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Review Article

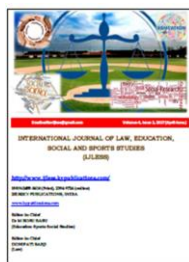


Digital India: A Transformational Leap towards Progress

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ABSTRACT

The journey of e-Governance initiated in India and took a broader dimension in mid 90s for wider sectoral applications with emphasis on citizen-centric services. Later on, many states and union territories started various e-Governance projects whose main focus was on the citizens of the country yet they could make lesser than the desired impact. It has been felt that a lot more thrust is required to ensure e-Governance in the country to promote inclusive growth that covers electronic services, products, devices and job opportunities. Moreover, electronic manufacturing in the country also needs to be strengthened, hence the Present Prime minister's strong emphasis on "Make in India".

In order to transform the entire ecosystem of public services through the use of information technology, the Government of India has launched the Digital India project with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and a techno savvy nation.

More than 250 services were launched in areas of health information, utility services, smart public distribution system (PDS) card, land record services, mobile applications for civic amenities, services for farmers, social welfare and pension services, electoral services, online court services, police services, and employment exchange services. Information Technology is making new landmarks but what best could be achieved out of it, can be seen within the last couple of years. The initiative taken by the Indian government to give a practical shape to the uses of technology is remarkable. Now the people of India do not have to think and wonder at the discipline, the prompt court and police services of the foreign countries but they can see things happening in their own country. Strong measures are being taken by the government of India like placing of Biometric machines in government offices; so that the officials may work and the public may get the maximum benefit. The present paper is an effort to study the steps taken by the government with an eager and earnest desire for the betterment of the nation so that India may once again be looked at par with the developed nations.

Key words: India, government, information, technology, people, services.

With a view to promote development, various measures had been taken in different times by different governments but the present scenario is very diverse from what the nation has witnessed in the days gone by. Many ways were adopted to educate the masses but it is human nature that it tends to learn under compulsion.

The present paper is an effort to study the steps taken by the government with an eager and earnest desire for the betterment of the nation so that India may once again be looked at par with the developed nations.

Digital India was launched by the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi on 1 July 2015 - with an objective of connecting rural areas with high-speed Internet networks and improving digital literacy. The vision of Digital India program includes growth in areas of electronic services, products manufacturing and job opportunities. It is centered on three key areas - Digital Infrastructure as a Utility to Every Citizen, Governance & Services on Demand and Digital Empowerment of Citizens.

The Government of India entity Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL) which executes the National Optical Fibre Network project will be the custodian of Digital India (DI) project. BBNL had ordered United Telecoms Limited to connect 250,000 villages through GPON to ensure FTTH based broadband. This will provide the first basic setup to achieve towards Digital India and is expected to be completed by 2017.

The government is planning to create 28,000 seats of BPOs in various states and set up at least one Common Service Centre in each of the gram panchayats in the state. The 2016 Union budget of India announced 11 technology initiatives including the use of data analytics to rip off tax evaders, creating a substantial opportunity for IT companies to build out the systems that will be required. Digital Literacy mission will cover six crore rural households. It is planned to connect 550 farmer markets in the country through the use of technology.

There are only ten percent English speaking Indians, only two percent reside in rural areas. Rest everyone depends on their vernacular language for living their lives. However, as of now, email addresses can only be created in English language. To connect rural India with the Digital India, the Government of India impelled email services provider giants including Gmail, office and rediff to provide email address in regional languages. However, the email companies have shown positive sign and are working in the same process. A company based in India, Data Xgen Technologies Pvt. Ltd, has launched world's first free linguistic email address under the name 'DATAMAIL' which allows to create email ids in eight Indian languages, English; and three foreign languages - Arabic, Russian and Chinese. One can see a rapid progress over the period of time, the email service will be offered by Data XGen Technologies in 22 languages. Digital India mission's main aim is to bridge the connectivity gap between the rural and urban areas.

The Government of India has a vision to achieve growth on multiple fronts with the Digital India Program. Keeping this view, the present government of India, has set a target to give an easy access to the people of India in spheres of Broadband Highway, universal access to internet, Public Internet Access Program, e-Governance-Reforming Government through Technology, e-Kranti - Electronic delivery of services Information for all , Electronics Manufacturing, IT for Jobs and Early Harvest Programs.

Some other facilities which will be provided through this initiative are Digital Locker, e-education, e-health, e-sign and national scholarship portal. As the part of Digital India, Indian government planned to launch Botnet cleaning centers.

The Digital Locker facility is a great help to citizens to digitally store their important documents like PAN card, passport, mark sheets and degree certificates. It provides secure access to Government issued documents. It uses authenticity services provided by Aadhaar card. It is aimed at eliminating the use of physical documents and enables the sharing of verified electronic documents across government agencies. The three key stakeholders of DigiLocker are the Citizen, the Issuer and requester.

Attendance gov. in is a website launched by present Prime Minister on 1 July 2015 to keep a record of the attendance of Government employees. This initiative was taken implementation of a common Biometric Attendance System (BAS) in the central government offices.

My Gov.in is a platform to share inputs and ideas on matters of policy and governance. It is a platform for citizen engagement in governance, through a "Discuss", "Do" and "Disseminate" approach.

To have a clean and hygienic country, Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) Mobile app is being used by people and Government organizations.

eSign framework allows citizens to digitally sign a document online using Aadhaar authentication. It is a great facility for people specially those who sick, for the senior citizens or for those who are living abroad.

The eHospital application provides important services such as online registration, payment of fees and appointment, online diagnostic reports, enquiring availability of blood online etc. These facilities are a boon to the citizens.

National Scholarship Portal is a one step solution for end to end scholarship process right from submission of student application, verification, sanction and disbursal to end beneficiary for all the scholarships provided by the Government of India. This scheme has proved to be very helpful to the students.

e- Sampark is a mechanism to contact citizens electronically, sending informational and public service messages via e-mails, SMSs and outbound dialing.

The projects were greatly appreciated both by the Indians and the people from foreign nations and at the launch ceremony of Digital India Week by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Delhi on 1 July 2015 top CEOs from India and abroad committed to invest 224.5 lakh crore (US\$3.3 trillion) towards this initiative. The CEOs said the investments would be utilized towards making smart phones and internet devices at an affordable price in India which would help generate jobs in India as well as reduce the cost of importing them from abroad. Leaders from Silicon Valley San Jose, California expressed their support for Digital India during PM Modi's visit in September 2015. Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, changed his profile picture in support of Digital India and started a chain on Facebook and promised to work on Wi-Fi Hotspots in rural area of India. Google committed to provide broadband connectivity on 500 railway stations in India. Microsoft agreed to provide broadband connectivity to five hundred thousand villages in India and make India its cloud hub through Indian data centres. Qualcomm announced an investment of US\$150 million in Indian startups. Oracle plans to invest in 20 states and will work on payments and Smart City initiatives. However back home in India, cyber experts' expressed their concern over internet.org and viewed the Prime Minister's bonhomie with Zuckerberg as the government's indirect approval of the controversial initiative. The Statesment reported, "Prime Minister Narendra Modi's chemistry with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg at the social media giant's headquarters in California may have been greeted enthusiastically in Silicon Valley but back home several social media enthusiasts and cyber activists are disappointed." Later the Prime Minister office clarified that net neutrality will be maintained at all costs and vetoed the Basic Internet plans.

Though these e-governance projects were citizen-centric, they could make less than the desired impact due to their limited features. The isolated and less interactive systems revealed major gaps that were thwarting the successful adoption of e-governance along the entire spectrum of governance. They clearly pointed towards the need for a more comprehensive planning and implementation for the infrastructure required to be put in place, interoperability issues to be addressed, etc. to establish a more connected government.

All new and on-going e-Governance projects as well as the existing projects, which are being revamped, now follow the key principles of e-Kranti namely 'Transformation and not Translation', 'Integrated Services and not Individual Services', 'Government Process Reengineering (GPR) to be

mandatory in every MMP', 'ICT Infrastructure on Demand', 'Cloud by Default', 'Mobile First', 'Fast Tracking Approvals', 'Mandating Standards and Protocols', 'Language Localization', 'National GIS (Geo-Spatial Information System)', 'Security and Electronic Data Preservation'.

The portfolio of Mission Mode Projects has increased from 31 to 44 MMPs. Many new social sector projects namely Women and Child Development, Social Benefits, Financial Inclusion, Urban Governance, eBhasha...etc have been added as new MMPs under e-Kranti.

It is proposed that Ministries, Departments and States would fully leverage the Common and Support ICT Infrastructure. They would lay down standards and policy guidelines, provide technical and handholding support, undertake capacity building, R&D, etc.

The existing as well as the ongoing e-Governance initiatives would be suitably revamped to align them with the principles of Digital India. Scope enhancement, Process Reengineering, use of integrated & interoperable systems and deployment of emerging technologies like cloud & mobile would be undertaken to enhance the delivery of Government services to citizens.

States would be given flexibility to identify for inclusion additional state-specific projects, which are relevant for their socio-economic needs.

e-Governance would be promoted through a centralized initiative to the extent necessary, to ensure citizen centric service orientation, interoperability of various e-Governance applications and optimal utilization of ICT infrastructure/ resources, while adopting a decentralized implementation model.

Successes would be identified and their replication promoted proactively with the required productization and customization wherever needed.

The government is mindful that Public Private Partnerships would be preferred wherever feasible to implement e-Governance projects with adequate management and strategic control.

Adoption of Unique ID would be promoted to facilitate identification, authentication and delivery of benefits.

The positions of Chief Information Officers (CIO) would be created in at least 10 key Ministries so that various e-Governance projects could be designed, developed and implemented faster. CIO positions will be at Additional Secretary/Joint Secretary level with over-riding powers on IT in the respective Ministry.

For effective management of the Digital India program, the program management structure would consist of a Monitoring Committee on Digital India headed by the Prime Minister, a Digital India Advisory Group chaired by the Minister of Communications and IT and an Apex Committee chaired by the Cabinet Secretary. The structure has the needed secretarial, monitoring and technical support and appropriate decentralization of power and responsibility to ensure effective execution of the various projects components by the implementing departments.

There are various types of committees to put a check and to monitor the Digital India programs.

A Monitoring Committee on Digital India under the Chairpersonship of Prime Minister which will be constituted with representation drawn from relevant Ministries/ Departments to provide leadership, prescribe deliverables and milestones, and monitor periodically the implementation of the Digital India Program.

A Digital India Advisory Group headed by the Minister of Communications and IT to solicit views of external stakeholders and to provide inputs to the Monitoring Committee on Digital India, advise the Government on policy issues and strategic interventions necessary for accelerating the implementation of the Digital India Program across Central and State Government Ministries/Departments. The composition of the Advisory Group would include representation from the Planning Commission and 8 to 9 representatives from States and Union Territories and other Line Ministries/Departments on a rotational basis.

An Apex Committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary would be overseeing the program and providing policy and strategic directions for its implementation and resolving inter-ministerial issues. In addition it would harmonize and integrate diverse initiatives and aspects related to integration of services, end to end process re-engineering and service levels of MMPs and other initiatives under the Digital India Program, wherever required.

There is an Expenditure Finance Committee (EFC) Committee and Non Plan Expenditure (CNE) to financially appraise/ approve projects as per existing delegation of financial powers.

The EFC/ CNE headed by Secretary Expenditure would also be recommending to the CCEA the manner in which MMPs/ eGovernance initiatives are to be implemented, as well as the financial terms of participation for States. A representative of the Planning Commission would also be included in both the EFC and CNE.

A Council of Mission Leaders on Digital India headed by Secretary, DeitY would be established as a platform to share the best practices in various existing and new eGov initiatives under Digital India and also to sensitize various government departments about ICT projects of DeitY. While the inter-departmental, integration and interoperable issues of integrated projects / eGovernance initiatives would be resolved by the Apex Committee on Digital India headed by Cabinet Secretary, the technical issues of integrated projects would be resolved by the Council of Mission Leaders.

Further, considering the scope of the Digital India Program and the need to look at issues such as overall technology architecture, framework, standards, security policy, funding strategy, service delivery mechanism, sharing of common infrastructure etc. at a program level, it is proposed that the technical appraisal of all Digital India projects be done by DeitY, prior to a project being placed before the EFC/ CNE. This appraisal would cover issues relating to inclusion of adoption of Standards, utilization of Cloud and mobile platforms, consideration of security aspects, etc. The Secretary, DeitY or his representative may also be included as a standing special invitee to all EFC/CNE meetings, which are appraising/approving MMPs. It may be mentioned that the DeitY has already set up a Program Management Unit, namely National e-Governance Division (NeGD) to provide support to departments in conceptualizing, developing, appraising, implementing and monitoring respective MMPs / e-Governance Initiatives.

Institutional mechanism of Digital India at State level would be headed by State Committee on Digital India by the Chief Minister. State/UT Apex Committees on Digital India headed by Chief Secretaries would be constituted at State/UT level to allocate required resources, set priority amongst projects and resolve inter-departmental issues at State level.

For effective monitoring of Digital India, usage of Project Management Information System would be mandatory in each new and existing Mission Mode Projects to capture the real or near real time details about the progress of the project. This tool should be proficient enough to capture the parameters for each stage of project namely, conceptualization and development, implementation and post implementation. The parameters could be decided in consultation with various line Ministries / Departments and DeitY.

Since the “e-Kranti: National eGovernance Plan 2.0” is already integrated with Digital India Program, the existing program management structure established for National eGovernance Plan at both national and state level has also been decided to be integrated appropriately with the program management structure being envisaged for Digital India Program at national and State/UT level.

The Apex Committee on the Digital India program headed by the Cabinet Secretary and the Digital India Advisory Group chaired by the Minister of Communications and Information Technology has been constituted.

The first meeting of the Apex Committee on the Digital India program was held on 26.11.2014. The second meeting of the Apex Committee on the Digital India program was held on 09.02.2015. The actions on decisions made by the Apex Committee are being worked out.

Digital India is an umbrella program that covers multiple Government Ministries and Departments. It weaves together a large number of ideas and thoughts into a single, comprehensive vision so that each of them can be implemented as part of a larger goal. Each individual element stands on its own, but is also part of the larger picture. Digital India is to be implemented by the entire Government with overall coordination being done by the Department of Electronics and Information Technology (DeitY). Digital India aims to provide the much needed thrust to the nine pillars of growth areas, namely Broadband Highways, Universal Access to Mobile Connectivity, Public Internet Access Program, e-Governance: Reforming Government through Technology, e-Kranti - Electronic Delivery of Services, Information for All, Electronics Manufacturing, IT for Jobs and Early Harvest Programs. Each of these areas is a complex program in itself and cuts across multiple Ministries and Departments.

All the initiatives, including establishing and expanding core ICT infrastructure, delivery of services ...etc under the Digital India program have definitive completion time targets. Majority of the initiatives are planned to be realized within the next three years. The initiatives planned for early completion ("Early Harvest Programs") and citizen communication initiatives ("Information for All") have already started going live and are being completed.

By the analysis of the structure, methodology, and the initiative and implementation of the Digital India program, it can be concluded that it aims at pulling together many existing schemes. These schemes will be reorganized, revamped and re-focused and will be implemented in a synchronized manner. Many elements are only process improvements with minimal cost implications. The common branding of programs as Digital India highlights their transformative impact. While implementing this program, there would be wider consultations across government, industry, civil society, and citizens to discuss various issues to arrive at innovative solutions for achieving the desired outcomes of Digital India. DeitY has already launched a digital platform named as "myGov" (<http://mygov.in/>) to facilitate collaborative and participative governance. Moreover, several consultations and workshops have been organized to discuss the implementation approach of the vision areas of Digital India.

In spite of the government's vision for a technologically literate India, there are certain critical views which must be mentioned here. There needs to be more research on the actual worth of these multi-billion dollar government and ICT for development projects. For the most part, the technological revolution in India has benefited the already privileged sectors of Indians. It is also difficult to scale up initiatives to affect all Indians, and fundamental attitudinal and institutional change is still an issue. While much ICT research has been conducted in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Gujarat, poorer states such as Bihar and Orissa are rarely mentioned.

Several academic scholars have critiqued ICTs in development. Some take issue with technological determinism, the notion that ICTs are a sure-fire antidote to the world's problems. Instead, governments must adjust solutions to the specific political and social context of their nation.

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