ICT for Rural Development

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Abstract-The letters ICT are to be seen everywhere these days. These letters specifically stands for Information and Communication Technology. It is basically the combination of information technology and communication technology. Rural development has always been an issue of concern for our nation. During the post-independence period of India a lot of efforts are taken in order to develop the rural areas of India. As a developing nation in the world there exists a wide gap between rural and the urban areas of the country due to lack of communication facilities. The combination of ICT with the existing schemes for the rural development can speed up the development process and can help to fill up the gap between the technically backward section and the forward sections of the society. Government projects and schemes under ICT facilitates citizens in improving their decision making capacity and to bring an overall qualitative development in the lifestyle of the rural society. ICT can provide a reasonable platform for the people in backward regions to nurture and develop the basic facilities and trades. This draws attention towards the potential of ICT to enhance the present condition of the rural community in India.

Keywords-ICT, Rural development, Government projects, Kiosks e-Panchayats, Gyandoot, etc.

I. Introduction

THE rural ICT applications intends to provide the services offered by the central government agencies to the less fortunate people in the rural areas who are deprived of the technology at their village door step. ICT has to provide a holistic approach to the poverty reduction and technical development in rural region. Several e-government projects attempts to provide these technology to improve the deprived condition of these people. These technologies are used in order to improve the reach, enhance the base, and minimize the processing cost and also to increase the transparency in the policies provided by the government [1].

The term development here can also mean in context to development in health, education, market strategies and finally lead to economic growth of the nation. In short ICT can increase the efficiency and the development rate of the government. But one potential result of ICT is that it threatens the equality policies of the nation since only digitally learned people can take advantage of these schemes in the initial phase of the project [2]. Thurs, this paper suggests the use of existing schemes to root out this inequality. Today's generation is widely exposed to the era of technology and internet. The fig. shows the number of internet users in India. This clearly shows the impact of internet in the regions and hence clearly shows the potential that ICT owns in order to develop these communities [3].

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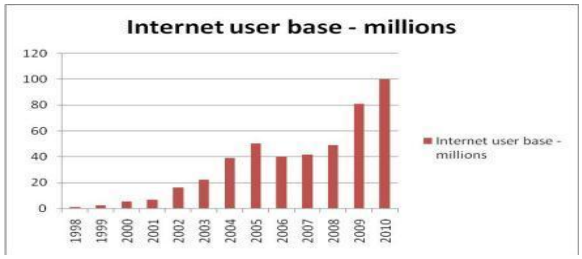

Fig. 1: Internet Users In India From 1998-2010

II. Role of ICT in Reforming Rural Local Governing Bodies

Being a vast and geographically diverse country India needs a large network of governing bodies to govern the nation. Due to lack of transport and communication facilities there exists a wide gap between the urban and rural areas and also their governing policies and its implementation.ICT intends to bridge up this gap. Since a major part of the population of India lives in rural areas hence these areas need at most attention. The technology which is found the most transformative today is ICT [4].

ICT as a medium of reformation in the local governing bodies of rural India is a concept which exists in the society and the government is striving hard to achieve the goals before them. The major goals that were considered under these schemes implemented were as follows:

- Ambition to reach to every corner of the country through internet and know their problems and issues and search for solutions.
- Make the facilities and policies available to every individual availed by the government.
- Make the citizens aware about their rights and duties.

In order to fulfil these aims realizing the reformative potential of ICT the Government of India and other state Governments has taken initiative under ICT to reform the local rural governing bodies so as to improve the services and deliver the public services with greater accountability. Former president of India when delivering a speech on 4th June 2009 had mentioned the former government agenda for expanding broadband coverage to connect every Panchayat to broadband network. She also mentioned the schemes like e-kiosks under the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) [5].

Some of the recent schemes of the Indian government to reform the existing frame of the governing bodies in the rural regions are discussed below:

III. E-PANCHAYATS

Speaking technically, e-Panchayat system is a web based Panchayat raj system which functions similar to the Application Service Provider enabling panchayat level digital services to all the citizens. These citizens could be among the residents or the elected representatives, Gram panchayat officials and the workers too [6].Under this project undertaken by the government of India has taken initiative to equip all the government offices like gram panchayats with computer and broadband connection. It is also proposed to facilitate all the offices with all the necessary software and skilled workers in order to handle the e-government in proper way so as to avail better delivery of services. This formation which is proposed to be created will then be used to train the elected representatives about their rights and duties and also the functional knowledge about the delivery of the schemes and policies to the citizens [7].

Several state governments like Gujarat, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, has taken initiative to speed up the development process and provide information to citizens at their fingertips. These governments have set up Panchayat portals to provide information regarding development schemes. An important feature of these portals is that they are available in all the regional languages like Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, etc. These portals also help citizens to know about whom they should approach to when need to perform some official work like applications and resolution of grievances. Some of the potential benefits of the e-Panchayat systems that would help the rural areas to nurture are as below:

- Speed public services delivery: Due to these portals connected and interlinked to each other they will provide centric services easily and effectively to people. Time consuming official processes like birth certificates and death certificates, payment of taxes and bills, granting of building permissions, issuing of licenses, etc. Since all the jobs above will be computerized and less documentation will be required and also can be provided at minimal cost and limited time. This will not only minimize the time required and costing but will also restrict the malpractices, corruption and frauds [8].
- Monitoring the development processes: Development and monitoring of reach of government policies to the common people will be easier. Online transfer of data will help to transfer documents and data faster and hence the processing will be speedy and most important timely.
- Information availability: People residing in far corner place of the country usually do not get much access to the information due to lack of communication facilities. But this problem could be solved with the help of e-Panchayat system. Internal functioning of the panchayat like the agendas, meetings, voting and the schemes can be recorded online and made available for the citizens

3.1 Problems and Prospects of e-Panchayat.

Establishment of e-Panchayats in every village is a tedious job and would require immense efforts from the government as well as the people. Providing a complete computer hub at every panchayat along with the internet connection is not an easy task also it will require a huge amount of investment. The severe problem that would be affecting while developing this project will be the lack of trained workers and also to equip the hub with regional languages is a job of demand too. Electricity is a major issue in this prospect because half of the rural areas of the nation are not connected with electricity. Also one more issue is that a lot of people in rural areas still think English as an alien language and many of the gram panchayat officials are not computer literate.

But all the efforts does not seem to go in vain ,despite of all these problems a strong point is that both the state and the central government have special strategies and plans to implement this schemes. To sum up, e-Panchayats are the need of the hour because the underdeveloped areas of the nation too need to have their rights. A perfect combination of technology and genuine efforts are needed to make this project a great success.

IV.GYANDOOT

Gyandoot is a government project that was implemented under ICT in the draught prone rural district of Dhar in Madhya Pradesh. The project was launched on January 1st, 2000.This project was implemented with a clear notion of reducing the efforts of the people in this area. Being a developing nation the concept of travelling 100 miles away from the village to the district offices in order to collect the public records, meet officials, know the agricultural commodities prices and many more things is not new for the people in the rural areas. Also villagers in this process fall victim to corruption and have to bear the monopoly of the officials. Gyandoot as a project intends to vanish all the above problems discussed. It facilities people to get maximum official works to be completed at the centres employed in the villages.

4.1 Project details of Gyandoot

- A large network of 38 telekiosks (Soochnalayas) were formed in the public places like bus stops so that a large number of nearby villages would be benefited.
- The project has made the front end offices computerized in these areas that is people would send the applications or inquire about the required service to the particular office website and then again has to go to the kiosk to get the intended services. The back end offices are still kept manual. Printouts of the service inquired are to be taken out and then the further processing is done. The data operator then enters the responses in the Gyandoot intranet for the user. The villager gets the response in maximum time limit of 7 days.
- The operator (Soochaks) at the village center is appointed by the government itself and is trained by it also so as he can help the people to use the project for their benefits. The operator person is trained at the district offices usually.
- The user needs to pay the nominal fees of say Rs.15 or Rs.10 for each service to be used like to get the land records or birth certificates or the death certificates or the other documentation works, etc.

- All the operations performed under this project are governed by the Gyandoot Samiti.
- The survey conducted by CEG-IIMA found out that the usage of Gyandoot was quite low and hence arises question on the continuity of the project. Few farmers who used the kiosk complained about the prices of the products in the website and that t6hey infact suffered loss because the prices were not updated by the officials [9].
- The total cost of the setup of 38 kiosks was about 2.5 million which was roughly around 75,000/- rupees for each of the center.[10]

The main problem that is being faced by the project is that in spite of so much efforts taken by the government the project did not get the expected response because of the inefficiency of some of the officials and due to other problems like lack of digital knowledge of the villagers, lack of trust, lack of basic facilities like electricity and transport.

V. Conclusion

The e-governance is defiantly a good platform for the rural areas to develop and nurture. ICT possesses a huge possibility to develop the less fortunate areas of the country where the common people are deprived of the very basic facilities like education. Of course ICT can contribute to rural development but only when it is used in right way for right purpose and under correct guidance. Also efforts will always be required to improvise the reforms in the schemes. Like all the other computer technologies ICT can provide a better platform for the development but certainly cannot offer a perfect solution to all the problems.

Thurs, ICT can defiantly become an enabling tool for wider socio-economic development. If used correctly it can surely help the needy people to take the advantage of the development programs meant for them and looking at the current statues of internet users and the availability of the communication facilities in the rural areas there is still a long way to go.

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