized implementation*; *public private partnerships*; adoption of *unique identification codes* for citizens, businesses and property as integrative elements; *programme approach* at national and state levels; facilitator role of Department of Electronics and Information Technology; and *ownership of ministries* in terms of mission mode projects.[3] National e-Governance Plan is implemented through *mission mode projects*. Each mission mode project is an individual project which directs attention on any one aspect of e-governance. The plan has centre, state and integrated mission mode projects.

**Table 1: Mission Mode Projects**

| Central Mission Mode Projects | State Mission Mode Projects | Integrated Mission Mode Projects |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Banking<br>2. Central Excise and Customs<br>3. E-Office<br>4. Immigration, Visa, and | 1. Agriculture<br>2. Commercial Taxes<br>3. E-District<br>4. Employment Exchange | 1. Common Service Centers<br>2. E-Biz<br>3. E-Courts |

[2] Department of Electronics and Information Technology, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, Government of India, New Delhi, Information Technology, Annual Report, 2010-11, page 16, http://www.mit.gov.in/sites/upload_files/dit/files/annualreport2010-11.pdf

[3] India.gov.in, National Portal of India, National e-Governance Plan, https://india.gov.in/e-governance/national-e-governance-plan

|  | | |
|---|---|---|
| Foreigners Registration and Tracking | 5. E-Panchayats | 4. Electronic Data Interchange for e-Trade |
| 5. Income Tax | 6. Municipalities | 5. India Portal |
| 6. Insurance | 7. Road Transport | 6. National e-Governance Service Delivery Gateway |
| 7. Ministry of Corporate Affairs 21 | 8. Treasuries Computerization | 7. E-Procurement |
| 8. Passport | 9. Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems | |
| 9. Pension | 10. National Land Records Modernization Programme | |
| 10. Post | 11. Health | |
| 11. Multi National Identity Cards / Unique Identification Authority | 12. Education | |
| | 13. Public Distribution System | |

*Source: National e-Governance Plan, Mission Mode Projects, http://www.negp.gov.in/Projects/Default.aspx*

Keeping in view the advantages accruing from use of information and communication technologies in governance process, the central and state governments have embarked upon numerous e-governance initiatives. The noteworthy initiatives at the central level are *India Development Gateway, National Portal of India, Government of India Web Directory, National Train Enquiry System, ERNET India, E-Post Office, National Knowledge Network, E-Visitor System, Aadhaar Enabled Bio-Metric Attendance System, Electronic Transaction Aggregation and Analysis Layer, Open Government Data Platform India, My Government,* and *Online Registration System.*

The thrust on e-governance has increased with successive governments and the present *Bharatiya Janata Party* government at the centre, led by Prime Minister *Narendra Modi*, in its *Lok Sabha Election Manifesto (2014)* made good governance and e-governance as high priority areas. Manifesto mentioned that e-governance would be the backbone for good governance and a digital India would be fostered for digital empowerment of every household and every individual. Prime Minister Narendra Modi regards that e-governance is the only effective way of transparent governance. Recognizing e-governance as one of the thrust areas, the Government of India launched its flagship programme *Digital India* on July 01, 2015. Its vision is to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. Digital India is an umbrella programme which applies to many ministries and departments. The programme has *three vision areas*, namely, *digital infrastructure* as a core utility to every citizen, *governance and services* on demand, and *digital empowerment* of citizens.

*Special issue on E-Government:*
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**ISSN 2347-6869 (E) & ISSN 2347-2146 (P)**
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### Table 2: Vision Areas of Digital India Programme

| Digital Infrastructure as a Core Utility to every Citizen | Governance and Services on Demand | Digital Empowerment of Citizens |
|---|---|---|
| ● Availability of high speed internet as a core utility for delivery of services to citizens.<br>● Cradle to grave digital identity that is unique, lifelong, online and authenticable to every citizen.<br>● Mobile phone and bank account enabling citizen participation in digital and financial space.<br>● Easy access to a common service centre.<br>● Shareable private space on a public cloud.<br>● Safe and secure cyber-space. | ● Seamlessly integrated services across departments or jurisdictions.<br>● Availability of services in real time from online and mobile platforms.<br>● All citizen entitlements to be portable and available on the cloud.<br>● Digitally transformed services for improving ease of doing business.<br>● Making financial transactions electronic and cashless.<br>●Leveraging Geospatial Information Systems for decision support systems and development. | ● Universal digital literacy.<br>● Universally accessible digital resources.<br>● Availability of digital resources/services in Indian languages.<br>● Collaborative digital platforms for participative governance.<br>● Citizens not required to physically submit government documents/certificates. |

*Source: Department of Electronics and Information Technology, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, Government of India, New Delhi, Digital India, http://www.digitalindia.gov.in/content/vision-and-vision-areas*

Digital India programme has *nine pillars* and these include *broadband highways*, universal access to *mobile connectivity*, *public internet access programme*, *e-governance*, *e-Kranti* – electronic delivery of services, *information for all*, *electronics manufacturing*, *information technology for jobs*, and *early harvest programmes*. The existing e-governance initiatives will be improved upon in an appropriate manner in order to associate them with the principles of the programme.

The state governments are also showing an interest in e-governance and are taking measures to make its more extensive use. State governments have their official websites which display all necessary information about the concerned state and provide useful links. Some projects of the state governments have become popular among the masses in terms of service delivery. These noteworthy projects include *Akshaya Project (Kerala), E-Gram – Vishvagram (Gujarat), Tele Samadhan (Madhya Pradesh), Lokvani (Uttar Pradesh),* and *Health Systems Project (Tamil Nadu). Panchayats* in states like Maharashtra, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Tripura, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh (now divided into Telangana and Seemandhra), Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim and Jharkhand have markedly adopted e-governance practices in performing their prescribed functions.

*Special issue on E-Government:*

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There is no doubt that wherever e-governance projects have been conceived, designed and implemented with due regard to the needs of the people there positive outcomes have been visible. These positive outcomes are in the form of providing user – friendly interface; bringing down transaction costs; ensuring availability of timely and reliable information to users; increasing government revenue; reducing red tape, delay and inconveniences; streamlining work procedures; improving decision making abilities; ensuring better coordination and communication; making public services more convenient and affordable; bringing government machinery to the doorsteps of people; saving time, money and effort; increasing accountability and transparency; and making development process more inclusive. However, notwithstanding the fact that even though definite gains have resulted from e-governance projects, it has to be acknowledged that most of the projects are facing multiple challenges coming from numerous quarters. These challenges are reducing their success rate.

## Challenges before E-Governance in India:

The public authorities have been vigorously championing the practice of e-governance in India for improving public service delivery. Despite numerous efforts taken at all levels only a small number of e-governance projects have been actually successful in the country. Many projects have proved to be either complete or partial failure. There are many technological and non-technological reasons for not so remarkable performance of projects.

The *eGovernment for Development Information Exchange* has provided a *Factor Model* which explains the causes of success and failure of e-governance projects. The critical failure factors in the model have been explained in the following table.

### Table 3: Critical Failure Factors

| Factor | Explanation |
|---|---|
| Lack of internal drivers | Pressures only from information technology vendors, with no internal ownership ( or understanding of e-government). |
| Lack of vision and strategy | Lack of any long-term view, lack of guidance, and lack of link between ends and means; may be caused by ever-shifting senior staff and / or ever-changing policy and political environment. |
| Poor Project Management | Dispersed responsibilities due to multiple ownership of project, absence or weakness of controls, ineffective procurement. |
| Poor change management | Lack of support from senior officials (causing lack of resource allocation, and negative message to other groups); lack of stakeholder involvement (causing lack of ownership). |
| Dominance of politics and self-interest | Focus of key players on personal needs and goals, often related to 'playing politics', with symptoms like infighting, resistance where loss of power is feared, 'me too' copying of e-government solutions for image purposes, obsession with electoral impacts and short-term kudos, and corruption. |

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| Poor/unrealistic design | Caused particularly by lack of inputs from key local stakeholders, leading to designs that are over-technical, over-ambitious, or mismatched to local environment (culture, values) and needs; occurs particularly where foreign donors, firms and consultants are involved. Other design problems: lack of piloting, lack of fit to organizational structure. |
|---|---|
| Lack of requisite competencies | Lack of information technology knowledge and skills among developers, officials and users / operators; lack of local knowledge among developers. |
| Inadequate technological infrastructure | Lack of sufficient computers or networks |
| Technological incompatibilities | Inability of computerized systems to interchange data. |

*Source: eGovernment for Development, Success and Failure in eGovernment Projects, Evaluation, Causes of eGovernment Success and Failure: Factor Model,*
http://www.egov4dev.org/success/evaluation/factormodel.shtml

Taking into consideration the failure factors provided in the factor model, the specific reasons which pose enormous challenges before e-governance in the country are:

- The officials sitting on key decision-making positions do not display a genuine urge to reform public governance system by duly applying information and communication technologies. The required support from these officials is not easily forthcoming. As a result, the tempo and enthusiasm prove to be a momentary affair.
- The desirable work culture and sustained work practices which are needed for the success of e-governance projects are found to be almost missing. The innovative work ideas are not much welcomed. Such ideas are caught up in the web of rules and ultimately lost. The lack of adequate motivated leadership coupled with lack of resources and upright efforts further cripple the designing and execution of e-governance projects.
- Many times the change of political leadership after elections leaves the ongoing e-governance projects in doldrums as every government has its own set of priorities. The decisions to make its priorities a reality may entail launching of new projects and leaving previous projects midway.
- The tendency of officials at all levels to resist change and continue to work with habitual work practices comes in the way of experimenting and then adopting new work culture and practices. Officials are not very keen to accept new information and communication technologies and practically make their use.
- Many projects are individual driven in the sense that the initiative to launch them is taken by few officials having reformist approach. Such projects continue to flourish so long as those officials remain their in-charge. But due to transfer or for some other reason when such officials leave the projects then there may be a possibility that their successor officials may not take desirable interest in them.

- The preference for a centralized approach mars the realization of full results that may occur from an e-governance project. The limited delegation of responsibilities for everyday activities prevents taking speedy and quick needed decisions.

- The entire project cycle is not conceived in an appropriate manner. The loopholes start from the stage of problem identification and project planning. A short sighted approach is often adopted. Various issues relating to risk assessment, feasibility assessment, prioritization of stages and activities, strategy formulation, financial control, need for staff, and delineation of roles and responsibilities are not properly addressed. The specialists and experts are not involved to the requisite extent. There is non-adherence of time schedule of activities and wastage of invested resources. Consequently, projects are unable to produce intended results.

- There is more focus on 'e' or electronic aspect of e-governance projects. The governance aspect is sidelined. The complex technological features of the projects do not suit the convenience of masses. Unclear guiding instructions further increase their difficulties. They are not attracted towards the projects and hardly show any inclination to use them.

- The shortage of skilled staff is a critical issue of e-governance projects. Since skilled manpower is limited so there is undue work pressure on them. In the absence of adequate timely incentives they become de-motivated and start looking for opportunities outside the public sector. The government is unable to retain them for too long and is, thus, deprived of their contributions.

- High project cost makes e-governance projects uneconomical and unviable in the long run. Government finds difficult to mobilize resources for their funding.

- The quality of infrastructure of e-governance projects is not up to the mark. At many places it is under-developed. The good quality hardware and software are in limited supply. Supporting infrastructure is not adequately developed and missing from many places.

- In many projects all services are not made available online to users. Some services are online while rests of them are available offline. These increase the inconveniences of users and they show disinclination to use them.

- There is lack of requisite coordination and cooperation between departments. The information technology department does not easily get required support from line departments. Ego clashes between officials of same rank as well as between superiors and subordinates further compound the intricacies.

- Digital divide is very widespread in the country. Computer literacy is not high and information and communication technologies have not penetrated to all the sections of society and in all regions of the country.

- The embedment of e-governance projects in socio-cultural milieu is found to be usually missing. The socio-cultural context of requirements of users is not adequately understood so there is lack

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of sensitivities in service delivery. The shortage of software in vernacular languages makes people lose a sense of appeal.

- Information and data security concerns are prevailing. Effective information security management practices have not been adopted to the required extent and they are not regularly updated. Many times important data is lost due to theft, piracy and malwares.

- Computerization of services has not much reduced the prevalence of corrupt practices. Intermediaries are there who take commissions from the public for availing services. The connivance between officials, service providers and intermediaries is a flourishing business.

## Conclusion:

E-governance has tremendous potential to serve as an effective public service delivery mechanism. Governments at the central and state levels have understood the need for its application in all sectors and regions to advance the cause of inclusive and sustainable development. That is why the number of e-governance initiatives has increased at rapid pace. This is a welcoming trend but the fanfare with which these initiatives are launched withers away after some time. This is disheartening as it leads to wastage of precious resources and limits their promising prospects. A serious consideration must be given to all the issues which are hampering their efficiency. At the same time measures must be taken up to maintain the human face of these initiatives. At the end, it must be remembered that the capability, commitment, dedication and sincerity of human factor actually count a lot in deciding the fate of any e-governance project.

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SOCRATES
An International, multi-lingual, Multi-disciplinary, Refereed (peer reviewed),Indexed Scholarly Journal
ISSN 2347-6869 (On-line & Open Access) ISSN 2347-2146 (Print)

Page No.90

**Cite this article:**

The Plausibility of E-Governance as a Public Service Delivery Mechanism in India

**Citation Format: APA**

Dr. Nandita, K. (2016). The Plausibility of E-Governance as a Public Service Delivery Mechanism in India. S O C R A T E S, 4(3), 79-90. Retrieved from http://socratesjournal.com/index.php/socrates/article/view/224

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