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E-Panchayat as a catalyst for empowering PRIs in Tripura

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Abstract---Tripura is a landlocked state in Northeast India, consisting of seven contiguous states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The state government of Tripura has implemented the e- governance in different parts of administration and e-Panchayat is one of them. E-Panchayat is not a replacement of e-Governance but a sub domain and supplement to bring transparency in the Panchayat Raj Institutions in Tripura. The notion of e-panchayat offers a lot of potential for rural people all around the country since it intends to turn institutions of the Panchayati Raj have been transformed into icons of modernity, transparency and efficiency. The main aim of this study is to look into how e-Panchayat can help the Panchayat raj system to work more efficiently in Tripura, especially addressing the needs of the people.

Keywords---e-Panchayat, transparency, initiatives, empowerment, lacunas.

Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 ushered in a new age of democratic decentralisation across the country. It was a watershed moment in rural government, allowing for decentralised and participatory governance through panchayats, and shifting the focus from project implementers to policymakers on a variety of local issues(Rashid, A., & Bansal, K. (2017), n.d.)It was critical to equip and make panchayats technology-friendly in order to make them self-sufficient in terms of governance. With the introduction of information and communication technology, they have become a tool for information transmission. The Indian government established a national e-Governance plan in

2006 to strengthen local self-government (Rashid, A., & Bansal, K. (2017), n.d.). The automation of many tasks was prioritised, and the panchayat raj institution was given special attention (Rashid, A., & Bansal, K. (2017), n.d.). Government service delivery to citizens and companies will be enhanced through the implementation of national e-governance. All government services should be made available to the average citizen in his neighbourhood through common service delivery outlets, while also guaranteeing that these services are efficient, transparent, and dependable at low rates to meet the fundamental needs of the average citizen.

An effort is underway in India to automate all panchayat functions. To ensure that the Gram Sabha meeting at the panchayat level is successful in Tripura, for example, employing technology to broadcast the meeting can be an efficient solution. A public address system announcement from a market or temple has been the most frequent way to communicate a gram Sabha meeting for years. Other common methods include advertising in the local newspapers, using a mobile truck for publicity, or putting posters on walls or buildings in the community. Networking through the usage of mobile phones is a viable alternative form of communication. A short messaging service can be used to inform gram Sabha members about a meeting. This type of mobile communication has the potential to bridge the gap between people and administration while also ensuring accountability and openness (Rashid, A., & Bansal, K. (2017)

Objectives of the Study

1. To unearth Tripura government initiatives of e-Panchayat project.
2. To identify the major breakthrough especially in public service delivery through e-Panchayat.
3. To find out lacunas in the implementation of e-Panchayat project in state of Tripura.
4. To explore avenues in which the e-Panchayat projects should be implemented in-order to provide public service delivery very effectively.

Research Methodology

The study adopts both descriptive and document method by utilising all the available data on e-Panchayats in India and Tripura particularly. The data, including scholarly articles published in Books and Journals, official reports of Tripura government, articles appeared in newspapers forms a major chunk of data for the study.

Scope of Study

E-panchayat is an effort that aims to modernise, digitise, and make more open and efficient the traditional PRIs into more open and efficient in addressing the issues pertaining with various stakeholders of the society. The rural areas of India stand to benefit enormously from this development. E-panchayat is a mission mode project (MMP) that is now being carried out in India with the intention of altering the lives of people living in rural areas and the communities in which

they live. As a component of its overall e-governance endeavours, the National Informatics Centre in Tripura is responsible for the conception, planning, and development of the software product known as e-panchayat. E-panchayat is an initiative in the Indian state of Tripura with the purpose of making the democratic process more effective. In the process of creating E-Panchayat, the requirements for information and knowledge management in a Gram Panchayat have been carefully considered and accounted for. E-Gram Swaraj is a simplified programme that is work-based accounting that was launched by the Ministry of Panchayat Raj as part of the e-Panchayat MMP. It is a component of the e-Panchayat MMP. The application addresses many aspects of the operation of the Panchayat, including planning, budgeting, accounting, and online payment processing, amongst others. This study aims to investigate and highlight the potential ways in which the E-Panchayat might assist in the empowerment of PRIs in Tripura especially in public service delivery, lacunas associated with implementation of the said projects, identifying the problems encountered by the government and other stakeholders while implementing the projects. Its mission is to investigate and highlight these potential approaches.

Discussion and Result

E-Panchayat

Gram Panchayat operations can be fully automated with E-Panchayat, a rural e-governance effort that offers a complete software solution. To empower local communities to discuss and debate their social, cultural, and economic traditions, as well as their experiences and issues, the panchayat authorities use it to communicate with the rest of the world. e-panchayats are digital platforms and working stations for every panchayat in India (Choudhury, J., & Ghosh, R. (2015) Internet-powered. By creating a digital data warehouse, it enhances public service delivery while also empowering citizens through bottom-up and bottom-down information and content. Tripura's e-Panchayat was launched in 2018 to improve the distribution of goods and services to the rural population in a transparent and efficient manner.

Tripura is one of the seven states in India's North East, and it is the third smallest state in the country, covering 10,492 km square. The vision of information and communication technology for socio-economic development has been realised by the Tripura Government. To fulfil the initiatives of e-governance, the government of Tripura has been proposed for implementation in several departments. For the government of Tripura, adequate capacity building is required, with ICT serving as an enabler. The government has launched a number of e-governance initiatives, which are being implemented across the state. Several departments have launched initiatives to increase transparency and accountability (Choudhury, J., & Ghosh, R. (2015). One of them is the panchayat level common service centre, which provides various e-governance services in rural areas.

Tripura's ICT Infrastructure

SWAN is vital to India's National e-Government Plan. This network aims to construct a Closed User Group (CUG) network that provides secure, high-speed connectivity for government operations, connecting State and District Headquarters. March 2005's National e-Government Plan named SWAN a strategic component. The Indian government's National e-Government Plan relies on a SWAN. This network intends to offer government activities a safe and quick connectivity through CUG networks.

SWAN was chosen as one of three e-governance infrastructure projects in Tripura. For citizen-centric services, SWAN requires an intra-government network with at least Mbps connectivity from state to block level via district and sub division headquarters. The Tripura SWAN optical fibre cable backbone connects 61 points of presence down to the block level (Bertram H, 2016).

Block-level ICT infrastructure initiatives have been implemented in the sector of telecommunications. CICs are completely operational in all of the state's block offices, totalling 39 CSCS. Temporarily assigning two computer operators to data entry in each block. 138 machines have already been outfitted with GPS. Internet access via SWAN/VSAT has been made available in all blocks as part of the e-panchayat programme. As a result, Nodal Officers have been appointed at the ward, district, and state levels. For all intents and purposes, from January 1, 2010, the MGNREGA MIS has been fully operationalized (Bertram. H, (2016)

Proposed and on-going ICT-based services on expansion of GPS

Measures have been taken to ensure that the Biometric Identification Card model is adopted in all Gps and that wages are only paid through accounts. Biometrics for MGNREGA job card holders are now being implemented by the state RD Department, in conjunction with Tripura Gramin Bank and Tripura State Co-operative Bank. Over 50,000 smart cards have already arrived at the workplaces of employees.

The plan of action GP/Block/District/State ICT infrastructure is being created in partnership with state IT departments, and line departments are being included for the implementation of MGNREGA software, hardware, and manpower. State rural development agency created new software with NIC unit. Key features include: Shelving (Capturing wish-list). AllGovernment schemes (Estimation, Work Order, Monitoring and Closure), Government-to-government and citizen to government supplies (Demand, Issue rate, Receipt, Delivery, Accounting and Monitoring), Government-to-government banking and works (Approval, Funding, Expenditure, Monitoring and Audit). In addition to government-to-citizen transactions, there are government-to-business and government-to-business interactions, including contractor-supplier (procurement, work/supply orders, and monitoring. (Bertram. H, 2016)

There are a number of E-Panchayat baseline details, such as ROR (Request for Receipts), Issues Receipts, Request Reports and Directory Offices. According to the CAG's suggested classification formats for PRIs, PRIA Soft complies with the

single-system inventory/stock register management entry and the CAG's recommended cash basis. There will be a record of stock purchases and sales kept by the panchayat. Scheme-specific expenditure reports show the issue of goods as well. Unreliable internet connectivity is one of the Challenges (Bertram, H 2016). The BC model is now primarily used offline due to the absence of phone connectivity at the GP level.

Issues and Challenges

While implementing the e-Panchayats projects the government face several issues and challenges-

- I. A programme of this magnitude has never been imagined.
- II. Each Pillar/programme has its own set of challenges.
- III. Concerns about human resources.
- IV. A chief information officer/chief technology officer is required for ministries.
- V. Coordination and financial resources issues.

According to our understanding, the fundamental issues and challenges in implementing e-panchayat or other digital India initiatives have multiple facets like- India is a land of Kaleidoscopic contrasts. People from 29 states and 6 union territories speak a total of 22 different languages. E-panchayat applications are only available in English. English is not understood by the majority of people, with only 10.55% of the Indian population knowing the language. As a result, developing e-panchayat applications in multiple languages is a challenge for the administration. The ability to read and write is defined as low literacy. The scope of the term has been expanded to include the ability to comprehend and use a culture's primary sign system through language, mathematics, pictures, and other means.

According to the 2011 population census, India's literacy rate is only 75.04 percent, making the implementation of e-Panchayats difficult. More than 90% of India's population is illiterate when it comes to the Internet. Villages and panchayats are represented by more than 6, 57,000 panchayat members in India. Around 40% of India's population lives in poverty, the illiteracy rate is more than 27%-32%, and nearly 92% of the population lacks digital literacy, which is a big problem.

Citizens are unaware or properly sensitised of e-Panchayat service; hence raising public knowledge of the e panchayat services is a key challenge. The amount of money each individual receives from a country's annual income is referred to as per capita income. As a result, people can't afford the government's internet services, which makes e-panchayat implementation difficult. (Dr. Pardeep Mittal, Amandeep Kaur, 2013)

Current status and future plan for service delivery systems

The majority of rural ICT applications are projected to target socially and economically disadvantaged communities. The rural population has a need for services. E-Government services, transactional services, informative services, and

other services. Citizens' services are currently supplied by CSCs and CICs. All panchayats are furnished PCs with the necessary basic infrastructure and other software (such as PRIA Soft, Rural soft, and e-panchayat related plug-in) to access various portals under the MGNREGA programme. All panchayats must be connected to the main data centre with a specified access level via available mode internet, secure internet, or a block level network that has been extended to SWAN. As a result, panchayats may serve as a one-stop (Upliftment of Rural areas of Tripura through ICT: A composite review (Tamojay Deb, Soma Saha) shop for all rural residents. All user interfaces must be known to service delivery operators, and the central agency must provide support in processing user services. Poor responses from the central agency might place service delivery agents in an awkward position, leading to service cancellation. In a few circumstances, it has been determined that central agencies are unable to commence troubleshooting processes for hardware, software, or portal operating mechanisms due to a lack of human resources.

The majority of data input work has recently been completed at CICs and CSCs, and few services are provided for rural citizens. It is not possible to extend human resource services due to a lack of suitable online monitoring mechanisms. As a result, service delivery operators must be well trained on the application environment as well as all conceivable services available through the kiosk. There must be a system in place to track service consumption and quality. Periodic assessments are necessary (Tamojay Deb, Soma Saha) for monitoring and improving service quality like birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates, electricity bill collecting, land records, email services, and counselling on medical and agricultural concerns are among services that rural kiosks in Tripura might provide. It could serve as a one-stop solution centre with local language support (Kokborok /Bengali, for example).

Any rural individual can use those services, and the link is its functioning to internet. Today's network access is mostly delivered by dialup telephone, while VSAT or long-distance wireless lines, 3G, and EVDO are also being used (in figure example of a topology is shown). These solutions are both costly and prone to failure. We propose instead that buses and autos be used as "mechanical backhaul" devices to transport data between a hamlet and an internet gateway. It could be cost-effective because used PCs could be used to build a kiosk. A recycled

The kiosk PC and the recycling PC can be linked using a Net4801 Soekris Single Board Computer (SBC) as the kiosk controller, and the kiosk PC can be utilised as a public access terminal. A similar SBC could be used as a DSL broadband Internet gateway at the headquarters of the implementing agency (128 kbps). Both locations include external 9 dBi Omni-directional antennas and 40/80/160 GB hard discs for local storage. Two 1.2A, 12V solar panels charge the kiosk SBC's 42 AH battery, while the gateway SBC is powered by a UPS. As a result, both nodes will be accessible at all times. (Tamojay Deb, Soma Saha)

Conclusion and Findings

The Government of India (GOI) began its National e-Government Plan (NeGP) in 2006 with the goal of strengthening rural administration and making it user friendly for citizens to engage in policy making. The chief aim of NeGP is to ensure that all government services should be efficient, open, and dependable and making the services available to the average person in rural areas through common delivery service outlets. As a result, state governments across the country have started to modernize the PRIs, especially automation of office procedures through a mission project called e-Panchayat.

The rural local governments in Tripura would be revolutionised with the support of the National Informatics Centre (NIC) and with the initiatives of ministry of PRI. Enhancing the skills of panchayat workers is also another chief aim of the e-Panchayat project. Now the e-Panchayat project in Tripura started to use the Local Government Directory (LGD), PRIA Soft, Action Soft, and the National Panchayat Portal; to provide essential public services to the people with affordable cost. The aim of the e-Panchayat projects is to increase rural communication by connecting all panchayats in Tripura, so that the information could be exchange with other panchayats in real time.

In the process of e-Panchayat, the panchayats in the state have released an accounting tool that makes budgeting, planning, accounting and online mode. Without much hardship, citizens in the state can avail the benefits of applying and getting birth and death certificates through online mode by paying a nominal fee only. This process has reduced the corrupt practices and saved much of time of the people also.

Basic services such as collection of property taxes, retirement and income, benefits to pensioners, applying and getting income certificates, subsidies to farmers and other stakeholders, e-health, education, and agricultural extension, e-primary education are also made available to the common people in the state. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MOPR) developed a database of all the assets generated and cared for by the gram panchayat by constructing & m-Action software.

The gram panchayat put up a support desk using the PRIA software and Plan Plus software, where individuals could come with any questions. Each question is assigned a number, so that it is addressed properly. Now the concept of e-Panchayat is now largely recognised and welcomed by the general public in the state of Tripura. This could benefit a large number of individuals living in rural areas. E-Panchayats are inevitable in the context of majority of people live in rural areas and the government too also committed to provide public services to needy people through technological resources, for instance the e-Panchayat.

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