

AN ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S E-GOVERNANCE DURING AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

Improved Internet-based technology is primarily used in e-government to streamline citizen-to-government communications. Despite the popularity of Digital India, certain segments of the population are still hesitant to use Internet-based services for a variety of reasons ranging from inability to ambiguous security and legal rules. As a result of these concerns, E governance was only slowly gaining acceptance in our country prior to the pandemic. With lockdowns and a greater reliance on technology to combat the epidemic, it has garnered not just acceptance, but also produced innovations and services that have enhanced accessibility.

With a focus on mobile-based applications, e-government enabled the country in responding promptly to pandemic-related challenges. This is only conceivable since the pandemic ushered in a rebirth of electronic governance, as well as recently developed applications concentrating on the demands and interests of citizens and governments alike. Now that the virus has passed, the country is reverting to old habits, albeit with a newfound embrace of E government. This highlights the future of E government in India, where only a small number of services are available through digital means. However, in recent years, some states have demonstrated the feasibility of implementing E governance in a variety of areas, including employment services, healthcare, public security, and so on.

This research article, therefore, aims to analyse the utility of e-governance initiatives and lay down the future prospects of increased inclusion of E governance after analysing the recent evolution in E- Governance.

Keywords: E- governance; COVID-19; Arogya Setu; Pandemic; Kerala; Future adoption

INTRODUCTION

What is E governance?

In essence, the Tenth Five Year Plan explained e-governance as the use of ICT in government operations to increase accessibility of public services. The major purpose of e-Governance implementation is to improve governance procedures and outcomes in modern times.

Relevance of E governance In Pandemic

The global effect of the COVID-19 stunned governments and healthcare institutions around the world. They responded rapidly, though, by implementing e-governance interventions aimed primarily at tracing and recording cases. In a country with a large population, such as India, e-governance in the form of the *Arogya Setu App* focuses on preventing virus spread through digitally enabled tracing.¹ Despite many issues concerning safety of data and privacy of citizen, this was a successful e governance initiative.

Rajasthan also had some good efforts in the District Administration category in 2020, such as *eMitra*, an ambitious E-governance initiative, which received a high ranking in the SKOCH State of Governance Rankings 2020².

These e governance projects, were successful in not only in urban areas but also rural areas, despite the glaring existence of digital divide and technological understanding in rural and urban areas (Isabel). However, the problem of crippled technological use and advancement in rural areas still continues to be major hindrance for wide inclusivity and acceptability of e governance in all domains, which is why the continued popularity and use of e governance in India seems to be in jeopardy.

¹ Annual Report 2020-21, Department of Health & Family Welfare, GOI, (Mar. 2, 2022, 9:29 PM) <https://main.mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/Annual%20Report%202020-21%20English.pdf>

² Team Inclusion, Rajasthan 2020: Gains in District Administration, e-Governance, Health, Inclusion, (Mar. 2, 2022, 8:19 PM) <https://inclusion.in/state-of-governance/2021/04/rajasthan-2020-gains-in-district-administration-e-governance-health/>

Why, despite a decade of existence, India's e-Governance ecosystem underutilized?

In the recent past, India has undertaken several efforts connected to the development and adoption of e-Governance initiatives, nonetheless, E governance remained in its early stages. After investment in the digital India program in 2014, e-Government in India progressed. But success remained largely disproportionate with Kerala and Karnataka demonstrating utility while other initiatives not achieving much success. Additionally, despite an increase in rural internet connectivity, the majority of individuals living in rural areas are still not connected or aware of it.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Because the E governance initiatives that were introduced and used were targeted in the pandemic, it cannot be assumed that it will remain unaltered post-covid. Furthermore, when several domains of government administration are brought under E governance, concerns about cyber security and data protection would double. As a result, the future of E governance is unknown and only a possibility.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

On a rudimentary level, the research's goal is to investigate the usage of E governance in a Public Health Emergency caused by the Covid 19 Pandemic and investigate its future application. Broadly, the research article aims to investigate:

- Examine the influence of a pandemic on future adoption of e-Government.
- The Future prospect for E governance in Public Administration
- Establish Importance of Legal Framework for E governance Initiatives

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research objectives have been investigated by examining the following questions:

1. What were the E governance Initiatives During and Pre-Pandemic that hinted a Brighter future?
2. What can be its importance in post pandemic India?
3. Why Legal Framework is necessary for success of any E governance program?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Doctrinal approach is used to examine the current situations and issues affecting E governance in public administration in the face of the global pandemic, as well as the areas where positive change is possible. Secondary approaches are utilized in this in order to acquire a better knowledge of the interplay between E governance and public administration and establish importance of legal framework.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Connecting the dots: Kerala's use of digital technology during the COVID-19 response³

The essay examines the breadth of digital technology's capacities and the ongoing challenges of data privacy and digital access equity. This serves to show how other states, as well as the Centre, may employ comparable methods to expand E Governance's reach and acceptance. We will hence pursue the possibility of its application across various domains at an all-inclusive level.

Implementing E-Governance In India Exploring The Administrative Reforms Agenda⁴

The paper examines and highlights the evolution of e-governance legislation and technologies in developing countries such as ours, which is critical to the project's success.

³Osama Ummer, Kerry Scott, Diwakar Mohan, Arpita Chakraborty, Amnesty Elizabeth LeFevre, Connecting the dots: Kerala's use of digital technology during the COVID-19 response, Vol 6 Issue 5, BMJ Glob Health (2021)

⁴ Sushma Yadav, Implementing E-Governance In India Exploring The Administrative Reforms Agenda, Vol. 70, No. 3, The Indian Journal of Political Science, pp. 679-692 (2009)

We will look into the issue of a legal gap in relation to the Aarogya Setu App, which was difficult to explain and analyse legally due to a lack of relevant laws.

The Legal Framework for Electronic Governance in India⁵

The study discusses the legal framework, which is an important aspect of E governance. After carefully reviewing the provisions, the author concludes that the IT Act alone is incapable of dealing with all of these issues. As a result of this research and the arguments surrounding the E governance platform during the pandemic, we will stress the significance of either addressing these concerns holistically in the Personal Data Protection Bill or enacting new legislation, with the former being the preferred method.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Pre-Pandemic Era

Even before that, the National e-Governance Plan's Akshaya project, which began in 2002 and was essential in transforming the district into India's first e-Literate district, was established.⁶

However, prior to the Covid era, e-Governance was mostly associated with the efficient delivery of government services, which was bolstered by the fact that such initiatives help to reduce corruption, bribery, and other forms of corruption.

Land Records Management System, for example, has been a successful e governance initiative that has succeeded in not only streamlining the process but also dealing with a number of irregularities that have arisen as a result of human malfunctions in registration process.

⁵Apar Gupta, The Legal Framework for Electronic Governance in India, Vol. 5, No. 3, International Journal of Civil Society Law, pp. 7-18 (2007)

⁶ 11th Report -e-Governance, Administrative Reforms Commission Government Of Kerala, <https://arc.kerala.gov.in/sites/default/files/inline-files/11th%20Report%20-e-Governance-Part%201%262-For%20printing.pdf>

In the field of taxation, NSDL e-Gov was already well-versed in managing a variety of national-level projects, so they were tapped for the GST Pilot Project, which has since evolved into GSTN, a full-service initiative.⁷

Now, during the pandemic responses, we have witnessed that E-governance delivers timely government information and public services, enabling citizens to access information without the need for bureaucracy, and boosts managerial efficiency (Sumedha). As a result, e-governance will become more significant in the future for streamlining administration and facilitating cooperative governance.

Post Pandemic Era

Because of the larger significance of e-Government activities during the Pandemic, the importance of e-Governance projects in the lives of citizens has seen a paradigm shift in terms of applicability and acceptance in the post-COVID era. To counteract the virus, India, like other countries, imposed a countrywide shutdown at first. However, this would be insufficient because administration concerns cannot be handled by restricting the movement of residents and government officials alike (Rawal). As a result, e-Governance efforts gained traction in order to serve a population of about 1.3 billion people.

Some Successful Initiatives: An Ode to the Advantages of E-Governance

- **TRACING:** The *ArogyaSetu app* was the most visible example of India's usage of e-Governance. Many other South Asian countries, including Singapore and South Korea, used similar apps in their e governance to aid the administration in its fight against the deadly illness.
- **ECONOMIC ADVANTAGE:** The Indian economy contracted as a result of the pandemic, which the government attempted to address by implementing measures such as economic stimulus aimed at increasing domestic demand. E-Governance can also help in this situation. The Delhi government established an employment

⁷The NSDL e-Gov Edge, <https://www.egov-nsdl.co.in> (last visited Mar. 8, 2022)

exchange portal where prospective employees may register. Prospective employers could utilise the aforementioned site to hire (jobs.delhi.gov.in). Because all candidates were at least shortlisted, this program was a huge success.⁸

- E-office applications allowed authorities to access digital files remotely without interfering with measures put in place to control the spread of virus while allowing government operations (Maria).
- While the government has issued various guidelines and regulations to maintain a rigorous curfew, Andhra Pradesh has implemented e governance and offered ePass for persons who need to move during the curfew for emergency services.⁹
- RT-PCR and Rati: The site was created to make it easier for Sample Collectors to get authorization to use the RT-PCR and Rati mobile apps. They also received the CSI Award of Recognition for Real Time Tracking and Recording of Every Test at the 18th CSI SIG e-Governance Awards 2020.¹⁰

Now, in order to comprehend the triumphs and failures of e-Government in India in the post-pandemic age, we must evaluate the drivers of the system, which primarily include the government, citizens, and technology (ICT)

Post Pandemic Era: Banking on the Benefits of E Governance

From a policy standpoint, in the post-pandemic era, the government may consider directing its limited resources toward increasing social media participation. Since it has been demonstrated that citizen engagement in Government social media accounts (GSMAs) may be used effectively by governments to not only address crises but also promote transparency and accountability by giving timely information to citizens (Preeti).

The idea is straightforward: India needs to implement long-term e-government reforms. Providing citizens with public services via electronic means is a very limited definition of e-governance. Rather, e-governance and digitization must be widely included throughout many

⁸Anil Baijal, DDA launches six e-governance initiatives, The Times of India, (Mar. 4, 2022, 10:02 PM), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/dda-launches-6-e-governance-initiatives/articleshow/70284646.cms>

⁹Andhra Pradesh Service Plus, <https://serviceonline.gov.in> m (last visited Mar. 8, 2022)

¹⁰Himachal Pradesh Official Website, <https://himachal.nic.in/en-IN/index.html>(last visited Mar. 8, 2022)

domains of governance. We may start with the Census, which is extremely essential but is now immature and poorly maintained ([Upmith](#)).

Recent elections in four states brought the issue of disparities in records to the forefront, which were mostly caused by the manpower tasked with data collection. Introducing e-governance can transform it into a real-time data field that also functions as an engine for e-delivery of public services.

Legal Framework an Immediate Necessity for E Governance

Arogya Setu app and Aadhar debates, highlighted the multiple legal flaws that exist in our legal framework. Privacy, cyber security, and data protection are novel problems in regard to technology that the Indian system has not fully examined with respect to E Governance. People have become more adaptable to online governance as a result of the COVID-19 scenario, and this tendency should be promoted by making platforms user-friendly and easy to access, as well as safe in terms of data protection and cyber security (frauds).

While the Constitution guarantees a right to privacy, as expressed in the famous Puttaswamy decision, we lack a robust data protection statute to determine the level of intrusion into individual privacy that is permissible. There is no clear mechanism for deleting data or setting restrictions on the amount of data that can be gathered in Arogya Setu app.

It is troubling that there is no anchoring legislation for improving digital trust in E governance projects. Because the mere legal acknowledgment of electronic records and papers in the wake of the IT Act is insufficient for such initiatives to be accepted in a legal sense. With the government announcing a national research health mission in August 2020, with the goal of providing each citizen in the country with a unique digital health id in order to make health care services, both public and private, accessible through a single digital interface, laws are becoming even more important.

Building digital trust is the first step toward expanding e-governance in the future, and it can only be accomplished through a legal framework that defines not only the permissible extent of data collection to protect privacy, but also addresses concerns about the ever-increasing number of cyber-crimes.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The above analysis in totality mainly demonstrates that any e-government initiative targeted to data collection and processing is largely *legally irrelevant at present* and the ones only offering services like jobs, land management are *not user friendly*. Hence, in the post pandemic era efforts focused to cure these issues should be immediate with immediate effect to progress with the increased acceptability of E governance. As a result, the government must prepare carefully for India's future in E governance, which can only be hastened by enacting and enforcing appropriate legislation. As a result, it is apparent that, if properly exploited, E Governance has the potential to rocket India to unparalleled heights.

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