

**DIGITAL – PANCHAYAT in RURAL INDIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Digital Panchayat is a function and dynamic digital platform and working station designed and created for each and every Panchayat in India, powered by Internet. The objective is to facilitate and improve Panchayat functioning on day-to-day basis, through two way flow of information and content. The goal is to realise various development objectives at grassroots level. Digital Panchayat is a national initiative of Digital Empowerment Foundation and National Internet Exchange of India. As per the World Bank, "e-Government refers to use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses and other arms of government." Government of India(GoI), with an intention to transform the governance landscape by ensuring participation of citizens in policy making and providing ease of access to information to the citizens, introduced the National e-Governance Plan(NeGP) in 2006. The vision of the NeGP was to "make all Government services accessible to the common man in his locality, through common service delivery outlets and ensure efficiency, transparency & reliability of such services at affordable costs to realise the basic needs of the common man." E-Panchayat is one of the Mission Mode Projects (MMP), currently being implemented with a vision to empower and transform rural India. Present paper aims to describe e-panchayat and Government initiatives towards E-Panchayat.*

**Key-Words :** Development, Rural, e-Panchayat, Technology, Digital, e-Governance

The information and communication Technologies play an important role in rural development. So e-panchayat is a need of present scenario. This system is web-based and n-tiered and functions like an Application Service provider enabling Panchayat level digital services for all stakeholders. The stakeholders are citizens, elected representatives, Gram-Panchayat officials, the government and the knowledge workers. It is a fact that the developed 50 countries have taken the full advantage of information Communication Technologies. In the year 2002 the Government declared a comprehensive program to accelerate e-governance at all levels of the government to improve efficiency, transparency and accountability for Government-Citizen interface.

Maharashtra state is the sixth best e-Governance state in India.

Over the past decades, India's ability to create, select, adapt, use and profit from knowledge has become increasingly to its sustainable economic growth and improvement of living standard. The growing role of information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools has strengthened the human intellectual capacity and the formation of modern lifestyles.

Country like India, where 70% of the population lives in village and rural parts of the country, it becomes more necessary to utilize such tools for their social, economic, administrative and governance regeneration. Recognizing the e-Governance, the Government of India(GoI) has introduced various administrative reforms and initiated many interventions under policy level and at institutional level. However, the government has been able to connect urban-centric regions of the country, but still this left with a major national-gap as far as using ICT for the nation building is concerned. Effective and viable usage of ICT tools at panchayaat, which represents the first level of government interaction for over 60% of the Indian populace, is largely missing.

As per official figures, there are approximately 2,50,000 Panchayats in India mapped by the National Informatics Centre and Ministry of Panchayati Raj on the ministry website under the project called e-Panchayat. However, it is difficult to find any information about single Panchayat. With this background, the National Internet Exchange of India(NIXI) and the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) initiated and rolled forward the concept of 'Digital Panchayat(DP)' programme across the nation. Digital Panchayat means – a web-based dynamic digital interface created for each and every Panchayat in India, giving information about particular panchayat in a two-way flow of current. The objective is to facilitate and improve Panchayat functioning on day-to-day basis, through two-way flow of information and content. The digital platform aims to bring out the local voices by empowering the local communities to showcase and share local social, cultural and economic practices, stories and challenges. Moreover, the web-platform would act as a repository of local content for national and global audience and vice versa with a bottom-up content thrust. Additionally, the portal would act as a multipurpose information and communication platform to showcase local content, culture, best practices, advocate local issues, e-Commerce to the Panchayat villages. Digital Panchayat is a platform for panchayat representatives to connect with rest of the world.

### **Panchayat Raj System in India**

In 1993, India has established one of the largest system of Panchayat Raj of the world through the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment. Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural areas signify India's experiment with direct democracy at the grassroots level. It has adopted a decentralized strategy based on the principles of subsidiary with a more active and area-based approach to rural development. Panchayat Raj have been given a wide range of powers and duties related to rural development. The main focus of the Panchayat Raj is that the people in the village should undertake the responsibilities of governing themselves. In the present scheme of

Panchayat Raj, the villagers have been held responsible for all round improvement in the village life, including education, sanitation, medical relief curative and preventive, lighting, housing, maternity and child welfare along with the administration of civil, criminal and revenue justice. It was thought this system would be powerful means for self-preservation in the arena of social life.

### **Changing Nature of Panchayat Raj**

After a more than a decade and half, there is a growing realization that the system of Panchayati Raj needs to be re-energized and strengthened to address persistent development challenges more effectively and also to be responsive to emerging problems such as climate change, water scarcity, natural disasters etc. Globalization and the information revolution have changed the nature of local polity through increasing competition and awareness among the villagers. The technology that is most transformative in today's society is information and Communication Technology (ICT). Information and Communication Technology does not impact physical objects directly; instead; it moves and processes information. U.S. is global leader in e-governance.

### **Background of Digital-Panchayat**

The National e-Governance Plan has identified Panchayats as one of the Mission Mode Projects (MMP), since Panchayats provide a large number of basic services for millions of citizens living in India's rural areas. Introduction of e-Governance shall help improve the delivery of services and good governance.

The seventh Round Table Conference of State Ministers of Panchayat Raj, organized by the Ministry of Panchayat Raj (MoPR) held at Jaipur in December 2004 recommended taking e-Governance in Panchayat Raj Institutions (e-PRI) as mission mode through NIC and other solution providers. The MMP has been designed to overcome the challenges being faced in the villages such as lack of reliable communication infrastructure, delay in providing services to the citizens mobilization for implementing schemes at the GP level, lack of 132 monitoring mechanism for the schemes.

As a first step towards formulating the project, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj constituted an Expert Group in June, 2007 under the Chairmanship of Dr. B.K. Gairola, Director General, NIC, Government of India. The Expert Group was entrusted with the task of assessing the IT Programmes of Ministry of Panchayati Raj and recommending cost effective solutions along with the cost implications. Adopting a consultative approach, the Committee interacted with the States/UTs to assess the existing status of computerization up to the Gram Panchayat level, including the initiatives undertaken by the State Governments. In order to understand the ground realities, the Committee conducted field visits to some of the Gram Panchayats in the selected rural areas where some IT initiatives had been undertaken. Inputs from eminent experts in the public and private sector were also taken into account as part of the consultative process. In essence, it

was found that while some computerization efforts had already been made at Panchayat level by States like Gujarat, West Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Goa, these attempts were limited as they were driven by short term goals and were unable to completely transform Panchayats due to lack of a holistic perspective. It was felt that a more comprehensive approach was required to make a cognizable impact on the functioning of the Panchayats for the benefit of the citizens. These recommendations formed the basis for the conceptualization of e-Panchayat MMP.

### **Objectives of Digital-Panchayat Mission Mode Project**

If the Panchayat are to perform efficiently and effectively all the mandated tasks, which are increasing day-to-day, extensive use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is needed. Moreover, there is a strong need to build a 'digital inclusive society' where large sections of rural population are able to benefit from new technologies; can access and share information and services freely and can participate in the development process more effectively. The Panchayats being at the interface of rural citizens and governance structure are an effective vehicle to induce mass ICT culture at the grass-roots level. It is with this broad vision that MoPR formulated a scheme for ICT enablement of all the Panchayats in the country on a Mission Mode approach. The e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project (MMP) is intended to address all the aspects of Panchayats' functioning from internal core functions such as Decentralized Planning, Budgeting, Accounting, Implementation and monitoring etc. to service delivery like issue of certificates, licenses etc. Hence the key objectives of e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project are to use ICT for :

1. Automation of internal workflow processes of Panchayats.
2. Improving delivery of services to citizens.
3. Capacity building of Panchayat Representatives and Official.
4. Social Audit.
5. Transparency, Accountability, Efficiency and RTI compliance of Panchayats.
6. Improving governance of local self-government. The Panchayats being the basic unit for planning and implementation of a large number of scheme service, this MMP would also go a long way in improving public service delivery through PRIs with better outcomes.

### **Problems and Prospects of Digital-Panchayat**

Establishment of the e-Panchayat in every village across the country is an elaborate process. ICT intervention should not be understood in isolation. ICTs function is a socio-cultural, political and economic milieu. Their efficacy is contingent on the various forces and realities that coalesce to shape the environment into which they are introduced. To equip every Panchayat with a computer and to provide it with Internet connectivity would not be an easy task, if we look at the current prerequisites for ICT enables system of governance in rural areas. A workable system of e-Panchayats warrants financial resources, computer applications,

skilled human resource and political will.

The primary technological factor that can impede the reach of e-Panchayats are the lack of infrastructure and trained human resources. Despite India being called the Information Technology capital of the world, its computer and internet penetration (at 2.7 per cent and 4.9 per cent, respectively) are among the lowest in the world. (The financial Express, Connectivity, Penetration keep IT away from Rural India, May 7, 2009). Teledensity in rural areas is around 14 per cent. (Ministry of Finance, Government of India, Economic survey 2008-09, p.246)

Slow progress in rolling out common services centres would delay process of e-Panchayats. 1,00,000 common services center were to be opened up in rural areas by March 2009, but only 50,008 have been rolled out until now. Some states, namely Bihar, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Sikkim and Haryana have already operationalized more than 75 percent of common services centers while others such as Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttarakhand lag behind in the process.

### **Key challenges in Digital-Panchayat**

The key challenges being challenges for implementation of computerization in Panchayat include.

1. The issue of electricity comes first – more than half of the rural households are still not connected with electricity.
2. most Gram(village) Panchayat representatives and villagers are not computer-literate; even a simple computer application would be difficult to handle for them.
3. Content creation in local language is another challenge. English is still an alien language in rural areas.
4. High Capacity Building - No back end support at all levels of PRI/PR Departments for operationalising computerization of services
5. No centralized decision support system (MIS) for monitoring the schemes and taking informed decisions
6. Genuine problems of infrastructure and other prerequisites for e-Panchayats in rural India.
7. Application of ICT is a political issue because it has potential to transform the socio-political dynamics of national and local polity.

### **Process of Digital-Governance**

The process of e-governance has already been started. The Government of India has decided to open one lakh common centres across the country under National e-Government services accessible to the common man in his locality, and ensure efficiency, transparency and reliability of such services at affordable costs to realise the basic needs of the common man. Now the Government of India has initiated the process access to computers

with broadband connectivity. All Panchayat at all levels need to be equipped with computing hardware and connectivity over the next few years. The approach would be to first use the Kiosks being set up under the NeGP's Common Services Centres initiative. For the remaining Panchayats, it is proposed to engage independent service providers who would be selected on the basis of a bidding process. It has been also planned to equip all Panchayats with necessary software and skills to handle e-Governance for better delivery of services to citizens. The other major component of e-Panchayats would be that of capacity building of functionaries of Panchayat Raj Institutions. The infrastructure that is proposed to be created through e-PRI would be utilized for training of elected representatives about their responsibilities and for giving them functional knowledge of the schemes that are implemented through the Panchayats or their statutory committees.

#### Action Taken by Indian Government

Governments at both the central and state levels have the vision and strategies to bridge the digital divide and provide supporting infrastructure in rural areas to enhance the capacity of Panchayats. Under the Bharat Nirman Programme, the Government of India has emphasized connectivity and other basic facilities. The Ministry of Power has introduced a scheme that aims at providing electricity in all villages and habitations within four years, thereby providing access to electricity to all rural households. (Ministry of Power, Government of India, Bharat Nirman-Electrification) it has been also proposed to achieve a rural teledensity of 25 per cent by means of 200 millions rural connections by the end of the Eleventh Five Year Plan. The Eleventh Five Year Plan has also targeted providing broadband connectivity for all secondary and higher secondary schools, all public health care centers and Gram Panchayats.

#### Conclusion

Lastly, we conclude that e-Panchayat are the need of the hour as people in rural areas are still deprived of basic facilities for a decent life. Common wisdom says that poverty and deprivation exist not only due to lack of resources but also persist because of inefficient and malfunctioning institutions. In the emerging knowledge society and information revolution, Panchayats should not be left in isolation. They should be provided with adequate technological resources in order to be able to play a meaningful role in the course of development.

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