PANOS FEATURES

Resources | Global Themes | Press Centre | About Us   Search

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Links | SiteMap

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India's Move To E-Governance Exposes Ancient System Flaws

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PANOS FEATURES

· July 2003
· June 2003
· May 2003
· April 2003
· March 2003
· February 2003
· January 2003
· October 2002
· September 2002
· August 2002
· May 2002
· April 2002
· February 2002
· January 2002
· November 2001
· September 2001
· July 2001
· April 2001
· January 2001
· July 2000
· March 2000

Search Features

BANGALORE, INDIA (PANOS) – India has rushed headlong into a romance with electronic governance but, in a country struggling to emerge from centuries of entrenched inequalities and poverty, its outcome is baffling observers.

Electronic governance, or e-governance, is pushing buttons around the world. It's the latest buzzword for governments trying to cut poverty, address corruption in their bureaucracies and make themselves more responsive to their citizens.

It is part of a whole swathe of so-called 'digital solutions' that many hold can help developing countries leapfrog, or bypass, certain stages in their development processes. And the Indian experiment is being keenly watched as experts try to gauge the efficacy of the budding relationship among the government, the computer and the citizen.

So far only a handful of state governments have tried to go on-line with any seriousness. The southern states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala pioneered the move to digitise the vast and complex workings of government. Now, with no standardised format to follow, some of India's other 29 states and 6 union territories are having a go.

"We are the best," Karnataka's Information Technology Secretary Vivek Kulkarni told Panos Features proudly, revealing an underlying rivalry. Karnataka's capital Bangalore was chosen by the World Bank to be the first developing country host for its annual Conference on Development Economics held in May, in recognition of its IT achievements.

The task is huge: less than 1% of the mammoth administration in India is computerised, and most has been done in a piecemeal fashion. The results are mixed, as a Panos Features visit to various rural areas of Karnataka revealed.

Karnataka is home to one of India's most prominent e-governance projects, launched in 2001. The Bhoomi (or 'land') project has seen the revenue department computerise the state's 20 million rural land records, involving some 6.7 million farmers.

It's a project the federal government now wants all states to emulate, as strong data on land holdings is needed to implement development programmes.

"I have no complaints [about Bhoomi]," says farmer Basavenappa Angadi, president of about 40 farmer self-help groups in the cotton-growing Dharwad district of Karnataka, 440 kilometres from Bangalore.

Central to the Bhoomi project is the computerised system of producing a farmer's Record of Rights Tenancy & Crops (RTC) – an all-important identity paper needed by the farmer to obtain bank loans (for diverse activities ranging from children's education to buying seeds), settle land disputes and even use as collateral for bail. It is no less than a social ID.

In Kengeri, a satellite town near Bangalore, farmer Byregowda too likes his new RTC: "This is now pukka [genuine]. The Village Accountant cannot change names anymore."

Under the old system, some 9,000 Village Accountants (VA) were employed by the state revenue department. They lived in the village, had three or four villages under their jurisdiction and were responsible for maintaining land records, including 'mutations' which recorded changes in ownership.

It was mainly through these 'mutations' that the poor suffered. Mutations became an instrument for rural corruption, exploitation and oppression. Landowners simply bribed the VA to change the titles of poor farmer's lands into their own name. Small farmers, mostly illiterate, could do little to change this state of affairs, either because they did not know of it or because they could not afford the VA's bribes.

Now mutations can only be approved by the head of a taluk (a sub-district-level administrative unit) in the revenue department, and the farmer has to be present for their record to be changed – only the taluk head or computer clerk's thumbprint can open the file.

The system is simple – at least in theory. The main town in each taluk has an 'e-kiosk' with two computers, a printer and a modem. The software, designed by the National Informatics Centre, stores all kinds of information for each

villager, including the name of the landowner, history of previous ownership, and minute details of the land, including what other lands it borders, and how many trees and what type of soil it has.

In order to access either an RTC or a mutation record, a farmer only has to turn up at the kiosk and hand in an application to the clerk, who keys in the request and gives the print-out to the farmer after checking their identity.

The problems that arise have to do with the vast inequities that cut across the social, economic and cultural spectrum of India – although e-governance has gone some way to addressing corruption.

Mallaiah Prabhakar, director of Karnataka's treasury department, admits that IT cannot address fraud in primary data that is put online. The concern is echoed by GN Nagaraj, a prominent left-wing politician in Karnataka, who says the state government has not bothered to tackle fraudulent land records that went online in the Bhoomi project.

"In one district in north Karnataka where feudalism still prevails, 32 farmers' lands had been recorded in the VA's name prior to computerisation," Nagaraj says. "The man immediately sold the lot before Bhoomi began. I know of hundreds of such cases."

All e-governance projects needed to do, he says, was to tally old records from the 1950s with current records and identify excess lands which could have been distributed to those cheated and landless. "The administration has just hurried this through and India has lost an opportunity to replicate Bhoomi as an instrument of equity."

This criticism cannot be overlooked in a country where 34.7% of people live on less than US$1 a day – the largest concentration of poor people in the world. It also goes into the heart of the view, held by many, that e-solutions cannot be effective in isolation from other social, economic and political solutions.

Ironically, while Bhoomi aims to help the poor, in regions like Bijapur in Karnataka, which has the highest demand for RTCs, it is the poor who appear to be struggling most with the new system.

"We spend Rs. 10 ($0.2) as bus fare to reach the town from our villages and pay Rs. 15 ($0.3) for an RTC. Sometimes it takes two days because the queue is so long. The VA was better," complains Mehboob Modi Patel.

Another farmer, Amsidda Irrappa Karnal, says, "I am illiterate. Who will help me fill up the application form [for the RTC] here?"

The project also fails to address gender inequality. Land ownership has long been a male bastion in India – in Karnataka women own just 12% of the land – and this is reflected in Bhoomi. Women in Dharwad district do not know of the new system.

Those from Kalakawatagi village in northern Karnataka say they have not seen their computerised RTC, issued free by the revenue department in 2001 for personal verification.

In Kolar Dsitrict, about 100 km from Bangalore, 42-year-old Pappamma, a feisty leader of some 200 women's groups, says she has visited the local e-kiosk several times to help women obtain RTCs. "But taluk officials themselves know little of the system and are in no position to even begin helping the women. They need training," she comments dryly.

These issues have opened up the debate on how best to use information and communication technologies to further development.

Dr Richard Heeks, an e-governance expert based in Britain's Manchester University, says, "At present, IT is reinforcing more than attacking inequality: men are benefiting more than women; the rich are benefiting more than the poor. The challenge is to create the conditions for 'reversing the polarities'; but that is a task for social movements more than computers."

Bhoomi's pragmatic designer, Revenue director and Karnataka's first e-secretary Rajeev Chawla, dismisses these problems as system-vulnerabilities. "These are organisational flaps that can be corrected. What I want is someone to challenge me in Bhoomi's [technical] design – to show it won't work," he says.

There are other 'vulnerabilities.' Although the federal government is asking all states to emulate Bhoomi, Panos Features found that on the field, former Village Accountants are still very much around – being used for verifying mutations and other tasks. Chawla admits, "The VA cannot be erased completely from a system where his powers have been in existence for the last 150 years."

As to the illiteracy and gender issues, he says: "IT cannot be held responsible for solving all of India's problems."/PANOS

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