

Development and E-Governance: Reflections on India's Democratic Experience

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Background and Context

India's experiment with post-colonial democracy is more than six decades old. So is her tryst with development. However, while the dialectics of development and democracy has been part and parcel of the post-colonial India for such a long period it has assumed immense complexities in recent times--- especially, since the nineties of the twentieth century--- with the Indian State adopting neo-liberal market-led economic reforms, on the one hand, and the polity claiming to be making a transition from representative democracy to *participatory* democracy, on the other hand. The participatory thrust in democracy has also been accompanied by the twin call for a paradigmatic shift towards *inclusionary* development and *people-centric* governance, the latter, as distinct from governing, being based on the attributes of transparency, accountability and responsiveness. Insofar as the mainstream policy discourse is concerned E-Governance in this transitional phase is being widely publicized and promoted as the "most viable instrument" of the aforementioned attributes, with high potential for simultaneously democratizing development and developing democratic orientation.

The guiding assumption behind such contention is that the Digital Divide--- being in or out of the Information Technology--- lies at the root of development/underdevelopment. Accordingly, the Government of India has passed the Information Technology Act (2005) and formulated a National E-Governance Plan (2007). The Indian states have also formulated their respective E-Governance policies. But to any informed observer of the Indian polity the official publicity-blitz associated with E-Governance runs the risk of reducing this very potent and effective policy instrument into a buzzword and political slogan. Such a possibility arises from the increasing rhetoric which seeks to present E-Governance as the product of a 'magic technology', which once implemented would at one stroke remove the deficiencies of developmental interventions, democratic initiatives and governing practices that have hitherto plagued India's progress.

Politically viewed, such kind of *representation* of E-Governance enforces certain 'closures', which in turn prevent a number of essential but uncomfortable questions and counter-claims being raised and brought into the public domain. In terms of policy implications such techno-managerial orientation of E-Governance lends it an *apolitical* edge, severely undermining diversity of opinions and space for dissent and alternative views. In the process it also subverts 'democratic scrutiny' which through extensive and intensive debates and discussions is supposed to process any public policy, especially those claiming to have extra-ordinary problem-solving potential. The idea and strategy of E-Governance, thus constructed, might have a hidden transcript of *politics of depoliticization*--- paradoxically marked by the twin pursuit of sanitization of possible sources of conflict, on the one hand, and intensification of the dynamics of power relations, on the other hand. This trend has much graver consequence for participatory democracy and inclusionary development.

Rationale of Study

E-Governance is a favourite and fashionable theme of various contemporary social scientific studies around the world. Accordingly there are a large number of studies on E-Governance in India. A survey of literature would reveal that most of the studies, with high degree of technological determinism, are based on a sort of congratulatory content and tone which, in assuming 'governance' and 'administration' as largely synonymous, generally argue that

digitalization process by itself is bound to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in administration/governance. Some such studies are also long on technicalities of the E-Governance strategy, and short on its social dimensions. As a result, the 'roadblocks' in these studies are mainly identified and interpreted in terms of "integration failure" or "implementation failure". There is also a growing literature on the success and failures of some specifically important E-Governance projects in India but here again the locus and focus of the studies are the projects *as such*, which severely undermines the broader issues and linkages of the projects under consideration, and remain confined to their "success and failure in service delivery". As a result, the attempt to situate the Indian E-Governance agenda, emphasizing the broader socio-economic and political economic linkages of the country's supposed transition from the welfarist orientation to the market-friendly development regime, is very rare. The proposed study would be a modest attempt to address such blind spots that exist in the otherwise burgeoning literature on E-Governance.

Foundational Hypotheses

First, the proposed study would treat E-Governance as a relevant and important public policy instrument for ensuring effectiveness of both inclusionary development and participatory democracy without however relying exclusively on its technological and technocratic agency. It is because a major premise of the study is that massive and extensive 'injection' of technology into unequal structural relationship is a cosmetic and self-defeating endeavour.

Second, the proposed study would consider popular participation as the key to the symbolic and substantive acceptance of E-Governance on the way to ensure both inclusionary development and participatory democracy.

Third, the proposed study is guided by the 'political' notion that both the policy discourse and the language we use to talk about policies and problems are not neutral because in both the cases setting the terms involves intense struggle for power. Thus, there is no 'veil of neutrality' in the proposed study and it overtly opts for foregrounding governance in favour of the ordinary people and their interest.

It is in the aforementioned background and assumptions--- marked by the specificities of development-democracy dialectics in the days of the perceived transition to participatory democracy--- that the proposed study would seek to indulge in a 'reality-check' of the official E-Governance agenda in India.

Research Questions

The proposed study would address the following questions:

- i) How is E-Governance conceptualized in official policies? [Specific focus would be on the definitional attributes].
- ii) To what extent the thesis of Digital Divide, which constitutes the 'point of departure' of the E-Governance policies, is tenable in facilitating the emergence of developmental democracy? [More specifically, this question would be explored in terms of the prime category of 'access', which remains at the centrestage of the Digital Divide thesis.]
- iii) Do the main referents of the E-Governance policies, from the inclusionary perspective, strike a balance between 'development-orientation' and 'facilitation of democracy'?
- iv) What are the lessons and implications of the E-Governance policies for the two different but intimately related nodes of governance: the institution of government and the dynamics of claim making in democratic politics? [This question, following the Concept Note, would be addressed with special reference to the strategy of reconfiguring of space by the governing Establishment and the governmental grids of power.]

Methodology in Brief

The proposed study would resort to critical analytical method in analyzing the relevant public policy documents of/on E-Governance in order to explore the ways in which the policy discourse comes to identify the themes/sub-themes and issues and frames the arguments on E-Governance as part of the construction of the broader development agenda. For this purpose the major focus will be on the official documents (policies, plans, programmes and reports) on E-Governance of both the central and the state governments but it would also be supplemented by the focus on related themes/issues, such as, the Right to Information. The study would also explore the 'critical' papers written by analysts on the E-Governance scenario in India to ascertain what specific issues have come to the fore and what still remain largely 'unuttered'. If funds permit, fieldwork and interviews would be undertaken in select project-areas.