

Information Communication Technology Revolution in Public Service: What Kerala Offers?

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Abstract

Information Communication Technology has been playing a dominant role in all walks of human life in the new millennium. Research is going on in plenty in inventing and reinventing innovative models for making life easy. In Indian scenario, the Central Government, State Government and even private sector are seriously involved in developing various software solutions to help government and other players in making things done smoothly and flawlessly. Among the various IT solutions for delivering public services, the programme called, FRIENDS, a flagship urban e-governance programme of the Government of Kerala operating since 2000 has contributed in providing various public services more transparently and efficiently. Now almost twenty years has been passed after the introduction of this service in the land of Kerala, a South Indian State. This paper evaluates the history, achievements and challenges of this project. Also, this article provides suggestions to improve the service effectively and efficiently.

(Key words: e-Governance, FRIDNDS, FREES, ICT, NeGP)

Introduction

E-Governance or electronic governance is a buzz word in the present world. Everybody in their day to day life enjoys the benefits of Information Technology (IT) solutions in various degrees. This is especially true when we access public services. With the advent of Information Communication Technologies (ICT), governance has entered into a new sphere of globalization. Previously online and offline governance were treated as two different spheres but with the emergence of ICT, this distinction has been blurred. There is a common assumption of e-government as the automation of government services, yet, there is much more to e-government.

The strategic objective of e-governance is to support and simplify governance for all parties - government, citizens and businesses. The use of ICTs can connect all three parties and support processes and activities. In other words, in e-governance uses electronic means to support and stimulate good governance. Therefore, the

objectives of e-governance are similar to the objectives of good governance. Good governance can be seen as an exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to better manage affairs of a country at all levels, national and local. A working definition of e-government is that it is: *“the use of information technology to support government operations, engage citizens, and provide government services”*(D. Sharon, 2003). The creation of this new cyber regime must incorporate good e-governance to deliver effectively and efficiently to citizens. The Government of India has formulated the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) to expedite deployment of Information Technology in governance with a vision to improve delivery of government services to citizens, business and other stakeholders. It has been recognized that a quantum jump in the quality of services is possible only by adoption and implementation of the principles of e-Governance. While initially the political and managerial focus was on developing e-services within each public institution, with limited consideration being given to cross-organizational coherence, the focus today has clearly shifted towards coordinated services offering one-stop shops to citizens and businesses (OECD 2007). In this context, this study has been carried out to examine the impact of an urban e-governance project of a South Indian State on good governance.

Indian experimentation with e-Governance

India was one of the earliest to respond to the possibilities of using ICTs in development administration in the developing world. It may be noted that the Indian State began to design and execute rural development programmes with a relatively visible ICT content in the 1970s, while international attention on the potential of harnessing ICTs for developmental activities is a much new phenomenon. The early experiments are examples of attempts to use ICTs for improvising development planning, a key area of State action in the pre-liberalisation era. The Dharampur Sub-District Infrastructure Planning for Development (1977) is one such early example of an attempt to use computer applications for cost optimization and decision-making. The Karwar Rural Development Information System (1984) was yet another initiative formulated with a focus on reducing delay and curbing corruption through a monitoring programme based on computer applications (Kaul. et. al, quoted in Bhatnagar, 1990).

‘Electronic governance’ became a key phrase in the Indian State’s efforts to provide a facelift to its administrative machinery in late 1990s. It is now geared for ‘good governance’ as part of the structural adjustment strategies dictated by the World Bank and other international agencies. Since the institution of the Ministry of Information Technology, the central government has shown substantial interest in using IT for various objectives. The surging numbers of what is identified as e-governance projects since 1999 indicate that most of the State governments and Union Territories in India claim to have accepted the need for undertaking e-governance initiatives.

e-governance initiatives in Kerala

In Kerala, since Government is very much a part of common man’s life, Information Technology has been a natural choice for the Government. In the State, the introduction of ICT in Government-citizen interaction has been more gradual rather than making a sudden impact on the G2C landscape. States’ first IT policy

announced in 1998 delineates reaching ICT to the common man as one of the four focus areas. The state though subsequently gave thrust on promoting IT industry base, its primary focus on citizen services was still the underlying thread in ICT interventions (Baby, 2006).

The State of Kerala has remarkable progress on all indicators of social development. Kerala has a much thought out and much discussed policy for the ICT enabling also. Kerala is among the front-runners in implementing e-governance in India. Introduction of e-governance and the use of computers in the government of Kerala may be traced back to the 1950s (Planning commission, GOI, 2008). Kerala was the first State government in the country to come out with IT policies aimed at co-coordinating and accelerating the pace of IT and e-governance projects. In 1998, the policies were focused mainly on creation of IT infrastructure in data communication and IT education. In 2001, policies were broader and covered industries like Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) and provided for liberalization of labour laws. The IT Policy (2006-07) envisages making each citizen of Kerala a creative participant and contributor of the Knowledge Society through the use of ICT. The IT Policy 2012 has also underlined the commitment of the Government in spearheading e-governance in all walks of life. The initiation of the NeGP has given more vigour to the adoption of IT in every acts of government-citizen interaction.

Given the basic premise that Government should adopt ICT for citizen services, a quick glance at the proven models of service delivery using ICTs in Kerala shall reveal a promising scenario. Major achievements of Kerala in the e-governance front during the past years include India's first fully computerised Panchayath, India's first fully computerised Collectorate, FRIENDS initiative to serve 35 lakh families, first largest deployment of wireless network in the World, significant development in local language computing, Akshaya's total e-literacy programme, first Citizen's Call Centre in the country, first complete e-literate district in the country etc. The State government has also initiated the 'Information Kerala Mission' project for the deployment of technology at the grassroots level as a model for participatory governance through effective use of IT.

THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF 'FRIENDS'

'FRIENDS' (Fast, Reliable, Instant, Effective Network for Disbursement of Service), is based on the concept of using ICT for better citizen Government interface. It started off as a pilot project in June 2000 with a 'collect and remit' and 'receive and forward' principle. A year later, all 14 districts had one center each. Though the idea of FRIENDS had its origin from the e-Seva project of Andhra Pradesh, there are some differences between the two. While the original inspiration for FRIENDS came from e-Seva, FRIENDS represents an attempt to promote single-point front-end service delivery without any real backend computerization. Nor does FRIENDS charge departments for effecting transactions on their behalf with the exception of the publicly-owned telecom company, BSNL. Unlike e-Seva, whose counters are staffed by

employees hired by private partners, FRIENDS counters are staffed by employees appointed by parent departments. Centers, however, are not networked to each other or to individual departments. Unlike e-Seva, FRIENDS has not allowed its centers to be used for delivery of private services; nor has FRIENDS turned to advertising to generate revenue. In spite of the fact that FRIENDS is clearly more “basic” than e-Seva, an opinion survey commissioned by the World Bank in 2001 indicates that FRIENDS has struck a positive chord with Kerala’s citizen (Madon and Kiran, 2002).

Objectives of the present study

The present article examines the growth, trend and challenges of the ICT project called FRIENDS, working in Kerala since 2000.

Methodology

The study uses primarily secondary data. Data have been collected from the websites of Kerala State IT Mission, different journals, annual reports of IT Mission and websites of FRIENDS Janasevena Kendram.

Services and participating departments of FRIENDS

Through the FRIENDS platform, a number of services offered by eight departments were made available in the beginning. The Table 1 summarizes the kind of services available with FRIENDS. The number of services is limited to these participating Government departments and in most cases there is some clause for effecting payments such as jurisdiction limits, bills without fine, etc...

Table 1: Services of Participating Departments

Sl. No.	Participating Departments	Services	Requirements
1	Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL)	Telephone bill payment	Telephone bill
2	Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB)	Electricity bill payments (low tension and spot billing) of various electrical divisions.	Electricity bill invoice provided by KSEB (only without fine)
3	Kerala Water Authority (KWA)	Spot bill	Bill invoice
		General water bills (domestic and non domestic) 5% discount for advance payment of at least one year.	Bill invoice, consumer card provided by KWA
4	Kerala University/ MG University/ Calicut university	University examination fees	Application form
5	Civil Supplies Department	Fees for civil rationing office related applications (license, permit, ration card etc...)	Application form
6	Motor Vehicles Department	1. Motor vehicle tax-105 types.	RC book, insurance papers, application forms

		2. Fee for licenses from motor vehicles department-20 types. 3. Fees for permits from motor vehicle department-142 type 4. One- time vehicle tax 5. Registration fee for motor vehicles	
7	Revenue Department	Building tax Basic tax Revenue recovery interest.	Application forms
8	Electrical Inspectorate	Inspection Fee Licensing Fee Other Remittance	Application forms

However, in course of time, some of the departments left from using the services of FRIENDS. The Motor Vehicle Department (MVD) has not cared to update the software after they revised the fees. Now, FRIENDS can collect only vehicle taxes, but even that have come down from around 70 per day to two or three. The Electrical Inspectorate payments, for industrial purposes, was another source of revenue, but now most of it has shifted to the treasury. Unless, new departments and more services from the existing departments are offered, the existence of this people friendly project will be extinguished soon.

Trends in Collection and Transactions of FRIENDS

Now let us examine the growth in the transaction and revenue obtained through FRIENDS. As evident from Table 2, from a mere Rs.568 lakhs in 2000-01, collection through FRIENDS has risen to Rs. 28,230 lakhs by March 2015. Similarly, the number of transactions increased from 1.24 lakhs to 4.85 lakhs during the period of study. Increased citizen acceptance over the years, as can be evinced from the increase in the number of transactions over the years is a milestone in the functioning of FRIENDS. However, consequent on the leaving of some departments and the existing services from this solution provided, there won't be much headway in both transactions and revenue collected.

Table 2: Revenue Collection through "FRIENDS" Centres

Year	Amount collected (in lakhs)	No of Transactions
2000-01	568	123709
2001-02	1305	1026919
2002-03	10619	2023811
2003-04	16000	2632137
2004-05	20210	3400182
2005-06	22170	3866948
2006-07	22747	4028287
2007-08	22289	3475795
2008-09	22601	3516571
2009-10	23006	3689870
2010-11	23500	3983887
2011-12	24800	4325654
2012-13	25300	4520322
2013-14	26789	4789034
2014-15	28904	4980345
2015-16	29456	5281456
2016-17	28112	5021365
2017-18	28653	4989721
2018-19	28230	4845879

Source: www.friendscentre.net

Discussion and Conclusion

The effective functioning of the project was facilitated by the co-operation of participating departments. As has seen that FRIENDS project began its journey in 2000 providing the services of different departments and agencies such as the Motor Vehicles Department, Revenue Department, Civil Supplies Department, Kerala State Electricity Board, Kerala Water Authority, universities, local bodies, Electrical Inspectorate, and the BSNL to the common public. For the public, it introduced an easier, 'friendlier' interface between them and the government offices they used to frequent. The employees were all deployed here from one or the other departments. There was the aim of inculcating a new work culture too, with the hope that they will take back the learnings from here to their respective departments. Of late, the lethargic attitude of participating

departments has reversed the growth path of this useful project. In all the centres of FRIENDS, there has been a sharp shortfall in their employees. In Kozhikode district, from around 18 staff in the beginning, now the project office has only four employees. The participating departments are not deputing their staff to FRIENDS, and this is a major challenge for its smooth functioning.

In the beginning, this project was facilitated through the front-end computer delivery only. It was a tedious job and as such every day, the project staff has to manually submit the accounts to concerned departments. But, the introduction of a new software called Friends Re-engineered and Enterprise Enabled Software (FREES), integrated to the online systems of most departments, and the addition of new services in 2012 led to a jump in revenue. Even though the number of visitors has fallen, the total revenue continued to rise till 2015 due to commercial customers paying bulk bills. From that point, there has been a marginal fall in the past three years as services such as the MVD and the Electrical Inspectorate moved out. Similarly, when the utility service was introduced in 2001, the online payment apps or similar e-services were unheard of. Now, the situation has changed with the entry of high-speed Internet services and multiple payment portals. So, the customers have started using their own mobile or computer to remit their dues to the government services. This has been reflected in the shortfall in the revenues of the FRIENDS centre.

From the discussion, it is clear that e-governance initiatives like FRIENDS have been found successful in ensuring good governance. Studies of Krishnan (2010) and Madon and Kiran (2002), to mention a few, have brought into limelight the efficacy of FRIENDS in delivering public sector services at low cost in terms of time and money. However, the project is to be strengthened in several ways. In terms of addition of more services, there seems to be stagnation. Similarly, FRIENDS has not been able to provide the information services. In addition, the operational area of FRIENDS still confines to the district headquarters. With the introduction FREES, there is possibility of adding more services through the FRIENDS platform. In addition, the government should enhance the budgetary allocation for ICT projects including FRIENDS.

Being an urban e-governance project, it has to be enriched as the urban population is bulging in our country. In the era of information commutation and technology revolution, citizen should be the focus of governance. The citizen centric good governance is the need of the day. In this context, projects like FRIENDS have a visible role in fostering better citizen-government patronage. It is true that *with* some timely changes and focus on newer areas, the centres are staying afloat even in a challenging environment.

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