e-Governance in Rural Assam

There have been significant strides in Assam's rural development scenario thanks to recent IT initiatives, says **Rashsul Hussain**. Read on to know the changing face of rural governance in this Northeastern state

e-Governance has become the popular focus of government efforts in many countries around the world. It reflects the intention of governments to take advantage of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution to improve services and delivery provided by the government to its citizens.

Beginnings

India launched a major campaign to modernize Government's ICT infrastructure by flagging off the 'National e-Governance Plan (NeGP)' on 18th May 2006. The NeGP comprising of 27 Mission Mode Projects (MMPs) or larger projects, and 10 supporting projects such as State Data Centers, aimed at improving the delivery of government services to its citizens and businesses.

A project with a mission

Of the 27 MMPs, the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project is one of the most talked about. It was started with a view to introduce and strengthen e-Governance at the grass-root level i.e. in Panchayati Raj Institutions across the country, and build associated capacities for effective adoption of e-Governance initiatives. Northeast India can take pride as its two states, Assam and Tripura, are now leaders in implementing e-Panchayat MMP [according to e Panchayat Puraskar 2011 and 2012].

e-Panchayat MMP comprises of 11 Core Common applications all with their own specific purposes as given below.

Photo: P&RD, Assam

Name of the Application	Functionalities
Local Government Directory	Defines local administrative boundaries for effective governance
Area Profiler	Maintains socio-economic database
Plan Plus	Strengthens de-centralized planning and participation by local citizens
PRIASoft (Panchayati Raj Institutions Accounting Software)	Ensures transparent Panchayat accounting
Action Soft	System to monitor the implementation of works and schemes
National Asset Directory	A tool to manage assets such as fisheries or roads
Service Plus	Facilitates service delivery such as issuing of application forms for job cards
Social Audit	Management portal for social audit by local citizens
National Panchayat Portal	Dynamic websites of all Panchayats for information dissemination
Training Management Portal	Management portal for taking in training demands and aids execution
GIS	Information given out through maps

Facts and Figures

e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project was started in Assam in the year 2010. Transparency of accounts was set as the first priority. The state started rolling out PRIASoft for all its Panchayati Raj accounts, making it mandatory to be implemented in its 21 Zilla Parishads, 186 Anchalik Panchayats and 2202 Gaon Panchayats, followed by a roll-out in all 27 DRDAs and 219 Block Development Offices. Assam was honoured with the third best state award in the form of the e-Panchayat Puraskar 2011 for its excellent implementation of PRIASoft in 2010–11. The state has continued to be one of the best states in implementing PRIASoft in 2011–12 and 2012–13 as well.

This followed rolling out 'Plan-Plus' in its 11 most backward districts. The entire Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF) was utilized using the help of PlanPlus, a planning tool for public use. Use of GIS and graphs acted as a support system in decision-making.

Assam is also one of the first states to implement National Panchayat Portal at all levels of Panchayats. Over 2,300 dynamic websites have been generated to disseminate information about Gaon Panchayats, Anchalik Panchayats and Zilla Parishads to its citizens.

Other e-Governance Initiatives

Apart from Mission Mode Projects, there are other e-Governance initiatives for the rural population, NREGASoft, AWAASoft, e-FMS (Electronic Fund Management System) are a few of them. NREGASoft is a huge software system for capturing and managing information on the landmark MGN-REG Act. Assam has a 100% track record in recording muster rolls for the same. AWWASoft, similarly, is for monitoring and planning of rural housing schemes such as Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY).

> e-Fund Management System is another upcoming initiative that will guarantee direct transfer of entitlements like scholarships, pensions, wages, etc. to beneficiary bank accounts across the country. This automation of processes will eventually lead to real time availability of data at all levels of governance for strategic decision-making, also reducing the turn-around time required for wage processing and payments.

Impediments

Assam being a multi-ethnic land has its own share of hindrances in smooth implementation of e-Governance. Six districts in Assam don't follow the Panchayati Raj system of governance as they have their own traditional governance structures. Implementing the traditional form of governance in a computer-based system is in itself a complicated and uphill task.

Also, due to its terrain and other associated problems, Assam has internet connectivity issues in most of its remote areas. Not only internet connectivity, but also non-availability of 24-hour electricity in remote Gaon Panchayats is a hindrance.

Lack of exposure to computers and the internet for most employees is another critical factor that has held up implementation. This also implies that the interface must be easy enough to be usable by all, and understood by semi-literate people as well.

However, despite existing problems, Assam has shown remarkable progress in implementing e-Governance, especially in projects like e-Panchayat Mission Mode, e-Fund Management and other projects like e-District etc.

Are we close to best practices?

If the answer has to be in one word, it would be a 'yes'. Assam has started late, but it has picked up pace now, and is on the right track. Going forward, massive capacity building exercises have been initiated for all stake holders.

> Use of Geographic-ICT is the new way forward. A master project is being conceptualized for monitoring and planning of all rural development schemes in Assam. This will be based on economic, demographic, social and geographic geo-spatial data which will lead to scientific understanding of monitoring and planning for inclusive development.

What more?

Strict policies for mandatory use of all e-Governance projects at all levels of governance and proper infrastructure are vital. Using local languages to disseminate information on government websites is another necessity. Most importantly, strong political will and social acceptability of e-Governance in rural areas will lead the way to a progressive and modern rural Assam. ⊘

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