



Enabling e-Governance

Partnering the Indian government in e-Governance projects, TCS is helping to bring transparency and efficiency into the system

The irony is hard to miss. For a nation that has made its mark in the global IT space, India has yet to reap the benefits of IT as far as e-Governance is concerned.

The e-Governance statistics in the Indian context are disappointing. The World Economic Forum Global Information Technology Report (2006-07) ranks India at 44 out of 122 countries, far behind countries like Tunisia, Qatar and the Slovak Republic.

There's more bad news. The Nasscom report on information technology on the economy of India highlights that India has a low level of IT investment and minimal dispersal of IT capital among 30 countries evaluated.

e-Governance or the use of electronic means to facilitate interactions of Indian citizens and businesses with the government (state and central) as well as internal government operations is a powerful weapon, capable of driving extensive administrative reforms across the country, particularly in remote areas. Failure to use this tool results in governance ridden with inefficiencies, high costs and lack of transparency.

Tanmoy Chakrabarty, vice president and head, government industry solutions unit (ISU), Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), says, "At the end of its five-year tenure, the present government at the centre has accomplished only two out of 26 mission-mode (the highest priority rating assigned by the Indian government) projects."

The first, the hugely successful MCA 21 programme, India's first mission-mode project under the National e-Governance Plan, for the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, has enabled 100 per cent electronic filing, electronic payment mechanisms, use of digital

signature certificates for all transactions, and significant increase in the rate of compliance, among other things. The second, the Passport Seva programme for automating the passport issuance process, has also been awarded to TCS.

There has been a little progress in three other mission-mode areas that the central government had committed to. The first, the State Wide Area Network (SWAN) programme, seeks to create network connectivity across the states. While 12 out of 30 states have commissioned this project, the pace is still slow. Of these, TCS has completed SWAN in Tamil Nadu and is commissioning it in Bihar and Chhattisgarh.

The second initiative is the State Data Centre, a repository of IT infrastructure across different state governments that can enable the data centre to house data applications. Mr Chakrabarty says, "Only one out of 30 data centres has come up." The status of the third initiative is equally deplorable. While the government had committed to commissioning 100,000 Common Service Centres by 2008, only about 10,000 have been commissioned.

The reality

The presence of an overarching central government policy document on e-Governance does not help matters. "Each state government," says Mr Chakrabarty, "has the freedom to adopt the policy and to prioritise it at its own will." Although states like Gujarat, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are pushing their e-Governance agenda forward, the effort is far from satisfactory. Mr Chakrabarty adds, "The central government has mandated that 3 per cent of the total budget allocation per department must be spent on e-Governance. Sadly, a lot of money is returned

unspent at the end of the fiscal year.”

Moreover, citizens have to contend with multiple portals relating to various departments in the same ministry. This silo approach to e-Governance, combined with outdated technology, conspires to create a system in which the benefits of IT do not percolate to the grass-roots level and citizens are unable to have access to efficient services.

Most departments within the government follow a procurement-based approach when it comes to resolving their technology needs. The IT arms of various government departments follow the practice of purchasing hardware, software, services and networks from multiple vendors. “This,” says S Ramadorai, CEO and MD of TCS, “has resulted in disparate, often outdated systems, standards and technologies that cannot interface and consequently prove to be an obstruction to intra and inter-departmental information sharing and collaboration.”

The positive approach

The disparity between the goal and reality is glaring. But TCS, currently the market leader with a 32 per cent share of the Indian e-Governance IT services market, is optimistic about doing better. The company has extensive experience in successfully developing and maintaining replicable and holistic solutions in public-private partnership mode. The company plans to build robust e-Governance applications in India and then take them to other countries where TCS is present. Currently, 80 per cent of the government ISU’s revenue comes from India.

“We are working in three broad areas of focus: intra-government efficiency, relating to everything within the government; citizen service delivery, relating to citizens and fiscal administration, and revenue augmentation, related to the treasury and taxation,” informs Mr Chakrabarty.

TCS has already adopted an aggressive approach to induce governments to adopt e-Governance. “We are put-

ting forward proactive solutions and promoting public-private partnership,” explains Mr Chakrabarty. “We believe that it is beyond the wherewithal of the government alone to complete the programmes. We are, therefore, reaching out to central and state governments, homeland security, paramilitary agencies, etc.”

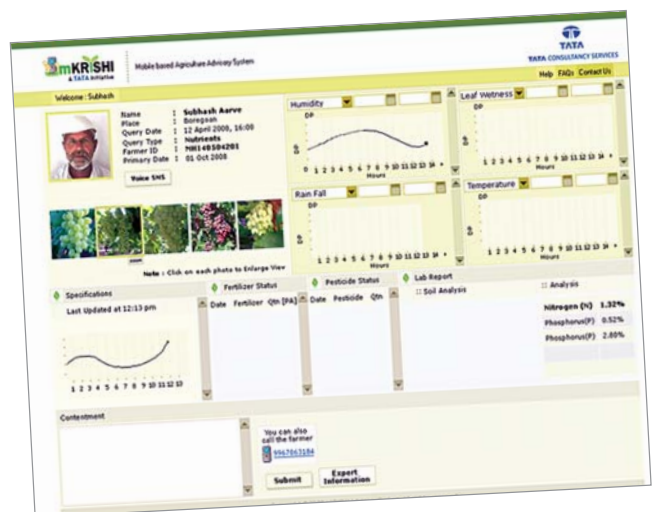
TCS believes that the government must recognise the ability of IT to influence the way a nation goes about its daily business and its life. It knows that the greatest obstacles are often in the mind and it is these that must be eliminated if e-Governance is to become entrenched in the country.

“It is all a matter of changing the mindset, not about the cost of the technology. We need to remove the unwillingness to change and the inertia. This would entail a psychological rather than a technological effort. The cost of the technology could easily be offset by building the software once and deploying it repeatedly. That way we can pass the benefits of such reuse to customers.”

Mr Ramadorai agrees, saying, “For e-Governance to succeed in India, the most important change that needs to take place within government, at the central, state and municipal levels, is not an understanding of technology or an ability to leverage it or even the need to re-invent government processes and systems. It is all about changing mindsets. For e-Governance to make a tangible difference to the lives of the millions of unserved and under-served in our country, the government has to switch from a mindset of procurement where technology is seen as an input to one where it is focused on outcomes and services.”

The benefits

Mr Chakrabarty is excited about taking the benefits of IT to the masses. He gives the example of APOnline, a bilingual portal that TCS created for Andhra Pradesh. This portal was accessed through 2,300 kiosks around the state by thousands of people who could not afford a computer. It generated employment for over 2,000 kiosk operators, who



became the interface for providing information, payment services and interactive services such as applying for a caste or land entitlement certificate, or getting inputs on seeds or fertilisers, etc.

The cost that may be incurred by the end-user should not deter the government from initiating more such programmes. Successful e-Governance programmes have shown that citizens do not shy away from paying service fees if they are sure that technology will save them time and effort, and ease the process of accessing government services.

Mr Chakrabarty says, “Ensuring successful e-Governance is a matter of creating the environment for automation. The reason why projects often fail is that there is no perceived value of the before and after. You have to create a differentiator between the new programme and the current options available.”

There are no limits to the number of public-government interactions that could be transformed through e-Governance. Activities such as buying tickets, paying taxes, applying for passports and certificates, filing returns, etc could be offered as an e-service to citizens.

By bringing e-Governance to people’s doorsteps, these initiatives are enabling a quiet revolution in states like Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat. And while vested interests in the government are rightly afraid of the power that e-Governance could wrest from their grasp, people are realising that this is an idea whose time has come. Mr Chakrabarty says, “I think that people’s aspirations have to be met and a large mass of society will prevail over a few with vested interests. Slowly more states will adopt e-Governance.”

Encouraging e-Governance projects is particularly necessary during the global downturn because it has the potential to stimulate the economy. Mr Chakrabarty says, “India should focus on injecting



more capital into e-Governance projects.”

Additionally, e-Governance allows people to re-skill themselves, to give up their mundane jobs and aspire for something more productive, thereby enhancing their quality of life. Mr Chakrabarty exemplifies, “If the railways could free up the clerks in their offices, they could be converted into ticket checkers on trains and create an environment where everyone travels with a ticket. The increase in the revenue could be plowed back into the development of the railway system.”

He adds, “The road to transformation would mean moving from vertical silo thinking to cross-boundary thinking and from one-channel service to multi-channel service. This will ensure that instead of duplicating costs we will be able to replicate our success stories.”

“To drive e-Governance,” says Mr Ramadorai, “the best tactic would be to first identify specific sources of cultural resistance and initiate specific action so that the enabling environment for success is created. Encouraging tech-savvy ambassadors and identifying champions at senior levels in government may be the way forward.”

Armed with expertise in areas such as taxation, citizen services, municipal administration and hospital management, etc, TCS hopes to transform governance and make it more responsive and accountable to citizens. ●

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