E-GOVERNANCE INITIATIVES BY THE GOVERNMENT OF WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

Public administration in the recent times has become much more challenging and adaptable to new changes that are taking place in the world over. The governments are in the constant process of developing their pro-people image by adoption of new techniques. E-governance is a comparatively new tool which has stepped in order to provide the much needed transparency and ease of business. As Information Technology is fast spreading across all sections of the people, introduction of user friendly online web portals and mobile applications has enabled people to apply for various government certificates, payments and benefits without physically visiting the offices, track the status of such applications and also get the certificates online. The West Bengal Government has initiated several e-governance initiatives which are discussed in this paper. It also speaks about the merits of such initiatives which has improved the credibility and faith of the present government in the eyes of the common people of the State.

Introduction

Today, governments the world over are faced with the challenge of meeting the growing requirements of people. There is an increasing concern about their administrative capacity and organizational efficiency to give the best to their citizens. In response to this challenge, most governments have administrative reforms programmes. Information Technology (IT) helps in reinvigorating government by increased transparency through dissemination of information, promoting more remote participation, innovation, introduction of new ideas, lower costs, improved efficiency and quality and effective linkage between the government and the citizens. The Government of West Bengal is trying to roll out all government schemes through e-governance service and match international standards in terms of service delivery quality. It has successfully implemented a number of e-governance projects to establish quick, error free and real time connection across all Gram Panchayats, Municipalities, Blocks, District Collectorate Headquarters, Department Head offices, Directorate Headquarters and the State Secretariat. The target is to convert the entire network of State Secretariat, Directorates and Regional offices into complete e-offices and ensure all the citizen-centric services under a single window portal within 2021. The primary objective of e-governance initiative by the Government of West

Bengal is to transform itself into a knowledge driven welfare society from the archaic bureaucratic structure with extensive use of IT and ITes in governance and positively affect the daily lives of the citizens of the State. The Government is sincerely committed to develop an inclusive, citizen friendly and information-based society in order to make the public services readily available to all sections of the people in the State in an efficient and transparent manner, through E-governance, with the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). In order to move ahead with this noble mission, the West Bengal Government has undertaken a number of e-governance projects in tune with the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) as well as the Digital India Initiatives with the technical support from Webel Technology Limited (WTL) which is the State Designated Agency (SDA).

Significance of study

This paper has two main objectives namely introducing the readers with the various tenets of E-governance and their merits and discussing about the various e-governance initiatives taken up by the Government of West Bengal. Most of the projects are a part of National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) as well as the Digital India Initiatives but some are unique schemes of the State Government. This paper also tries to differentiate between the pre and post scenario of introduction of such a user friendly initiative. It also points out the merits of the introduction of such initiative in public governance and how it has touched the lives o the common man.

Methodology

All the available literature in this context are read in order to get a clear perspective into the subject. Each and every e-portal launched by the Government for different functions are studied thoroughly as almost all of them are used by the author of this research paper in his job as a public administrator. The handbooks, manuals and orders issued by the State government at various levels during the period between 2010 (when E-governance was first introduced as a pilot project) till date were meticulously studied in order to understand the philosophy of the administrative decision to introduce this initiative.

Issues in governance

Delay – The functioning of a government system is inadvertently linked with red-tapism and delay. This is because each and every decision taken has to pass through several layers of hierarchy before it receives final approval and even after the completion of the process, it takes unusual delay for making the payment. This results in several pitfalls- the government officials lose their momentum in monitoring the scheme/process which in turn leads to compromise in quality, the contractors/suppliers do not invest their best effort to execute the scheme be it in terms of manpower, materials or technical expertise, knowing full well that they would receive their payment long after the scheme is over and the beneficiaries, for whom the scheme/project is targeted, usually fail to get the desired benefit from the same. Excessive delay also results in increase of project

cost, depreciation of construction due to improper planning and execution and even loss of materials due to natural causes or even petty theft.

Lack of transparency – Till the late 1990s, there was an absolute secrecy about Government dealings from the common public. All the Government files, procedures, allotments and even directives were kept away from common parlance and even media (which was also not so active in those days). It was after the enactment of the Right to Information Act 2005 that we got to know a bit about their functioning. Still the mandatory disclosure schemes are quite sketchy and it is evident from their dilly dallying tactics that the "babudom" still share the apathy to share relevant Government information with the common public.

Complexity – Each and every government procedure, starting from a common tender notice to a Land Registration process, is intentionally made complex and require a lot of obscure and unwanted documents to complete the application procedure. Applying for a Home Loan from a Government Bank or procuring a Trade License from the concerned Municipality has become a sort of nightmare for a common man. S/he would instead take recourse to paying a hefty sum (a few times the application amount) to a tout/middleman to get the procedure completed within a stipulated time. This has lowered the credibility of Government functioning in the eyes of the common man who is an obvious victim of the system and had to pay a "price" for getting any job done.

Corruption and favoritism – The less spoken about this dreaded "disease" in Government parlance the better, as this particular "termite" has intruded every possible nook and corner of governance. The unholy nexus between politicians/ministers, government officials and contractors/suppliers have taken its toll in this nation where numerous scams have become the order of the day and people have become so used to it that they fail to gain attention any more. The upright officials and staff are constantly threatened and pressurized to accept the "system", the "whistle-blowers" have to pay a very heavy price (sometimes with their lives) and the common man curse the "system" but silently prefer to bow down before it lest their petty interests are affected or they fall 'prey' to the system. Even a section of the Judiciary is affected by this contagious "disease" and the common man who seeks justice ends up being a "victim" of the "system".

Resistance from employee unions – The introduction of e-governance would eventually lead to efficiency of delivery of government services and will flatten the organizational hierarchy. This will lessen the importance of a section of government employees who had the habit of harassing the common public unnecessarily just to exhibit their influence and even earn "cut money'. E-governance will easily enable the officials to track the efficiency of their staff and may also lead to redundancy of some government posts. This is the reason why almost all government employee unions, cutting across political lines, initially opposed the idea of introduction of computers in government offices fearing that their "hornet's nest" will be disturbed. However, gradually over a period of time, due to public pressure and matured political sense, almost all the offices have adopted e-governance and most of the employees have been trained to work in an e-environment comfortably.

Strategies in E-governance

It is against the backdrop of such a dismal picture that E-Governance can play a very strategic role. It empowers the administration in several ways -

Improves delivery and efficiency of government services – The primary aim of any government agency is to deliver a particular service to the beneficiary. E-governance has enabled faster delivery of this service through online mode. Such delivery process could also be tracked online which enhances its efficiency. For example, when wages are distributed to a job card holder in MGNREGS, the amount directly gets credited in her/his account instantly and the same can be tracked online at any point of time.

Improves interaction of government with business and industry – The Single Window web portal has enabled entrepreneurs to carry out multiple actions through a single website - apply for new trade license, renewal of existing trade license, applying for business loans, searching for suitable land from existing land bank, registration of industry and applying for electricity, water and pollution clearance. This reduces the time and effort of small business holders to approach different government agencies and creates an investor friendly environment. The process of e-tendering has enabled a level playing ground for all suppliers with adequate eligibility and the whole process is conducted online so that both the accepted and rejected bids could be viewed by everyone.

Empowerment of citizens through access to information – The citizens can now apply for almost all schemes online through the E-governance portal. Application for Caste certificate, Income & Domicile certificate, Arms License, Ration Card, Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC), various beneficiary portals like Kanyashree, Yuvashree, Gatidhara and creation of new Self Help Groups can be made online and the entire approval process can be tracked online and finally the certificate can be downloaded from any convenient place. This application has made the entire process of issuing certificates fair and transparent and it is mandatory on the part of the government agency to provide adequate and justified reasons if the application is rejected at any stage.

Less corruption and more transparency in administration – Improving of efficiency in delivering public service, quicker processing of applications, online tracking and mandatory justification of rejection has obviously lowered the level of corruption. E-governance has even enabled most applications to be submitted with adequate documentation without even having to visit the respective government office. It has become very easy for the senior officials to track the work flow of their subordinates and any inordinate delay can be easily noticed.

Greater convenience to citizens and business – Faster execution of government functions has provided more time and energy to both the citizens and the businessmen to invest in their own field which provides a favorable environment for running establishments and increasing faith in governance.

Growth of revenue and reduction of costs – Easier application process has led to increased number of participation in every sphere, be it in bidding for tenders or starting a new business unit, which has in turn helped to fill the government coffers substantially. Since it has become easier to pay taxes online, there is hardly any defaulting cases in normal circumstances. The increase in online functions has reduced the engagement of contractual manpower to conduct the processes manually and actually distribute the benefit to the beneficiary. This has led to significant reduction of costs which could be gainfully utilized somewhere else.

Increased legitimacy of government – The more transparent and efficient a government functions, the more it enjoys the trust of the common people. This leads to more participation for a common cause, a trust to carry on business with integrity which eventually leads to more investment and better business and career oppurtunities.

Flattens the organizational structure – The archaic government structure which we were so used to see has now become more lean and flexible. E-governance has eased operations and require fewer manpower to conduct numerous operations and the decision making has shifted from a vertical to a horizontal pattern so as to enable faster and decentralized mode of functioning.

Improved coordination between various levels of government – Almost all the government files, orders and documents have been made available online and almost all the schemes portals can be tracked easily. This has reduced the communication gap existing between different departments of the Government and it has become more convenient for planning of schemes and improving the level of coordination among them.

Improved relations between government and various functionaries like media and civil society – The civil society which always maintains a vigil eye on the functioning of Government agencies in order to protect the interest of the fellow citizens find it easier to interact with a fair and transparent order with fewer obstacles faced by the citizens. This develops a sense of trust and a positive vibe is aired by both the print and electronic media. This in turn results in developing healthier interrelationship between the government in power and the civil society and media and more constructive and justified news improves the credibility of the government.

Restructuring of administrative processes and functions – The entire administrative process has undergone a radical restructuring following the advent of e-governance as a few effective posts are created in order to aid smooth functioning while a lot of redundant posts have been done away with. The pattern of governance has become more open, adaptive and flexible to handle rapid changes in perspective of both administration and the mentality of the younger generation who form a formidable portion of the present population. The present mode is more consultative, approachable and pragmatic compared to the dictatorial, stringent and theoretical approach followed earlier.

Thus we can safely comment that e-governance has brought about a sea change in the pattern of functioning of organization whose benefits have become quite apparent to the common citizens in the form of improved and efficient functioning and delivery of services.

IT initiatives in West Bengal

Four categories of e-Governance services

1. **G to C** – Interaction between the Government and Citizen (Inter-government enterprise, control, monitor & distribution)

   It enables citizens to accrue benefits from effective and timely delivery of government services, expands their availability and accessibility, improves the service quality thus making the government functioning citizen friendly.

2. **G to B** - Interaction between the Government and Business (e-tenders, contract management, tax collection)

   It enables the business fraternity to communicate with the government through e-governance portals, check red tapism and remove corruption, reduce time and save operational costs and creates a congenial and transparent business environment. The Single Window System helps in easing functions such as licensing, procurements, permits and revenue collection.

3. **G to G** - Inter/intra Government employees (registration, land revenue, hospital, agriculture)

   It enables smooth interaction between different government entities so as to improve the efficiency, performance and output.

4. **G to E** - Interaction between the Government and employees (policy enforcement, standards, accountability)

   This is an effective tool to improve employee satisfaction through fast and efficient interactions and also transparent modes of grievance handling and personnel issues.

Major e-Governance initiatives

1. **West Bengal State Data Centre (WBSDC)**

   The primary objective of WBSDC is to provide essential e-services to the State Government, Line Departments and Public Sector Units. It hosts many critical mission projects related to Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems (CCTNS), Land Records, Commercial Tax, Stamp Registration, Excise, IFMS, etc. The Data Centre also facilitates the hosting and management of various software applications online with the use of a common centralized system.

2. **West Bengal State Wide Area Network (WBSWAN)**

It offers a dedicated, secure, closed user group with data encryption capabilities and has been created to provide a minimum 2 Mbps bandwidth up to the Block level. With 346 points of presence, the WBSWAN connects more than 500 offices of various departments in the State level up to the Blocks.

3. **West Bengal e-District Mission**

It is a project with the objective of making the State's services available to the citizens through an online system. The services may be availed through internet personally, by visiting the nearest CSP (Customer Service Point) or a nearby Kiosk. There is no necessity to visit the Government office for submitting the application, knowing the status or receiving the certificate.

4. **State Portal & Service Delivery Gateway (SSDG)**

This online Single Window Portal (Silpa Sathi) provides a single window service under the applicable Acts, Rules, Policies and Schemes. It also provides all facilitations and handholding supports to the investors intending to start or operate a business in the State.

5. **Crime & Criminal Tracking & Network System (CCTNS)**

CCTNS is a Mission Mode Project conceptualized and sponsored by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) aimed at enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of police departments across the country. It will create a comprehensive and integrated system for enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of policing at all levels and especially at the Police Station level through adoption of principles of e-governance on real time basis. It includes virtual connectivity of police units (linking police units at various levels within the State - police stations, district police offices, state headquarters, SCRB and other police formations) as well as horizontal connectivity (linking police functions at state and Central level to external entities).

6. **Centralized e-Office**

The State government has created several employee related portals such as IFMS (Integrated Financial Management System), HRMS (Human Resource Management System), E-Pension and Workflow based File Tracking System (WFTS) which has created an open and transparent environment for the employees. The State Secretariat, Government Departments and Directorates and almost all the District magistrate offices in West Bengal have a centralized e-office system which is developed on the basis of the Central Secretariat Manual of e-office procedures of DAR&PG. It provides a role based access mechanism, electronic file processing system, central repository of documents with managed access, single employee directory and a centralized Management Information System.

7. e-Municipality

The Urban Development & Municipal Affairs Department has provided a portal for the citizens to pay municipal taxes, apply for various licenses and complete the entire mutation process online. The same portal has a separate login facility for the Municipal employees from where they could access their IFMS and HRMS related issues.

8. e-Panchayat

Under the Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats Scheme (ISGPS), almost all the Gram Panchayats in West Bengal have been connected through internet facility and most of the functions are now carried out through the E-governance portal. Individual entrepreneurs are motivated to open Tathya Mitra Kendra (CSP) in the remote villages from where the ordinary villagers could apply online for various schemes at nominal costs. Such CSPs frequently double as Computer Traning Centres providing much needed computer skills training to the rural youth at subsidized costs.

9. e-Land & Land Records

West Bengal is perhaps the first State, if not the only one, to completely digitize the entire Land Records, Land Registration and Land Mutation process, with the help of the National Informatics Centre (NIC), West Bengal. The government had initiated digitization of 68386 map sheets in 2008. Initially the activity was slow but picked up in the last three years with the support of the State Government. NIC has completed 62000 map sheets. The digitization is made in layers such as area, line and point which is termed as "GIS ready digitization". All the 3 objectives were fulfilled with the software "BHUCHITRA" custom developed by NIC and implemented at all the 341 Block land offices of the State. The State has also implemented the 'On Registration Mutation Service', under the Centre's 'e-dharti" scheme. All the 247 Registration Offices distributed across the State has implemented Registration Process Automation System called "CORD".

10. e-Procurement

This system enables the eligible bidders with proper credentials to download the tender schedule free of cost and then submit the bids online through the same portal (wbtenders.gov.in). This results in transparency and ease of participation and the entire tender process could be tracked online. All the stakeholders have to login using their own Digital Signature Certificates (DSC) which negates the chance of impersonation.

11. Smart Card

The West Bengal Transport Department has developed a Smart Card (Automatic Fare Collection System) for daily commuters of government buses which functions similar to the ones used in Metro Railways. On Bus Intelligent Transport System (OBITS) and Pathadisha Mobile Application are the other innovative commuter friendly schemes for booking seats and tracking the movement of buses respectively.

12. Computerization of Court Cases (CONFONET)

The CONFONET project was implemented in the backdrop of the Consumer Protection Act, 1986. It provides online information on Consumer Rights and Protection, Online Cause Lists, Online Judgements, Online Case Status and Case History and Statistical Reports (for State Commissions and Forums only). This project caters to a wide range of beneficiaries such as consumers, advocates, consumer activists, Bar Councils, members of Consumer Courts and law students.

Conclusion

E-governance has brought about a new way of government functioning. In order to adopt it effectively, the government must redesign its delivery process and reengineer its structure and functioning. Essentially, the mode of public governance has to become more responsive, transparent and accountable to the citizens who are the key stakeholders in the development process. Technology must be made widely available at low costs and service delivery should become strictly based on the vital measures of performance. The "governance culture" should constantly strive to achieve excellence and quality with the ultimate aim of public satisfaction through continuous improvement and a strong feedback mechanism.

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