E-GOVERNANCE INITIATIVES IN KERALA

Today, world is on the threshold of a new revolution namely knowledge revolution. Accordingly, there is a growing trend towards emergence of knowledge societies. This has been enabled essentially because of the fast advances in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), often referred to as ICT revolution. In the specific case of Kerala, the role of ICT in economic development significant because of its peculiar socio-economic, industrial and political environment. This is characterized by very high level of technically qualified and skilled manpower, near full literacy rate, extremely high level of NRI population and high level of foreign remittances. Besides, Kerala has a very high levels of social development and living standards almost comparable with any of the advanced countries. Because of the above features it is widely recognized that Kerala should depend primarily on its knowledge resource for its development.

E-governance Infrastructure

To help realize the potential of e-Governance, the state concerns ordinary citizens by providing information, digital inclusion, and e-Governance systems and services. Information delivery takes place through knowledge dissemination centres, called "Akshaya Centres", which are spread across the state and lie within easy reach of every household. The State Data Centres (SDCs), which form part of the core digital infrastructure, deliver e-Governance services. All SDCs are connected to the Kerala State Wide Area Network (KSWAN), the network backbone that connects three network operating centres, district headquarters, block headquarters, and mini points. To support information delivery and interaction, the Citizens' Call Centre functions as a single-window facility for providing assistance across government departments, organizations and projects.

The government has conceived the State Service Delivery Gateway (SSDG) to act as a hub for all interactions between citizens, businesses, and government departments for delivering high volume transaction services and seamless information flow. It fosters seamless exchange of data across the network spectrum. The effect of having such a hub is the streamlining of all public-state interactions with the e-District facility. Through the e-District facility, the government brings together all districts under a common platform, delivering high volume citizen services relating to Revenue Department, online RTI, Public Grievance Redressal, revenue court cases, and various payments. The e-District facility enables the government in the issuance of e-certificates.

To ensure a high level of transparency among government staff, the Service and Payroll Administrative Repository for Kerala (SPARK) hosts an integrated personnel, payroll and accounts information system. It helps the administration to ensure a consistent application of rules and to forge better employee relations. Every staff has a unique Permanent Employee Number (PEN) as a stamp of identity across departments and services. e-Health provides an integrated framework to ensure efficient delivery of healthcare services. It includes a centralized database of healthcare information and support solution for healthcare service personnel consisting of doctors, paramedical and nonclinical staff at the primary, secondary and tertiary care centres. e-Office brings in efficiency, speed and transparency in the way files are managed at various government departments, collectorates, sub-collectorates, directorates and line departments. e-Procurement helps in enhancing transparency and efficiency in public procurement activities and monitoring the same on a real-time basis.

KFON forms an essential part of the Kerala government's ambitious plan to provide Internet connection to BPL families, government offices, hospitals and schools. About 12 lakh below poverty line (BPL) families will get free Internet connection. KFON is a highly scalable network infrastructure that provides on-demand, affordable broadband connectivity of up to100 Mbps for organizations and households. The network connects the state administration with all urban and rural areas to address the digital divide. There are Wi-Fi hotspots across the state to help connected-users in schools, hospitals, offices and houses. The skill development platform is a database of two lakh specialized engineering hands in the state.

Major E-governance Initiatives

FRIENDS (Fast, Reliable, Instant, Effective Network for Disbursement of Services): "Friends" is a single window 'no queue' integrated remittance centre where the citizens have the opportunity to pay all taxes and other dues to the Government under one roof at no extra cost. Offering a comfortable ambience, each FRIENDS centre accept payments of the different public payments. Each of the counter follows a token management system which eliminates the need for queues and inordinate delays in making remittances. FRIENDS seeks to extend the benefits of full-fledged computerization of individual departments to the citizens, even before the whole backend computerization is completed. The salient feature of the project is the effective integration of IT and logistics for citizen services.

AKSHAYA (A Mission to Bridge Digital Divide): Akshaya Centres have been emerged as a finest network of effective Common Service Centres (CSC) envisioned to deliver a multitude of G2C, G2B as well as B2C services to the public under a single roof. By bringing ICT to all segments of people Akshaya acts as a vehicle for improved quality of life, accessibility to information, transparency in governance and overall socio-economic growth. The Akshaya project is an e-government initiative that has succeeded in encouraging people to use technology in a socially deterministic way to satisfy local needs. An evaluation of the Akshaya project found that it was successful in generating employment, promoting IT literacy, enhancing communication, and providing e-services.

IT @ School: The project aims at imparting computer education to the high school students for the qualitative improvement in the conventional learning systems and also to equip teachers to use computers as an educational tool. Stake holders are the school management, teachers, students and the local community

E-Office: E-Office launched in Kerala Secretariat on 5th March 2014.e-Office Services have been extended to different Secretariat Departments, Collectorates and Directorates and the efficiency in file processing also improved a lot. E-Office is a web application enabling the Government to automate the entire work flow of file processing starting from Tapal creation, File Creation, File processing and issuing orders from the file. Citizen will get the information regarding File Status, Search View facility for published Government orders through this website. Online requests can be submitted to different Government department through this website.

Chief Minister's Grievance Redressal Cell: It helps to bring the complaints and grievances of citizens directly to the notice of the Chief Minister, thereby ensuring transparency and efficiency in the functions of the Government. This is achieved through the automation of Chief Minister's Grievance Redressal Cell and convergence of all the available forms of

communication to redress the grievances of the citizens. It is achieved through CCC and video conferencing.

Aasthi (Asset Management System): It is automated e-Inventory management of computers and other IT related equipments. It helps in creating and managing a data repository of the inventory pertaining to the hardware and software of IT resources in an organization.

Citizen Call Centre: It is the first of its kind in the entire country and is set up in the State Capital viz. Thiruvananthapuram. It provides information on transactions pertaining to various Government Departments which are required by common citizens, over telephone. The information that can be collected include details of various Government schemes, programmes, entitlements, welfare schemes etc.

Challenges to E-Governance

There are several challenges for a state like Kerala in fostering e-governance as a prime policy of action. Several gaps can be identified in the implementation of e-governance strategy. There are gaps like hard-soft gap that is, the gap between the technology and the social context in which it is operated. Further, a public-private gap can be identified as suggesting what fits in the private sector may not fit in the public sector. Next is the matter of trust while implementing e-governance in administration. When citizens and the implementing agencies distrust the ICT, it hinders the implementation of e-governance. That is, the user must be confident, comfortable and trusting the tool or technology with which they will interact. Similarly, the dimension of a trust pertains to trust of the government. There has to be a balance between ensuring that a system prevents fraudulent transactions.

As such, the innovation diffusion theory states that over time innovation will diffuse through a population, and the rate of adoption will vary between those who adopt early (early adopters) and to those who embrace the innovation much later (laggards). The proportionate increase in the number of laggards with that of early adopters is needed to enhance e-governance. Last, but not least, the problems of digital divide and infrastructure divide in the state affect the initiation and operation of e-governance in the state.