

COMPONENTS OF GOOD GOVERNANCE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO E- PANCHAYATS IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Good governance and democratic development are perceived as responsive to the interest of the poor that make the majority within the Indian context. It is ICT that could strengthen civic education, guarantee equal access to information and tie individuals and institutions to make real participatory discussion and debate across great distances. Mutual recognition and a workable relationship between the state and civil society promote socially accountable, participatory, inclusive and just development for the most marginalized communities.

e-panchayats has become the key to good-governance. India has been harnessing the benefits provided by the Information & Communication Technologies (ICT) to provide integrated governance, reach to the citizens faster, and provide efficient services and citizen empowerment through access to information. The aim is to redefine governance in the ICT age to provide 'smart governance'.¹ Several significant initiatives have been taken at the Centre, the State & the local level in this direction. At the Central level, the government has extensively promoted the use of IT in managing its internal processes and has drawn up a 'Minimum Agenda of e-Governance'². The Government has enacted IT Act 2000 which provides legal status to the information and transactions carried on the net

Key Words: Good Governance, Components Good Governance, e-panchayats, functions of e-panchayats and expected outcomes.

Introduction: Indian Government has revived the local self-governance with more powers and financial resources devolved in order to make them more people-centric and effective instruments of governance at people's door steps. This is evident from the fact that Government of India has pondered upon the proliferation of electronic network throughout the country for governance down at the village level and its work plan in 2003. Since then the information and communication technology was introduced at grassroots level governance, commonly known as e-panchayats. It can be said in short that e-panchayats is nothing but use of ICT in the local-level governance through panchayat bodies for administrative and development purposes. Although there are various aspects of e-panchayats like application, use, equity in accessibility, maintenance, efficiency, sustenance, etc., yet it is essential to have a conceptual framework for examining the e-governance by the grassroots-level functionaries.

Objectives:

1. To understand the components of good governance and ICT
2. To analyze some of the features of e-panchayats in India
3. To know the functional areas of e-panchayats
4. To analyze service delivery by e-panchayats and outcome

Methodology: This study is fully based on secondary data. The study is descriptive in nature. The data was collected from books, magazines, research articles, news papers, documents and websites.

Components of Good Governance and ICT:

Governance has certain specific connotations which have recently acquired significance in the literature of political science and public administration with varied meanings. Generally, it has been meant as the process of decision making and the process by which decisions are implemented or not implemented. Management of natural, material and human resources for the public good is governance. Now the question is how governance becomes good. The goodness of governance needs to be crystallized. The postulates of this concept have been crystallized with universal acceptance in a way that it has eight major characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. Thus good governance is also responsive to the present and future needs of the society. Further, it is guided

by human rights and by the principles of the rule of law and democracy, such as equal political participation for all.

Table-1: Components of Good Governance (GG) & ICT³

Components	ICT for GG
○ Accountability	To people
○ Transparency	Information accessible to all
○ Responsiveness	Makes governance respond
○ Effectiveness and efficiency	People's watch
○ Equitable and inclusive	ICT knows no socioeconomic divide
○ Participatory	ICT empowers people to assert & exert
○ Consensus oriented	Opportunities open to all for opinion
○ Follows the rule of law	ICT cannot favor/disfavor any

e-panchayats:

e-panchayat system is web-based and n-tiered; and functions like an Application Service Provider enabling panchayat level digital services for all stakeholders. The stakeholders are citizens, elected representatives, Gram Panchayat officials, the Governments and the knowledge workers. But it should not be merely perceived as an ICT enabled system of governance that provides public services on demand.⁴ It promotes virtues of good governance and deepens democratic values in society. It creates an environment in which people feel empowered, establishes a system that ensures people can easily avail themselves of their fundamental rights to information, and broadens the scope of local Government. Several State Governments have also taken initiatives to set up the e-panchayats to facilitate the development process and provide easy access to information to citizens. States such as Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Himanchal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Haryana and Goa have set up panchayat portals to provide information regarding development schemes such as National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, organizational/departmental set-up, developmental policies, annual reports, notification, evaluation reports of development programmes, status of development schemes, revenues etc. The common feature of the portals is that they give information in local languages like Hindi, Gujarati, Kannada, etc. and about issues concerning the local people.⁵

Some features of the e-panchayats in India are:

Intra-organization Coordination: The use of ICT at panchayat-level governance has been to empower the villagers with knowledge and information and better service delivery on their demand. For this the internal management of resources within the organization should be appropriate. As such e-panchayat does also require the information network for accruing, storage, analysis and dissemination of the information within the organization.⁶The elected executives and appointed executives are equally accessible to whatever information they require. This minimizes the point of difference. In the conventional governance, people have been getting 'supply-oriented' benefits of the governance whereas in the e-panchayat they can aspire for 'demand-oriented' benefits.⁷e-panchayat can manage its organization for meeting the people's demand.

Information and democracy: Democratic governance requires wider people's participation which is possible only if they are properly equipped with information. As such the governmental organization has to be, by nature, an information intensive organization. Thus democratic governance is an 'information centric' process.⁸ The governing institutions like elected panchayat bodies are representative democratic structure which requires wider participation of all or most of the citizens which can only be assured if they are accessible to relevant information. Thus information is power but information management is political because it involves installation, maintenance, operation and dissemination which are done by the governing bodies (state government, panchayat representatives and the local bureaucracy).

Citizen's RTI: Another conceptual dimension of e-panchayat relates to function as a vehicle of ensuring citizens' right to information. The right to information empowers citizens with the right to 'demand' information and governments with the duty to 'Supply'. e-panchayat can enable the government to meet its obligation under the

right to information by simplifying the delivery process. By ICT at panchayat level, local government transforms itself into transparent, less corrupt and truly decentralized in decision-making process.⁹ It facilitates delivery of better and convergent services to citizens and improvement of internal management, capacity building and efficiency.

People as stakeholders: The concept of governance has changed a lot and citizens are now not considered as simply beneficiaries rather ‘stakeholders or shareholders’ of the entire development process who ‘seek’ several information on the functioning of the government as well as ‘provide’ several inputs that help policy-making process on one hand and as customers of the government ‘demand’ better services. As such the e-panchayat becomes ‘information receiver’, ‘information provider’, ‘service provider’ and ‘feedback seeker’. In short, it transforms a citizen from ‘beneficiary’ to ‘stakeholder’.¹⁰

Functional Areas of e-Panchayats:

The functions of e-panchayats can be categorized into two folds – internal management and service delivery.

Internal management: Support processes: Since inception of new PRIs, the major problem that new panchayat bodies had to face was handling the accounts. It was a great deal of nationwide debate as how would panchayat representatives keep the account as they were not so trained to handle the funds. As such the local level bureaucracy dominated the entire development process in the name of keeping the accounts of the funds. The siphoning out of the funds occurred in connivance with the elected representatives and the local-level bureaucracy. But the e-panchayats can handle the issue of account keeping of PRIs at various levels. The ICT devices can develop fund monitoring and accounting system through appropriate software (‘module’). The Internet and Intranet of the government organisations can be used on large scale. The accounting from bottom organisations to apex ones can be consolidated at the district level, which may be consolidated at the state level through ICT networking.¹¹ This technology can generate debit/credit vouchers, cashbook, ledgerPs, cheque issue register, pay bills and pay slips and further it can easily analyze the cash, receipts and payments, deductions etc. Of course it would need the revision of Accounts Rules and approval of the Accountant General of the state, in the case of PRIs in view of the software technologies.¹² This would also require creating posts of experts of computer operation in accounting like – system managers at secretariat level, district information analysts at Zila Parishad level, informatics and data entry operator at Panchayat Samiti level and Panchayat Secretaries be trained accordingly.

The devices for the better internal management can be developed through Community Service Centres (CSCs), which would be loaded with the required information and knowledge. Besides, the introduction of public private partnership (PPP) may also be facilitated through the CSCs.¹³ The CSCs once installed by government may be left to the people and private parties for its maintenance on the basis of cost recovery mechanism. The creation of State Wide Area Network (SWAN) would be the prerequisite for introducing the ICT in CSCs or such centers at the offices of two-lower layers of the PRIs.

Table-2: Functions of e-Panchayats:

Components of e-panchayats	Areas of functions	Specific functions
Use of ICT through CSCs and network in (right from Gram Panchayat to Zila Parishad level)	The support process making internal management effective	Providing adequate and analyzed data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handling funds • Keeping accounts of the PRIs • Monitoring and reporting • Facilitating PPP
Empowering people for participation	Providing opportunities of e-learning among people	Making people enthused to use ICT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating e-learning • Empowering people with knowledge • Poor people made both information 'receiver and provider'
Open for local private entrepreneur to handle self-supported ICT kiosks/CSCs	Locals are given responsibility of operation and maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost-affectivity and cost-recovery mechanism • Enthusiastic BOO mechanism

Service Delivery Functions:

The people are always at trouble when they have to get the certificates (related to caste, income, domicile etc.) from the government organizations and even the panchayat bodies. The e-panchayats are able to generate computerized certificates like trade licenses, caste certificate, income certificate, domicile certificate etc.¹⁴ on one click without taking the services of agents as the information would be stored in the ICT network from anywhere through the Internet and Intranet provisions. The information about one's placement in the BPL list, list of beneficiaries of various schemes including social security schemes can easily be get from the CSCs or ICT kiosks of panchayat bodies.

Service Delivery by e-Panchayats : The electronic architecture of panchayat functioning is web-based n-tiered. It functions like Applications Services Provider for all panchayat level digital services to all the stakeholders. The stakeholders are citizens, elected representatives, Gram Panchayat officials, the government and the knowledge workers. At panchayat level an ordinary client with Internet access is sufficient to implement e-panchayat. Most of the computation is done locally; the reporting and association communication takes place through available network for a very brief period of time. Thus field level units can conserve a lot of communication cost and at the same time ensure the uniformity and quality of services through e-governance. All the functions of the e-panchayats can be applied through following four kinds of server software, such as i) Administrative Module, ii) Management of Information System Module, iii) Citizen's Service Module, and iv) Module for panchayat representatives. These modules have been developed by NIC.¹⁵

e-Panchayats and Expected Outcome:

The introduction of e-panchayat has shown that e-panchayat is multifunctional governing institution – such as, faster and better decision-making mechanism, better intra-organisational management, better service delivery system and empowering people. e-Panchayat facilitates the development voluntary organizations. Introduction of electronic mode of governance builds capacity both of the governing organization and the people as well. The services provided by the e-panchayat enable public services on the ICT and provide digital support system for decision making. It empowers the citizens with information, awareness, and acquaintance with the ongoing schemes in order to make them ready to participate both as the beneficiary and the stakeholder. Most important

of the functions of the e-panchayat is ‘web-based’¹⁶ monitoring of the progress of schemes which is open to both the managers and citizens. Stronger watch by the people themselves can be ensured by the information network. This assures accessibility, accountability and transparency. The most difficult part of the new panchayat institutions has been the handling funds which could be overcome by the e-panchayat. Most important part of the whole process is ‘e-readiness of the people’. e-Panchayat will provide opportunities of e-learning among the people. Once the people are accessible to the ICT at the panchayat level, they will learn to use the devices:

Table-3: e-Panchayats and Its Outcome:

Postulates	Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intra-organization coordination 	Efficient and effective management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory democracy 	Empowers people with information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information dissemination 	Ensures citizen’s RTI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People oriented 	Makes people to participate as ‘stakeholder’ not as only ‘beneficiary’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficient service delivery 	Avoids delay and procedures, lessens the chasm between ‘centre of decision’ and ‘centre of action’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solver 	Overcomes the ailments of conventional governance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assures public action 	NGOs, SHGs and other such public actions facilitated

Conclusion:

Creating simply the software and modules cannot work. It is people, not the goods that make things go. Thus it is imperative to ensure the successful implementation of the network in the shortest period with optimum efficiency and cost-effectiveness. It is generally alleged that the hurdles come in the way to deliver good for the people by a government organization. The first and foremost among them is lack of infrastructure, IT infrastructure and e-readiness of the people to use the ICT at panchayat level. Other challenges are- non-availability of centralized database, lack of connectivity among officers of various departments, lack of departmental coordination, lack of skilled hands and the non-standard procedure and practices. The cost-effectiveness can only be assured if it is maintained and operated by the people themselves. The government at the state level requires providing the server in the beginning. At the ground level, the panchayat bodies particularly, the Gram Panchayats and local people should go for a system of ‘build own and operate through a self-employment generation scheme. So that in each village one or two families would be able to get their livelihood by rendering services to the citizens and the GP officials by operating and implementing e-panchayat. For rendering the services, the service charges can be fixed. It will be the entrepreneur’s responsibility to collect and feed data, and generate reports. The amount of data fed and the number of reports generated are monitored through software and accounted for making payment. The system maintenance, procurement, internet connectivity and associated logistics shall be cared by the entrepreneurs. As such the government or panchayat bodies need not bother about the recurring expenditure or associated expenditure. In case of need of initial investments, government can play role of catalyst by recommending banks to issue soft loans to such entrepreneurs or voluntary bodies formed for the purpose. They would take better care as they will be dependent on it for sustenance.

e-panchayats are the need of the hour as people in rural areas in India are still deprived of basic facilities for a decent life. Common wisdom says that poverty and deprivation exist not only due to lack of resources but also persist because of inefficient and malfunctioning institutions. In the emerging knowledge society and information revolution, panchayats should not be left in isolation. They should be provided with adequate technological resources in order to be able to play a meaningful role in the course of development in these countries.

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Tables

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