



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

E-Governance In The North-East Region: A Study Of The 'E-Prastuti' Project In Assam

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Abstract

e-Governance is a reality of 'minimum government and maximum governance'. E-governance is the use of digital technologies to change the way government works and make it easier for people to get public services. The e-Prastuti project is a commendable initiative taken by the government of Assam to digitize its public administration system. This project has several features and benefits that are aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government services. The project is also focused on ensuring transparency and accountability in government operations, which is a significant step towards good governance. The programme covers several departments, including revenue, health, education, and agriculture, and seeks to increase transparency and accountability in governance. The present paper aims to examine the objectives, features, and benefits of the e-Prastuti initiative in the state of Assam.

Keywords: e-Governance, Citizen-centric, Sustainable development, Efficiency, e-Prastuti, Public Policy.

Introduction:

E-governance pertains to the utilisation of digital technology for the delivery and management of public services. Specifically, it involves the use of information technologies such as the World Wide Web and the Internet. E-government has the potential to personalise relationships between the government and its citizens through more effective administration. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO), e-governance refers to the utilisation of Information and Communication Technology by the public sector to enhance information and service delivery, promote citizen involvement in the decision-making process, and increase the efficiency, accountability, and transparency of government. This overview was applied because it makes it abundantly visible that e-governance is not simply the automation of the status quo in government; rather, it is a mechanism with the potential to revolutionise relations between governments and the people they represent. India's National e-Governance Plan (NeGP), which promoted the use of the internet in government, was first implemented in the late 1990s. The National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) had

the objective of revolutionising governance by leveraging Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to ensure universal accessibility of all government services to everyone. The National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) was structured as a three-tiered framework. The first tier was dedicated to the establishment of essential ICT infrastructure, while the second tier was dedicated to enhancing capacity. The third tier was dedicated to the provision of citizen services. e-Governance should be thought of as the process of making governance adequate to the knowledge society that is emerging worldwide. The ultimate objective of e-Government is "Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent" (SMART) governance, which can be attained through integrating information and communication technology into the operation of the government. The use of technology has not only improved the quality of public services, but it has also made government processes more open and accountable. E-governance has made it easier for people to get government services, which has cut down on corruption and made government work more efficient overall.

The Northeast (NE) region of India is renowned for its natural grandeur, cultural diversity, and abundant natural resources. In the Northeast states, a significant population of indigenous people resides. The culture, traditions, music, and way of life of indigenous groups and tribes vary. Additionally, this region is linguistically and ethnically diverse. The inhabitants of the north-eastern region have struggled for years due to insurgency, unemployment, and a lack of communication and infrastructure. Due to its remote location and inadequate infrastructure, this region faces numerous developmental challenges, including a lack of connectivity, a low rate of literacy, a high rate of poverty, and inadequate healthcare facilities, among others. For the Northeast region of India to be able to compete with other developed sections of India, it is necessary for the region to place a primary emphasis on the sustainable development of its rural areas and the people who live there. The concept of e-governance is essential for Northeast India. E-governance can help solve some of the region's most important infrastructure, connectivity, and access problems by making government processes more open, efficient, and transparent. It can also aid in promoting economic growth, enhancing the quality of education and healthcare services, and reducing disparities between urban and rural areas. Therefore, policymakers and government institutions in Northeast India should prioritise e-governance.

e-Governance in North-East India:

The significance of e-governance has been on the rise in recent years, especially in Northeast India, where challenges related to infrastructure, connectivity, and accessibility have been observed. The residents of Northeast India frequently encounter challenges in accessing government services due to their residence in remote and mountainous regions. Utilisation of e-governance technologies such as online portals and mobile applications can streamline individuals' access to crucial government services such as healthcare, education, and social welfare. The technologies serve as instances of e-government initiatives. The implementation of this initiative has the potential to mitigate the disparities in service provision between urban and rural regions, thereby enhancing the overall standard of living for individuals residing in Northeast India.

In northeast India, government activities are often hampered by corruption, bureaucracy, and inefficiency. The government can increase the efficiency of its operations, get rid of possibilities for corruption, and expedite bureaucratic procedures by adopting and implementing e-governance initiatives. This can enhance

the legitimacy and credibility of regional government institutions, which is of the utmost importance in an area that has experienced severe social upheaval and political unrest. In the same period, the government can deliver high-quality education and health services to individuals in rural areas by introducing e-learning platforms and telemedicine initiatives. This has the potential to enhance the health and wellbeing of the local population while also easing pressure on the healthcare system. For those living in the area, it may also help to raise educational standards and open up new prospects. The government can expand opportunities for startups and small enterprises in this industry by using e-commerce platforms and online marketplaces. This might open fresh possibilities for economic development and growth while reducing the region's reliance on conventional industries like agriculture.

The Northeast e-Governance plan has also focused on capacity building and skill development among government officials and citizens. The scheme has provided training to over 31,000 government officials in the Northeast on various aspects of e-governance, such as digital literacy, cyber security, and project management. Furthermore, over 69,000 citizens have been trained in digital skills to enable them to access government services online.

The impact of the Northeast e-Governance Scheme has been significant. According to data from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, the scheme has led to a 160% increase in the number of digital transactions in the Northeast between 2018 and 2020. The scheme has also helped to improve the quality and efficiency of government services, resulting in greater satisfaction among citizens.

Here are some reasons why e-governance is important to the region:

- **Geographical challenges:** North-eastern India is a region with rugged terrain and difficult communication infrastructure. It can be difficult to reach remote and isolated communities, which often lack basic services such as healthcare and education. E-governance can help bridge this gap by delivering essential services through digital means.
- **Improved efficiency:** E-governance can help improve the efficiency of government services in this remote region by reducing paperwork, simplifying processes, and making it easier for citizens to access services. This can save time and money for both the government and citizens.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** E-governance can help promote transparency and accountability in government by making information availability easily to citizens. This can help prevent corruption and ensure that government officials are held accountable for their actions.
- **Digital literacy:** E-governance can help promote digital literacy in this region, which is important for economic development as well as for social inclusion. By providing access to digital services and resources, e-governance can help prepare citizens for the digital age and improve their job prospects.
- **Disaster management:** North-eastern India is prone to natural disasters such as floods, landslides, and earthquakes. E-governance can help improve disaster management by providing real-time information and alerts, facilitating communication between government agencies and citizens, and streamlining relief efforts.

e-Governance has the potential to transform the way government services are delivered in North-eastern India. Using ICT, this region may better manage the difficulties of its remote location and increase the effectiveness, openness, and responsibility of its governing bodies.

Some Major Government Initiatives in the Northeast Region to help e-Infrastructure: The Northeast region of India comprises eight states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. This region is known for its rich cultural diversity and natural resources but has been facing challenges related to economic growth, infrastructure development, and governance. To address these issues, the Government of India has initiated various e-infrastructure schemes in the Northeast region. To bridge the gap between the region and the rest of the country, the government of India launched the "Northeast e-Governance Scheme" in 2018. The main objective of this scheme is to improve the delivery of government services and increase transparency and accountability in governance using information and communication technology (ICT) tools.

- **PM-DevINE-** The Ministry of Development of Northeast Region (DoNER) is responsible for overseeing the planning, implementation, and evaluation of developmental initiatives and programmes in the Northeast region of India. A new programme called the Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North East (PM-DevINE) has been started because it has been determined that the 8 NE States have a lot of work to do in the areas of infrastructure, social development, livelihood, and community capacity. Prime Minister has put a lot of effort into improving this area, which has been the site of many development projects in recent years.

The Prime Minister's Development Initiative for the Northeast, also known as the Northeast Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESIDS), was started in 2017. The objective of the scheme was to facilitate the enhancement of infrastructure in the northeastern states of India. The main goals of the plan were to improve the region's road connections, water and power sources, and tourism. The government allocated a budget of Rs. 10,000 crores for the programme, which was to be implemented over a three-year period. As of March 2021, it has been reported that a cumulative sum of 876 projects, amounting to Rs. 7,799 crores have been authorised. A total of 730 projects valued at Rs. 6,188 crores have been successfully executed, while 146 projects valued at Rs. 1,611 crores are presently in the implementation phase.

The government has taken various measures to improve the road network, including the construction of new highways and the widening of existing ones. As of March 2021, a total of 4,586 km of roads have been constructed or upgraded under the scheme. This has improved connectivity not only within the region but also with other parts of the country. Another key part of the project has been the promotion of tourism in the region. The North-Eastern part of India has a lot of beautiful natural scenery, and the government has taken steps to encourage tourists there. As of March 2021, a total of 33 projects worth Rs. 452 crores have been approved to improve infrastructure for tourists in the area. This has led to more tourists coming to the area, which has given local people jobs. March 2021, a

total of 66 projects worth Rs. 525 crores have been sanctioned for the development of healthcare infrastructure in the region.

- **10% Gross Budgetary Support for Northeast Region-** Ministry of Development of Northeast region (MDoNER) watches and keeps track of all non-exempted Central Ministries/Departments (currently 55) that are required to spend at least 10% of their Gross Budgetary Support (GBS) of Central Sector and Centrally Sponsored Schemes for NE Region. This is to secure a significant increase in budgetary resources flowing to the region to address the backlog and gaps in basic minimum services and infrastructure. Since 2014-15 (through September 30, 2022), roughly Rs. 3.64 lakh crore have been spent in NER under 10% GBS. Under 10% GBS, spending in NER will go up by about 186%, from Rs.24,819 crore in 2014–15 to Rs.70,874 crore in 2021–22. The BE allocation for NER under 10% GBS for the year 2022-2023 is 76,040 crores. During 2021-22, expenditure tracking was meticulously done by categorising Ministries/Departments into three major functional areas and upgrading reporting through PFMS. As an immediate result of this, the expenditures went up by Rs. 22,311 crores, or 46%, above the level they were at in 2020-21, and they also went above and beyond the target (104%) for the very first time.
- **Common Services Centres-** Northeast India is a region of India consisting of eight states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. The region is geographically isolated from the rest of the country and has a predominantly rural population. The CSC scheme has played a crucial role in providing access to digital services to the people of this region. According to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), there are currently more than 15,000 CSC centres in the Northeast region. These centres offer a wide range of services, such as Aadhaar enrolment and updates, PAN card services, utility bill payments, banking services, and various other government services. The CSC centres have also played a crucial role in providing COVID-19-related services to the citizens of the region.

The CSC project has not only served to reduce the digital divide in the Northeast, but it has also given young people in the region a chance to find gainful jobs. As per the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), the Northeast region has a workforce of over 10,000 individuals employed in the Common Service Centres (CSC) centres. The CSC programme has additionally facilitated the advancement of entrepreneurial activities within the locality. A considerable number of CSC centres are managed by female entrepreneurs who have undergone training and received assistance from the government. The entrepreneurs have received financial aid from the government to establish the CSC centres.

- **Unified Mobile Application for New-age Governance (UMANG)-** The 'Unified Mobile Application for New-age Governance' (UMANG) is a mobile application launched by the Government of India in 2017, aimed at providing e-governance services to citizens on a single platform. UMANG has been a game-changer in the delivery of public services, making them accessible to citizens

anytime, anywhere. The Northeast region of India has also been benefiting from the UMANG app. UMANG has been instrumental in bridging this gap, making e-governance services accessible to citizens in the Northeast region. Earlier, citizens had to go through a cumbersome process of visiting multiple government offices, filling up forms, and waiting for long periods to get their work done. With the UMANG app, citizens can now apply for various services online, track the status of their applications, and receive updates on their mobile phones.

UMANG offers over 1,200 services from various government departments, including passport services, income tax e-filing, and health services. These services are available in multiple languages, making it easier for citizens who speak different languages to access them. The UMANG app has also been integrated with various payment gateways, allowing citizens to make online payments for government services.

- **e-District Mission Mode Project (MMP)**- The e-District MMP of Northeast India is a commendable initiative that has leveraged technology to improve the delivery of government services to the citizens of the region. The e-District MMP aims to provide end-to-end computerization of the district-level administration, including the automation of workflows and the delivery of public services through the use of information and communication technology (ICT). As per the latest available data, as of September 2021, a total of 151 services across various departments have been integrated with the e-District platform in the Northeast region. These services include certificates such as birth, death, and caste certificates; revenue-related services like land records and mutation; and services related to driving licences and vehicle registration, among others.

The project has made significant progress in terms of the number of services being offered through the e-District platform. In Assam, 34 services have been integrated, including 23 revenue-related services, while in Tripura, a total of 28 services have been integrated. In Meghalaya, 20 services have been integrated, including 11 revenue-related services, and in Nagaland, 13 services have been integrated. A total of 1.62 crore transactions have been carried out in the Northeast region through the e-District platform, with Assam accounting for the highest number of transactions at 71.65 lakh, followed by Tripura with 19.14 lakh transactions, and Manipur with 16.45 lakh transactions.

- **Diksha** - Diksha e-learning platform has been a game-changer for education in Northeast India. The platform has helped to bridge the digital divide and democratize access to quality education. Students in remote areas that were previously underserved by traditional schools now have access to quality educational resources. The platform has also helped to empower teachers by providing them with the tools to enhance their teaching and learning methods. As of 2021, over 3.3 million students and 250,000 teachers have registered on the platform in Northeast India. The platform has over 80,000 e-books, 30,000 videos, and 50,000 interactive quizzes available for students to use. Additionally, the platform has seen a surge in usage during the COVID-19 pandemic, as schools have had to close due to lockdowns and social distancing measures.

- **National Agriculture Market (e-NAM)-** e-NAM, or the National Agriculture Market, is a digital platform designed to create a unified national market for agricultural commodities in India, and the northeastern region of India is known for its unique biodiversity, diverse culture, and rich agricultural heritage. The implementation of e-NAM in northeast India has brought a significant change to the agriculture sector. As of September 2021, a total of 59 markets across the Northeast region have been integrated with the e-NAM platform. These markets include 15 in Assam, 13 in Meghalaya, 10 in Nagaland, 9 in Arunachal Pradesh, 7 in Manipur, 3 in Mizoram, and 2 in Tripura. The platform has enabled farmers to access a national market, thereby eliminating the middlemen and providing them with a fair price for their produce. The e-NAM platform also provides farmers with real-time information on market prices, which enables them to make informed decisions about selling their produce.
- **M-KISAN** – The Indian government launched M-Kisan, a mobile platform that offers farmers all over the nation services and information related to agriculture. The platform enables farmers to access a range of services, including market prices, weather forecasts, and expert advice, among others. In the Northeast region of India, M-Kisan has emerged as a vital tool for farmers to enhance their agricultural productivity and incomes. The farmers in the region face numerous challenges, including a lack of access to modern farming techniques, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to markets. To address these challenges, the Government of India launched M-Kisan in the region, providing farmers with a range of services to enhance their agricultural productivity and incomes. As of 2021, over 2.7 million farmers in the Northeast region have registered with M-Kisan, with the platform providing them with access to critical information and services. This information has helped farmers in the region reduce crop losses due to adverse weather conditions, thereby enhancing their incomes. Another critical service offered by M-Kisan is access to market information, which is essential for farmers to get better prices for their produce. The platform provides daily updates on market prices for various crops, enabling farmers to make informed decisions on selling their produce. M-Kisan also provides expert advice to farmers on a range of agricultural-related topics, including crop management, pest control, and soil health, among others. The platform has a team of agricultural experts who provide advice and guidance to farmers on these topics, enabling them to adopt best practises and enhance their agricultural productivity and income.
- **Mobile based advisory system for agriculture & Horticulture (M4AGRI)** – It is mobile based advisory system for agriculture and horticulture. It has been implemented in the North-East States namely Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh.

In collaboration with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and other agricultural institutions, the Meghalaya government created the M4AGRI technique. The technique involves a combination of traditional and modern farming practises, including the use of organic fertilisers, intercropping, and crop rotation. M4AGRI is the use of indigenous microbial technology, which involves the use of microbes found in the soil to enhance soil fertility and improve crop yields.

This technique has been used successfully in Meghalaya to increase the yield of crops like rice, maize, and vegetables. According to data from the Meghalaya government, the implementation of M4AGRI has led to a significant increase in crop yield in the state. For example, the yield of paddy in the state increased from 1.8 metric tonnes per hectare in 2014–15 to 3.5 metric tonnes per hectare in 2020–21. Similarly, the yield of maize increased from 1.5 metric tonnes per hectare in 2014–15 to 3.5 metric tonnes per hectare in 2020–21. With its combination of traditional and modern farming practises, M4AGRI has proven to be an effective tool for sustainable agriculture and livelihood improvement in the region.

e-Prastuti Project in Assam

The e-Prastuti initiative is a major step towards modernising Assam's land administration. This initiative has the potential to revolutionise the way land-related services are provided in the state. The project will increase the land administration system's transparency, efficiency, and precision, which will be of tremendous benefit to the people of Assam. e-Prastuti is an ambitious effort by the Assam government to digitise the state's land records. The initiative seeks to establish a trustworthy, effective, and open system for land administration in Assam. It was introduced in 2017 with an estimated price tag of Rs. 116 crores. The primary goal of the e-Prastuti project is to establish a digital database containing all Assam land records. This database will contain ownership, tenure, land use, and physical boundary information for every parcel of land in the state. Assam's current land administration system is plagued by rampant corruption and inefficiency; this initiative seeks to eradicate these problems. The e-Prastuti initiative is anticipated to provide Assamese citizens with numerous advantages. It will make acquiring land-related services more expedient and transparent. Citizens will no longer be required to visit government offices and interact with corrupt officials to complete land-related tasks. They need only access the web portal to initiate the required service. The initiative will ensure that all state land records are accurate and current. This will prevent land disputes and assure the smooth execution of land-related transactions. The government will have a clear picture of land ownership and land use in the state, making it simpler to implement various development projects.

The implementation of the project is being split up into two stages. In the first phase, all extant land records in the state were digitised. This phase was concluded in March 2019, with the digitization of over 6 billion land records. The second phase entails the development of a web-based portal for land administration, which will enable citizens to access their land records and initiate various online land-related services. This phase is presently in progress, and the launch of the portal is imminent.



The implementation process involved the following steps:

- Assessment of existing services: The first step was to assess the existing public services and identify the ones that could be digitized.
- Design and development of the platform: A common platform was designed and developed to provide a one-stop solution for citizens to access all public services.
- Integration with government departments: The platform was integrated with various government departments and agencies to enable the delivery of services through a single window.
- Training and capacity building: Training was provided to government officials and citizens to enable them to use the platform effectively.
- Launch and roll-out: The platform was launched in a phased manner, and services were gradually made available to citizens.

The e-Prastuti project has had a significant impact on the citizens of Assam. The project has made it easier for citizens to access public services, saving them time and effort. The platform has also reduced corruption by eliminating the need for physical interaction between citizens and government officials. The project has also increased transparency by making information available to citizens in a timely and accessible manner.

Challenges and Suggestions:

The e-Prastuti project has faced several challenges during its implementation. One of the major challenges was the resistance from government officials to adopt the new platform. The lack of infrastructure and resources in some areas of the state also posed a challenge. Another challenge was the lack of awareness among citizens about the platform and how to use it effectively. Some recommendations for this program are given in the handbook of e-presentation published by the government. Some key suggestions are as follows:

- The website should be customised to the demands of the citizens.
- The website's target user group should be identified first, and then focus on the design, usability, and interaction components of the website.

- The department should own the content and be solely responsible for its upkeep and authenticity.
- A central point of coordination has been established for all website inquiries and support.
- Website to:
 - Be friendly for the differently enabled.
 - Have multi-lingual support.
 - Easy navigation
 - Be mobile compliant.

Conclusion:

The e-Prastuti project is an important initiative of the Government of Assam aimed at providing electronic delivery of public services to citizens. The project has had a significant impact on citizens, making it easier for them to access public services, reducing corruption, and increasing transparency. The project has also faced several challenges during its implementation, but the government has taken steps to overcome these challenges. Overall, the e-Prastuti project is a step towards achieving the larger goal of e-governance in the state of Assam.

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