Translating ICT into Social Advantage: The E-District Programme in Uttar Pradesh

SIDDHARTHA MUKERJI
BUTKU9@GMAIL.COM

Introduction

Good Governance is a watchword in contemporary public administration in India. It entails a concerted effort on the part of entire government machinery in ensuring public welfare and common good by improving the overall quality of services provided to the citizens. The requirements for good governance go far beyond the limits of promoting *adhoc* readjustments in the existing administrative practices by advancing certain incremental reforms and changes. Its underlying objectives are ethically grounded which require addressing the structural constrains that impede effective public administration. Such constraints include red-tapeism, corrupt practices involved in almost all social sectors, lack of accountability and transparency in public works, and above all the virtual distancing of the people from their own developmental concerns. The humanitarian dimension of public administration necessitates an inclusive model of development that implies integrating the peripheral regions and marginalised communities like farmers, tribals, women and minorities in the developmental mainstream.

The strategies and methods to accomplish effective governance that entails an all-inclusive model of development necessitate increasing use of information and communication technology. This is what is being termed as e-governance. It involves multiple applications of IT and digital technology in improving public service delivery mechanisms.

Therefore, the focal point of e-governance is to facilitate people's access to a range of public services that would otherwise involve complicated and cumbersome procedures. It includes services such as health, education, legal aid, payment of bills, agriculture extension programmes, and many others.

The aim of the paper is to understand the constraints that have weekend implementation of e-governance at the grassroot level. The real challenge is to see how an innovative scheme like e-district aimed at facilitating public access to welfare schemes at the grassroot level shapes up as it comes in the grip of a path-dependent, parochial administration tied with a social system where discrimination manifests itself in several forms. Drawn upon the theory of path dependency enunciated by Paul Pierson, a path-dependent administrative structure is one in which the embedded social norms make them change resistant. Pierson observes that, 'There is a causal relevance of preceding stages of institutional formation in a temporal sequence. Movement along the same path is common is because the cost of switching over is high' (Pierson 2000: 252). The administrative structures also find it hard to transform for the loss of power and prestige that the actors beholding to them enjoy. In this context, the macro-level technocratic initiatives fail to produce the desirable social change at the grassroot level where the micro-level governance structures continue to resist innovation that costs their authority. The macro-level technocratic agenda itself emerges from the policy orientation towards e-governance which adds on to the export-oriented strategy of the government.

332

Shifts in technocratic perspectives

The acceleration of industrial liberalisation by the government during the mid-1980s and the adoption of export-led growth strategy provided an extra impetus to the industrial sectors that exhibited a certain degree of comparative advantage in the international market. IT was one of them. It gained special attention by technocratic advisors to the prime minister commonly referred to as his computer boys of the Department of Electronics (DoE). Understanding the transformative nature of technocracy in the DoE, Peter Evans exclaims that, 'major actors in the DoE expressed themselves less in custodial terms and more in terms of midwifery and husbandry' (Evans 1995).

The triple alliance between the political leadership, technocratic bureaucracy and the new entrepreneurship laid a strong foundation for the advancement of liberalisation and special policy incentives for the emerging computer software industry. The 1984 and 1986 Computer

and software policies removed or restricted import licensing on computer hardware for software exports.

The shift towards export-oriented IT policies gained further momentum after the adoption of SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme) in 1991 by the government of India. This led to the introduction of STPs (software technology parks), a special institutional scheme for the export-oriented firms in IT and software. The STPI scheme, launched by the Government of India in 1991 seeks to encourage, promote and boost software exports from India. These are tax-free and license-free zones that provide a variety of technical support services like data communication links, incubation, and training. Providing exclusive facilities for the export-oriented firms, the STPI has been a special attraction for the SMEs (small and medium enterprises) that occupy a large portion of the IT services business today.

Other special packages include establishing free-trade zones for the IT and Information technology enabled services (ITeS) exports like Domestic Tariff Area (DTA), special economic zones (SEZ), export processing zone (EPZ) and other special concessions for export-oriented units (EOU). These schemes provide special concessions on duties, import tariffs, custom duties, sale tax concessions, and income tax rebates. However, the IT firms have preferred to avail the STPI as compared to others as the latter is specifically meant for the promotion of IT, software and ITeS exports. The other schemes are more general in nature as they cater to the needs of wide range of industries. The specific requirements of IT and software gets due consideration only in the STPs. For instance, other than the tax concessions, the STPs pay special attention to a continuous availability of long-distance data communication links which is undoubtedly the most essential requirement of the sector. Support by the government to the industry has triggered its growth in last two decades. The meteoric rise of IT-BPO sector is particularly noticeable. In this regard, it is observed that,

> The rapid expansion of revenues from IT hardware, IT software and ITeS (information technology enabled services) holds the promise of substantial change in the nature of economic activity and the pace and pattern of growth in developing countries like India [...] By triggering the diffusion of information technology across nations and within individual nations this is expected to substantially alter the position of individual developing countries within the international economic order. (Chandrashekhar 2003: 53)

The Annual Report of the Department of Information Technology 2010-11 reports that the revenue aggregate of the IT-BPO industry grew by 19.2 per cent and reached a mark of $88.1 billion in the FY2010-11.

Likewise, it further observes that the ITeS-BPO and the IT services exports reached a figure of approx. 59 billion and $33.5 billion respectively in the same year (Department of Information Technology 2010-11: 1). The new technocratic entrepreneurship in these countries has received tremendous support from their respective governments in the form adequate infrastructural facilities, technical assistance and financial incentives in the recent past.

Recent years have witnessed a significant rise of the BPO industry. *Strategic review 2008* observes that the BPO industry in India has been growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 37 per cent and has emerged as the fastest growing segment in India's IT-BPO sector-BPO exports have grown from $3.1 billion in 2004 to at about $8.7 billion in 2007 (National Association of Software and Service Companies 2008: 58). In FY2009-10 it reached a mark of $4.2 billion (Department of Information Technology 2009-10: 1). Underscoring the growing significance of India's IT-BPO sector in the world market, the Annual Report 2010-11 exclaims that:

> the IT-BPO sector has showcased India's ability to build global firms with world class business practices that are capable of catering to the most sophisticated and demanding customers. (Department of Information Technology 2010-11: 1)

Also, the emergence of knowledge process outsourcing (KPO) in the recent past has reflected increasing proclivities of the firms for upgradation of skills. The BPO/KPO industry derives its strength and uniqueness from a large pool of young and talented human resources with the required linguistic and technical skills. Driven by export-orientation, these models have mainly worked for the international market. Their contribution towards social development was left untouched until very recently.

To democratise technology, minimise the digital divide and make technology socially meaningful, ICT-driven programmes of the government in collaboration with private players have tremendous scope not only in India but entire South Asia. It has the potential of transforming the life of millions that live under severe hardship and destitution. In this regard, Aditya Dev Sood suggests that:

> The region hosts an extraordinary concentration of new technology-driven companies, tech-savvy administrators, managers, a political class newly sophisticated to the possibilities of IT, social entrepreneurship and non-governmental organization (NGO) institutional structures that could all come together to bring the benefits to rural and underprivileged groups. (Sood 2001)

There is now a gradual change towards re-orienting technology for promoting mass welfare. While speaking at the Digital Divide Seminar held recently, Bill Gates, the founder of MicroSoft, commented that, '[...] there is an urgent need to examine the catalytic and enabling role to be played by the government in ensuring that IT provides new opportunities for the 40% of the people who are living below poverty line, so that they may move above it.'[1] The idea of e-governance has assumed its vitality and significance from such a line of thinking. It attempts to make modern technology people-centric and ensure faster delivery of public services. States with powerful IT sector like Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have taken a lead in this regard. Contrarily, regional disparities have put certain states like Uttar Pradesh on backfoot where path-dependent parochial structures unduly undermine innovations brought through e-governance.

The present study is an ethnographic account of public administration with reference to the implementation of e-district, an e-governance programme in the periphery of Uttar Pradesh's Lucknow district. Ethnography appropriately serves as a research tool to locate the institution-community interface through ground narratives on how formal structures are experienced by the peripheral communities and what values to do they assign to them. Ethnographic accounts mainly involved individual narratives and focus groups discussions. The members of focus group discussion were a group of young and middle-aged women who were trying to procure certificates of different kinds by availing this scheme. The respondents were drawn from urban periphery where social and structural constraints made it difficult to access the welfare benefits. Structural change carried out to support e-governance programmes is understood by collecting information through detailed interviews of the officials at the Centre for e-governance in Lucknow, the capital city of Uttar Pradesh and the state headquarters.

E-district Programme in Uttar Pradesh: an empirical account

Ease of doing business is now complimented by the ease of getting basic public services. The pace and scale of change in Uttar Pradesh has however been slow and sluggish. Often blamed for neglecting human development, the governments have cut a sorry figure before the public. While generating political consciousness and democratic fervour in lower castes and communities, the second democratic upsurge (Yadav 2000) led by mass parties like Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) did not translate into tangible social and economic gains. Since then identity politics has had profound effect on elections in the state, but a clear public verdict for three different parties in the last three state

elections indicates an emerging developmental orientation of the public. Parties have revised their manifestos to include packages for development and good governance. To begin with, the erstwhile chief minister Akhilesh Yadav from SP carrying the image of a youth icon with an engineering degree from a foreign university raised high public expectation for a new technology and developmental mission in the state. Likewise, going by its promises to promote development, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) campaign in 2017 state assembly elections also focused on governance. The political commitment thus translated into an ideational conviction for promoting social development through the use of information technology. This not only helped in realising the inclusive agenda of e-governance but also developing a technocratic orientation in people to connect with the government for availing their services. The success amidst all odds of the government's e-district programme is a case in point. It shows how online services can facilitate development in a backward state by improving public accessibility to government facilities.

E-district was introduced as a state mission mode project under the centrally-sponsored national e-governance programme with the objective of computerising some basic public services related with registration certificates, property mutation application, application for scholarships and marriage grants, widow and handicap pension, and financial and legal assistance to dowry sufferers. These services are divided across eights departments of the state government including revenue, medical and health, social welfare, women welfare and child development, handicap welfare Panchayati Raj, urban development and home.[2] However, 85-90 per cent of the services emerge in the revenue department. UP along with Delhi is accredited for being the first state in the country to pioneer the e-district programme. To begin with, the programme was carried out in its 6 pilot districts namely Gautam Buddha Nagar, Ghaziabad, Sultanpur, Sitapur, Gorakhpur and Rai Bareli and today it operates in all the 75 districts. Presently, it is being run in partnership with 8 private firms namely CMS, IAP Company Private Ltd, JRS Transport, KDE, Nekton IT India Pvt.Ltd, Srei Sahaj e-village Ltd, SRM Techsol Private Ltd, and Vayam Technologies Ltd.

The study explores the nuances of implementation embodying a mix of innovations and challenges with an empirical account of administrative responses and peoples narratives at the periphery. In a way, it tries to locate the institution-community interface at which people experience the formal structures by encountering them in their everyday life. The methodology combines in-depth interviews with operational managers at the Centre for e-Governance with an ethnographic account of public service delivery involving detailed narratives of people in the

capital periphery. The themes explored by these narratives can be identified as public-private partnership in e-governance, decentralised administration, delivery innovations and hazards. It was apt to choose Sarosa Bharosa, located at the interface of Lucknow and Kakori sub-division, as the field site for registering marginality in the capital periphery. With roughly 60 per cent of Dalit population mainly belonging to Rawat community, the village served as a fit case for offering an ethnographic account of rural marginality and the outreach of an e-governance programme.

Administrative architecture and delivery mechanism

The e-district programme was started under the common service centre (CSC) scheme- a centrally sponsored programme to be implemented by states- as the front-end delivery point for multifarious citizen services in rural areas. E-district as stated is a partnership project between government and private players. The delivery is carried out by a well-knit public-private partnership (PPP) network involving state agencies and private entities. The institutional network for e-governance therefore has two legs: the government and the private collaborator. At the governmental level, three types of institutional cum administrative roles are played- operational or technical activities like developing relevant software for running the overall programme performed by National Information Centre; advisory or consultative role by the Centre for E-Governance in the Department of IT, Government of Uttar Pradesh; and regulatory plus coordinating responsibility entrusted upon the District e-Governance Society (DeGS) with principal secretaries of IT, finance, planning and law as its permanent members.

The district magistrate carries out the overall supervision and arbitrates disputes emerging at the district level. The DeGS coordinates with the respective DMs to oversee the activities of CSCs. It is further controlled, regulated and advised by Centre for E-Governance (CeG) appointed as the State Designated Agency SDA) by the state government for facilitating the implementation of e-district programme. Accordingly the SDA performs three major roles: facilitating and regulating the programme centrally; advising and facilitating the implementation and extending infrastructural support to the district service providers. DeGS works in close coordination with district magistrate (DM). The DM's role in the administration of e-district is seen to be most critical and for this sufficient autonomy is accorded to him for monitoring the activities of the district service providers. But DM has to render its services in this domain in consultation with the DeGS. Finally, the chief executive of the programme is the chief minister who can individually

monitor its progress, demand reporting from time to time, and identify shortfalls in the outreach of citizen's services.

The private entity comprises the Service Centre Agency (SCA) and the Service Centre Operator (SCO) or the Village level entrepreneur (VLE). SCA which is now designated as the district service provider is the private service provider and therefore the central driver of the e-district programme. The overall profitability and sustainability of the project is therefore the responsibility of the SCA. As per the central guidelines, a master service agreement is signed between SCA and the DeGS before the business is undertaken. As per the terms of the agreement, the government only provides a footprint of the location in which the service is to be rendered. This also includes the information on socio-economic and the demographic profile of the location of the basis of which sustainability of the programme in the designated location is assessed.

The SCA appoints the VLE also known as the Service Centre Operator (SCO) who manages the operational business at the village level. On an average, one VLE is appointed for six adjoining *gram panchayats*.[3] The VLE also works in close coordination with the g*ram pradhan* (village head) of the respective villages whose responsibility is to inform the villagers about the VLE's services. The activities of the VLEs are overseen by the SCA. However, the VLE acts as an entrepreneur in his own right for running the business and maintaining the infrastructure of his office. While performing the designated task of rendering citizen's services by charging a fee stipulated by the government, the VLE is rendered free to offer other services of a running shop in his own right. It was informed that VLEs other than the designated services run additional business like providing mobile services, selling recharges etc.

At present, there are 62,000 VLE centres in the state. Government's financial liability at the VLE level is negligible but has a share in the fees charged for the services rendered. The delivery mechanism follows a decentralised structure. To avail the online service the applicant submits an application to the VLE of his Gram Panchayat by paying the stipulated charge. The fee charged for all the services is Rs.20 per application with the exception of Rs.30 for the property mutation application which, as informed, is received in large numbers. The VLE then sends the application online to the concerned department which further verifies the details before providing the required certificate through the VLE. The details are also given online if the mail of the concerned applicant is provided. Any grievance concerning the information received is communicated through the VLE to the concerned Department. In case of unsettlement, the DM of the concerned district intervenes and arbi-

338

trates. The SCA is solely responsible for the activities of the VLE and has independent authority to dismiss him in cases of dereliction of duty. Government's involvement in the business network is thus only confined to laying broad guidelines of the delivery mechanism and arbitrating in case of major disputes or complaints from the service receivers. The operational business at the ground level is carried out by the VLE under overall supervision of the SCA. There is therefore least intervention by the government in the day-to-day business of the e-district programme.

Administrative innovations

The decentralised structure of implementation is paramount to the achievements of the programme. In this regard, the empowerment of DMs for supervising and monitoring the programme at the district level has left more space for policy innovations by the Centre for e-Governance, the advisory body on e-governance. A critical observation is that the SCAs have become more alert and responsible with active intervention of the DM in the programme.[4] District-level management, regulation and arbitration by the DM have therefore streamlined operational business at the ground level.

The other institutional innovation that has given new direction to administration of the programme is the constitution of DeGS which now acts as a nodal agency for supervising the e-district programme. The involvement of principle secretaries of the major line departments as members retains the centralised control of the government and compliments the decentralised administration of the programme under the respective district magistrates. This model of public administration is a classic case of reconciliation between centralised control and decentralised management.

The training programme for e-district also adds to the innovation. The state government undertook a comprehensive capacity-building programme to ensure the best training for the officials/staff attached with various departments rendering e-district services. This mainly comprised staff of the revenue department that covers nearly 80-90 per cent of the services. The capacity-building programme was being carried out in two phases—Project Zone 1—covering 35 districts and 15,063 government officials by December 2014 and Project Zone 2—covering 34 districts covering 19,320 government employees by March 2015. The other component of this programme was to develop laboratories and data centres with requisite infrastructure at district, block and *tehsil* levels as per the target envisaged under each phase.

Innovation at the department level can also be gauged. While associating integrally with programme, Department of Revenue has worked towards smoothening the rendering of services by providing tablets and mobile phones to its functionaries for easier and faster verification of the applications and ensuring transparency in the delivery process. This has not only improved the services but also instilled greater confidence in the functionaries in carrying out their task. Plus, delays in the delivery with immense paperwork could now be avoided.

The online services seemed to be popular amongst the rural youth. Updated with the latest development on e-governance, the young beneficiaries were profoundly impressed with the new model of public administration. Young participants in the focus group discussions conducted at Sarosa-Bharosa Gram Panchayat showed high optimism towards the e-district programmes of the government. Vicky, an aspirant for admission in the B.A programme of Shakuntala Mishra University, Lucknow narrated his encouraging experience with the e-district services provide at his Centre. The special advantage that he received was that the service was available on time and close to his home. He also informed that once the certificate arrives at the Centre a message is sent on mobile and email for information. The girl participants were equally impressed by the programme showing same amount of enthusiasm for government's innovative ways of delivering public services. Sarita, an undergrad student expressed the need to enlarge the canvass of e-governance by including many such programmes for youth welfare. The optimism running equally well in the male and female youth indicated both the vitality and necessity of going online to connect the rural youth with the mainstream.

Constraints

Innovation embodied in the e-district programme has been largely underrated by the layered administrative structure that remains untrammelled in its attempt to fracture the system by its corruption network. Linking the services online has not delinked the corruption network that continues to operate unwaveringly to deprive the poor of the e-governance benefits. While technology has provided the ease to do business it has not substantially eased the means of getting public services. Virtual governance has fallen short of undermining the real world of discrimination, marginality and exclusion experienced in the everyday encounter of people with their social and institutional environment. Expressions of distress and helplessness often show little regard for the virtual innovations that seem to make no impact in the hard-pressed challenges of everyday life. The constraints viewed from

the managerial perspective seem to have no link with the grim experience of service recipients placed in the margins. Also, the little note of optimism, viewed earlier, can in no way overshadow the hard-pressing claims of livelihood that service providers even with their best possible devices cannot address given the superimposed structures of domination and exploitation in administration and society. The lived experiences of people at Sarosa-Bharosa are a testimony to the dichotomy between administrative innovations of e-governance and the social realities of public governance in rural India. With these general remarks, the constraints of e-governance can be conceptualised in terms of a mix of responses from the operational managers and the people at the capital periphery. Broadly, they can be classified as three deficits: structural deficit, social deficit, and moral deficit.

Structural deficit

Structures are defined as patterns of formal behaviour in accordance with the rules of the game. It therefore entails the rules of administration and the way these rules are operationalised in administrative practices. Basically, it denotes the formal structure of the organisation and the way different parts of administrative machinery synchronise with each other. As stated, the decentralised structure of administration has systematised the regulation of the programme by allowing the Centre for e-Governance to focus on the operational part; at the same time the layered structure of decentralised administration with multiple levels of scrutiny involving Lekhpal, Tehsildar, and the concerned department has only bred corruption and nepotism. Also, poor coordination between the governing bodies has caused red tapeism and excessive delay in service delivery. The DM who is the overall regulator of the programme at the district level also has little control over the layered structure that tends to fracture the service delivery in most apparent ways. He only adjudicates in matters that assume greater political magnitude. With this, the continuity of the needlessly hierarchical structure practising parochialism at every step of administrative action defeats the purpose of making the administration transparent with virtual governance. While rules are meant to facilitate services, they are often misappropriated for limiting the outreach.

Structures also need to be probed through ordinary sites where people's lived experiences and everyday encounter with their governing structures provide a substantive understanding of formal politics and administration. E-governance, a top-down model of governance is found to be limited in its reach when it is brought to shape the lives of poor. To begin with, in absence of a formal communication mechanism, the

structures provide a half-hearted access to e-district. A large number of uninformed people therefore remain disconnected from their own entitlements. In the world of technology, they face a sense of isolation and remain concealed in their predicaments of everyday life. The services thus become far to seek. The only point of communication is the Gram Pradhan who could also be accessed by those few who had proximity with him.

Himu Rani, a 50 years widow belonging to Dalit community expressed her helplessness in accessing the power structures at the grassroot level. Her day-to-day struggles for earning livelihood as a wage labour to raise a family of three unmarried daughters is a show of lived experience of the 'political' and 'governing structures' in the periphery. Her disillusionment with the formal structures of governance comes into light when she finds accessibility to local governing bodies available to chosen few.[5] Here emerges a dichotomy between formal structures of governance, its objective mechanism to produce social change and the inter-subjectivity of rural marginality expressed through people's encounter with their governing structures on an everyday basis. In this way, inaccessibility to technology-based services is much to do with apathy of the local governing structures.

Structures also fall short of fixing responsibility at the delivery end. VLE, being the service provider, faced the wrath of the clients that approached her for the service. In absence of a clear line of accountability, the VLE is subjected to interrogation at the receiving end. This also indicates an informal shift of accountability beyond the structural domain of administration to the private service provider. While the fault lines lie within the layered administrative structure created to process the applications, the onus of delivery is put on the VLE. The narratives by the lady assistant at the VLE Centre located in the middle of jostling market brought into light the negative act of the *lekhpal* who savoured his authority while the VLE was subjected to public discontentment. Expressing her helplessness in this regard, she observed that delay in submitting report by the lekhpal prolongs the procurement of certificates. The lekhpal had no accountability but only undue authority to fracture the process for his vested interests. He has special clients whom he assists and turns a blind eye to public interest that the e-district is meant to serve. Her deliberations on execution of e-district clearly points towards the failure of structures in fixing accountability and ensuring transparency. This defeats the very purpose that the scheme was meant to serve. It also shows how the state actors at the local level resort to clientalism rooted in the parochial culture of grassroot administration.

Accountability therefore remains a week spot in the local governing agencies. In absence of accountability fixation, an informal pattern of customer-client relation develops where private service provider is held responsible for all the delays in service delivery. Further, the government intermediaries who should be actually held responsible for the delays in processing applications continues to fracture the innovative programmes that are meant to facilitate public services at the local level. Structural deficit therefore emerges from two predicaments: Lack of accountability fixation in local administration and second the predatory role of administrative intermediaries in the layered structure of local administration.

Social deficit

Local power and administrative structures often reinforce the social inequalities when they come into play at the periphery. They are a mirror to the social realities and practices that often tend to obstruct policies that aim at promoting social wellbeing. E-district was also found to have fallen prey to the unsavoury parochial practices of grassroot administration. Social vulnerability comes alive when one looks at the marginalisation of poor Dalits at Sarosa-Bharosa. Proximity to capital city offers no added advantage in getting access to e-district. Services are accessed by a chosen few, those who are resourceful and have proximity with the Gram Pradhan.

343

The social divide in the local arena was clearly located along class and age. Young educated boys and girls who were connected well with the internet world made best use of the facility to get their income, caste and residence certificates. Hopeful about better connectivity in the future, they also gave relevant advice to improve services. However, time delays in providing the certificate was a common grievance of the applicants. Naresh a college aspirant had approached the VLE for getting the caste certificate. While he was promised to receive the certificate in 3 days, it arrived only after 15 days of application. By then the college had closed the application, and Naresh could not take admission. Aggrieved by the lacklustre approach of the governing authorities, Naresh expressed dejection towards the snail-place functioning of local administration. With a startling twist in his expression he comments that entire time was spent on going to the Centre, there are many other things to do in life.[6] Naresh's agony shows the helplessness of people in dealing with a parochial administrative structure that remains undeterred even by the intervention of information technology to improve social life of the common citizens. Yet Naresh's optimism for govern-

ment's online initiatives and faith in democracy continues as he firmly suggests that the government should go completely online.

The moment I move through the gully of Sarosa-Bharosa I come across a half-blind old woman who seemed to have lost all her faith in the government. Clad in a tattered *saree* and walking with a stick to find her way through the gully, 80 years old Sarita gazes around to find a shed for getting respite from the scorching heat. Abandoned by her children, Sarita had no means of earning her livelihood other than begging before others for food and water. Disconnected with the world of information technology, her only point of communication was the Gram Pradhan who refused to extend any help to her in getting certify-cates by which she would be able to get her widow pension. Her social exclusion as an abandoned old widow serves as a social valuation of a programme such as e-district that has high stakes in promoting inclusive development by improving public accessibility. Such exclusionary spaces make little sense of an inclusive society envisaged under the new technological order of e-governance.

While I move further to take a closer look at the social milieu of Sarosa-Bharosa, I meet a group of young and middle-aged women having a conversation over evening tea at the doorstep of a half con-structed house. The discussions that follow after being assigned to express views on e-district clearly brings into light the class and age divide. Gradually, the discussion takes the form of a debate between two young women favouring the motion and a middle-aged woman taking a contrary position. For the young women, e-district was a life changer, a means to integrate with the government and its services. The reactionary middle-aged women quickly intervened to say that technical assistance was not meant for the poor but only for the affluent ones.[7] Class discrimination is thus apparently indicated in access to services offered under e-district. Technology-enabled services are still consider-ed as opportunities for the privileged groups.

Sarosa-Bharosa is a mirror to the social realities of public governance. The interviews clearly highlight the helplessness and social exclusion of senior citizen and middle-class women from e-governance services. The younger lot is certainly more optimistic about the technology-driven services but still feel that the benefit will not flow to the target groups until the attitude of the administration changes. Social inequalities in the local arena keep a large number of people excluded from the policy advantages. The marginalised, poor people find it extremely difficult to access the services for not being able to influence the Gram Pradhan and the local administration. E-district that was meant to promote social inclusion by giving easy access to the poor has become yet another

terminal for misappropriation by the resourceful and powerful families in the village. Accessibility is improved by getting closer to the Pradhan who is set to offer clientelism in all possible ways. Pradhan therefore stands at the juncture of society and politics getting only selected few into the realm of advantage. Leaving the rest disadvantaged, the social inequalities continue to belittle the innovative programmes of the government.

Moral deficit

A programme is not worth its value if it falls short of serving public interest. To secure it, transparency guarantees are imperative. But the real world of public administration remains far removed from this moral prescription as practices of rigging, corruption and nepotism continue to thwart many visionary programmes of the government. E-district has also failed to develop immunity from this. It is yet another programme where clientelism has subverted public interest and bred corruption and nepotism to fulfil the vested interests of the administrative intermediaries as Lekhpal.[8] Comparable to the intermediaries in society like the *sahukars* or financial agents, they tend to destabilise the programmes more conveniently by their presence in the formal structure. As intermediaries they break all moral bounds to extract benefits and make people helplessly depend on their patronage.

345

The exorbitantly high service charges at the VLE Centre also indicated the gap between norm and practice and the subversion of public interest. The minimum fee charged was Rs.100 as against Rs.30 for *khatauni* and Rs.20 for rest of the certificates prescribed in the guideline. So, even the minimum charge was nearly five times the stipulated amount. The amount was augmented as per the level of urgency and was fixed by the VLE after knowing the share demands of lekhpal*, tehsildar (*sub-divisional magistrate*)* and others in the corruption chain. In this way, the VLE was subjected to what I call as compulsive disorder, a psychological trapthat arises when the system forces the service provider to manipulate and rig for paying commission fixed at different levels of the chain in order to run the business even if she personally doesn't favour it. So, manipulation gets done not necessarily for personal fulfilment but for those who control the administration and regulate the local business (Mukerji 2018: 60). The VLE seemed helpless when people complained of poor delivery observing that invariably the Lekhpal was responsible for the delays.[9]

Development with e-governance will remain a distant goal as long as the uprightness of the governing actors continues to be compromised. E-governance has built the technical know-how of the governing

network without offsetting the unsavoury practices of the parochial administration. This in a way creates an asymmetry between the inclusiveness and transparency guarantees of e-governance and the built-in opportunism and discriminatory approach of the local bureaucracy. Overall, it impacts development in a way that people while hoping greatly from the innovations of e-governance are held back from their opportunities, feeling a sense of discrimination that sets in with its multiple manifestations. The root of this is depravity that still remains a hard nut to crack despite all the promises of ethical governance.

It unconsciously drags those into the network who would otherwise rebuke it, as the VLE did. As long as the system remains morally deficient, no amount of governance will produce the desirable social change. From the interview with the VLE, it was clearly revealed that the innovative programmes will make no impact unless the corruption network that runs through the local administration is broken. Also, the prevalence of compulsive disorder has dragged the service providers into the corruption chain. Overall, an innovative programme like e-district remains unduly subdued by the immoral practices of local governance structures. Therefore, moral antipathy of the local bureaucracy continues to fracture service delivery in the periphery.

346

Suggestive measures

At macro-level, structures for e-governance need to be built through a comprehensive capacity-building scheme. For this purpose, two important steps have been taken: Creation of National E-Governance Division (NeGD), an autonomous business division within the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology as a nodal agency for co-ordinating the e-governance schemes and setting up of 'State-Mission Teams' to provide technical support to the states and Union Territories (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology). The NeGD is mainly responsible for facilitating implementation of NeGP by various ministries and state governments by extending all the technical support, undertaking technical assessment of all NeGP projects, training and capacity building and also recommending necessary changes in the organisational structure for NeGP from time to time. The national mission however requires to be complimented by grassroot training under which all the stakeholders must be collectively familiarised with the working benefits of the programmes. Innovative models worked out in other states must be extensively communicated.

Attitudinal change particularly in local bureaucracy is necessary for adaptation to the newly created-technocratic environment by e-governance. Reluctance to adapt and subscribe to the new mode of governance

still remains a big challenge. Jagdish Kapur enlists certain age-old characteristics of a typical bureaucracy and public agencies that inhibit good governance and effective public administration which are as follows:

1. Monopoly and protectionism causing inefficiency;
2. Inward-looking bureaucracy that lacks innovation;
3. Complicated legal rules and procedures;
4. Practising corruption and nepotism in the name of discretion and judgment; and
5. Personnel administration involving recruitment, training, transfer and promotion not linked with development of individual competencies and capabilities (Kapur 2005: 121f.).

Most of the e-governance projects are run through partnership with private software companies under the PPP (public private partnership) model. Two main advantages that accrue from PPP are: Financial advantages and greater efficiency. But the schemes under PPP face serious constraints due to myriad rules and regulation of bureaucracy, red tapeism, and absence of adequate incentives for rewarding performance. Multiple channels of clearance create difficulties for private partners in working effectively for e-governance projects. Also, lack of infrastructural facilities slows down the process of service delivery. Private firms feel reluctant to continue their partnership with the government because of lack of transparency in public works. Autonomy to service providers with relevant means to ensure accountability by the principal (the government) needs prior attention. The predatory intervention of administrative intermediaries like Lekhpal and tehsildar needs to be curbed for better promptness in service delivery.

347

Finally, e-governance projects have fallen short of showing desired results because of existing digital divide. Due to deplorable economic conditions, the rural masses and the urban poor have insufficient resources to acquire computer education. Also, the basic facilities to impart IT training in rural areas are absent. E-governance scheme will show meaningful results only when common masses are able to make best use of the given resources. Due to lack of computer literacy, they remain disconnected from the benefits. Also, the reluctance to embrace new technologies has wider implications for unacceptability of the facilities provided under e-governance. People's participation in the projects of governance must therefore be promoted through capacity building programmes undertaken by the government in collaboration with the private partners at regular intervals. Such training must first begin by highlighting the benefits of e-governance schemes so that people may change their attitude and perception towards ICT. Attitudinal change may enhance the potential of prospective users and connect more and more people with e-governance projects. As the basic purpose of e–

governance is to enhance participation through information dissemi-nation and interconnectivity, all efforts must be taken to improve its accessibility to common masses.

Conclusion

The e-governance programmes that seek to improve accessibility to public services are still in a nascent stage. Yet they are innovative and futuristic to bring social change in the periphery. To do that, the imple-mentation of such schemes requires political and administrative will complimented by increasing levels of people's participation in their own developmental programmes. This would necessitate special attention at the grassroot level where e-governance is meant to bring the desirable social change. Technical assistance to marginalised communities without the intervention of the administrative intermediaries is a prior necessity as it would not only foster self-reliance but also prevent the public delivery system from being thwarted by the clientalistic network. In this regard, states like Uttar Pradesh which generally took a lead to actualise the inclusive goals of e-governance became severely handicapped in doing so as the administrative intermediaries continued to fracture the system's innovation by their unethical practices of clientelism. The interviews with the VLE and some of the young folks clearly indicated the predatory action of the administrative intermediaries like the Lekhpal.

Nevertheless, the macrostructures of governance are in place with clear lines of supervision at the top levels of administration. DM's central role in supervision of the programme at the district level compliments the state-level regulation and coordination of the programme by SDA and DeGS. However, these structures of macro-governance appear oblivious of the predatory local governing structures. They seemed far removed from the realities of local administration that made it difficult to take the programme to its logical conclusion. New programmes have been introduced without streamlining or delayering local structures whose undue intervention delays and debilitates implementation. There-fore, programmes of e-governance with all its innovation will remain inaccessible until the predatory structures of local administration remain in place.

The ideological underpinnings of e-governance are not very different from what came to be envisaged by the planners in the early years of independence which was about recognising the capacity of science and technology to transform human lives and promote inclusive develop-ment. As pointed out by Karunamay Subuddhi:

> The emphasis given at the early stages in state's involvement of technology transfer through rural development programmes demonstrates state's proactive role in bringing about social and economic transformations. (Subuddhi 2002: 3914)

Today, the challenge is to translate this vision into reality amidst increasing disparities at all levels. The real challenge of parochialism in administration thus need be countered through necessary social and political action the scope for which is immense in our democracy. Pinning hope in democracy, ordinary people amidst all odds appreciate government's innovations for social development as Naresh, a young respondent aspiring for higher education, exclaimed that despite all challenges, such programmes that take the new generation forward must continue. But as the interviews suggest, people of middle and older age groups at the periphery feel severely constrained to access the benefits because of their lack of ability to influence the local governance structures including the Gram Pradhan. Also, their preoccupation with the daily scores makes them even more vulnerable to make sense of the new world of technology that can ease their access to public services. Democratic governance would therefore necessitate greater integration of people into innovative programmes like e-district so that fissiparous tendencies of society that hinder participation can be countered.

349

Endnotes

[1] http://www.microsoft.com/billgatesspeeches/2000/10-18digitaldividends.asp [retrieved 22.03.20].

[2] Centre for e-Governance, A Society of IT and Electronics Department, Government of Uttar Pradesh,
http://upite.gov.in/ceg/StaticPages/Services.aspx [retrieved 12.03.19].

[3] Interview with Manager, Centre for E-Governance, Government of Uttar Pradesh. 2019, 3 April.

[4] Interview with the Operational Manager at the Centre for e Governance, Lucknow. 2019, 4 April.

[5] Interviews at Sarosa Bharosa, Lucknow. 2019, 12 April.

[6] Interviews at Sarosa Bharosa, Lucknow. 2019, 11 April.

[7] Focus group discussion with a group of women at Sarosa Bharosa. 2019, 11 April.

[8] Lekhpal is a clerical government position in Uttar Pradesh. The official is concerned with village revenue accounts and village land records.

[9] Interview with VLE at Sarosa-Bharosa, Lucknow. 2019, 12 April.

Interviews

Interview with Manager, Centre for E-Governance, Government of Uttar Pradesh. 2019, 3 April.

Interview with the Operational Manager at the Centre for e Governance, Lucknow. 2019, 4 April.

Interviews at Sarosa Bharosa, Lucknow. 2019, 12 April.

Interviews at Sarosa Bharosa, Lucknow. 2019, 11 April.

Focus group discussion with a group of women at Sarosa Bharosa. 2019, 11 April.

Interview with VLE at Sarosa-Bharosa, Lucknow. 2019, 12 April.

Bibliography

National Association of Software and Service Companies, New Delhi. 2008. *Strategic review 2008.*

Centre for e-Governance, A Society of IT and Electronics Department, Government of Uttar Pradesh, http://upite.gov.in/ceg/StaticPages/Services.aspx [retrieved 12.03.19].

Chandrashekhar, C. P. July/August 2003. The diffusion of information technology: the Indian experience. *Social Scientist*, 31(7/8), pp. 42-85.

Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India. 2017. National e-Governance Division, 2 Mar., https://www.meity.gov.in/content/national-e-governance-division [retrieved 13.05.20].

Department of Information Technology, Government of India. 2010-11. *Annual report 2010-11.*

_____. 2009-10. *Annual report 2009-10.*

Evans, Peter. 1995. *Embedded autonomy: state and industrial transformation*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Kapur, Jagdish C. 2005. IT and Good Governance. In: Bidyut Chankraborty & Mohit Bhattacharya, eds. *Administrative change and innovation*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 119-30.

Mukerji, Siddhartha. 16 June 2018. The 2015 Gram Pradhan Elections in Uttar Pradesh: money, power and violence. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53 (24), pp. 58-63.

Pierson, Paul. June 2000. Increasing return, path dependence and the theory of politics. *American Political Science Review*, 94 (2), pp. 251-67.

Sood, Aditya Dev. October 27-November 2, 2001. How to wire rural India: problems and possibilities of digital development. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36 (43), pp. 4134-41.

Subuddhi, Karunamay. September 21-27, 2002. Science and technology for rural development: role of state. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (38), pp. 3914-20.

Yadav, Yogendra. 2000. Understanding the second democratic upsurge: trends of Bahujan participation in electoral politics in the 1990s. In: Francine Frankel et al., eds. *Transforming India: social and political dynamics of democracy*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 120-45.