

Accountability, Transparency and Sustainability in Governance: Can Rural Broadband be a Game-changer?

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Abstract

Transparency and accountability is crucial to sustainability of any system. Transparency of a governance structure is ensured if there are robust and reliable processes of information sharing. Accountability comes with effective feedback and redressal mechanisms. In this context, use of technology by way of rural broadband connectivity can greatly help in making rural governance system more transparent, accountable and hence more sustainable. This article details various methods of using rural broadband for deepening the democratic processes through Panchayati Raj in India. The use of rural broadband to communicate, train, educate, deliver, mobilize and finally evaluate can truly play a transformational role in India's rural governance systems.

Keywords

Decentralization, panchayat, transparency, accountability, technology, rural broadband

In a democracy where Government is owned by the citizen, issues of accountability ought to be taken for granted. However, a democratic government has to wrestle with issues of both accountability and transparency because democracy itself is only partially realized. Political democracy needs to be complemented by social democracy and stratifications in a society combined with handicaps arising from poverty and illiteracy limit the realization of entitlements. Therefore, the effort to make government accountable and transparent is a continuing process and is a marker for the maturing of any democracy.

Transparency and accountability create the social sustainability of a regime. Both transparency and accountability depend critically on two factors: 'people' and 'technology'. India today is at a crossroads where a deepening of democratic processes through Panchayati Raj and a broadening of democratic space through civil society activism have both become positive drivers to enhance accountability and transparency. The political process delivers best in a context where it is challenged by civil

society to live up to its promises. We have seen in India an evolution towards accountability through enshrining them as rights—first in the form of a Right to Information, a Right to Education and a Right to Work through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and now a Food Security Act on the anvil—all of which collectively move towards empowering citizens. The strengthening of Panchayati Raj through a constitution amendment has created the institutional arrangement for people to mobilize for making public systems accountable.

Since the track of political decentralization for creating accountability is a well known one, this article focuses on how people's organizations like panchayats can use technology for enhancing accountability. There are multiple opportunities with the rapidly disruptive innovations in social media but let us keep that aside for the present. Let me take the example of rural broadband which proposes to connect all 250,000 panchayats in India with high speed broadband facility for data and video transmission.

Transformational Potential of Rural Broadband

Context

The uneven spread of broadband in the country limits our potential from a range of social and economic benefits that in turn come from interconnectedness and possibilities of co-creation. European and North American countries today have about half of the global subscribers of broadband while South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have less than 3 per cent. However, now the potential of broadband is realized and has become a major policy concern in many countries including India. The World Bank has estimated that in low- and middle-income countries, every 10 percentage points in broadband penetration can accelerate economic growth by 1.38 percentage points. Many countries have also now legislated for broadband as a right. In this context, the decision of the government to provide broadband connectivity to all panchayats the next two years becomes very significant and timely.

Thrust Areas

Panchayats, which stand at the cusp of the government, and the community holds the maximum potential to mediate citizen action. The power of a billion plus 'connected' people can become truly transformational, the potential of which is yet to be mapped. Application could be in the following major areas.

1. G2G communication, where units of government get connected to panchayats. Panchayats today handle substantial areas of government activity as well as funds to be deployed on them. A medium sized panchayat handles nearly ₹ 5 million in funds.
2. Improvement of Delivery of Public Services
3. Training of grassroots level functionaries
4. Skilling of the community in select areas
5. Social Communication/Advocacy/Continuing Education/E-reading room/library
6. Crowd-sourcing evaluation

Government to Local Government (G2LG) Communication

A Gram Panchayat today handles almost all major programmes for social and economic development at the village level. Among the major programmes handled by the

local panchayat are the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Right to Education/Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the National Rural Health Mission, components of Bharat Nirman like Rural Water Supply, Rural Housing, Irrigation, Rural Connectivity and so on. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has already mapped the activities that can use broadband. It has already developed the following 12 programmes for using broadband (Table 1).

Improvement in Delivery of Public Services

The second major application would be improving delivery of public services. The vision is to transform the quality of delivery of public services. A few examples illustrate the point. Assessment Survey Evaluation Research (ASER) reports that 25 per cent teachers in rural area do not attend schools regularly. GOI spends nearly ₹ 300 billion on Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and if this ASER report is true, then nearly ₹ 75 billion is lost annually just under SSA.

Similarly, the availability of vaccine for immunization, availability of pre-natal and ante-natal advisories, availability of nutrition material in *anganwadis*, availability and quality of mid-day meal in schools, availability of foodgrains, etc., in public distribution outlets can all get tracked and citizens report on them to get immediate redressal. The entire range of rural public services can be radically transformed with rural broadband connectivity. Some of these are detailed later.

Training of Grass Root-level Functionaries

This is an unprecedented opportunity where governments and NGOs together can conceive and transact training and develop training material to ensure that capacity of grass root-level leaders can be upgraded. Such training could include training of

1. Elected panchayat leadership
2. All agricultural field workers (on new techniques, sustainable farm practices and so on)
3. All veterinary field assistants
4. All ASHAs (health advisories from above as well as reporting on health status/epidemics from below)
5. Other social animators
6. Units for disseminating standard designs for buildings, etc., to be constructed by panchayats and free from chasing elusive government engineers

The list is not exhaustive but only illustrative.

Skilling of the Community

There are large number of skills that are amenable to training being transacted through broadband availability at the panchayat level. These kiosks would be virtual training centres. Such training that can be imparted virtually has already been partially addressed. A skilling revolution could happen through panchayat-level units. These modules are being worked upon at present.

Social Mobilization/Advocacy Communication/ Continuing Education/E-Library and Reading Room

The hub at the panchayat level which provides with rural broadband connectivity becomes an ideal location for social mobilization of the community and the spread of mass literacy. Today literacy is taught in three primers and there is a danger of a large number of neo-literates relapsing into illiteracy. An effective continuing education unit that uses broadband can be conceived where citizens can take tests and keep upgrading their competency levels. It could also be an ideal medium for communication on all

Table 1. Programmes for using broadband

1. Local Government Directory	Would provide unique codes to all Panchayats, capture changes to Panchayats owing to delimitation and assign codes appropriately. It would link all Core Common Applications by providing a mechanism for identification of all Panchayats.
2. Panchayat Profiler	Would maintain a complete village profile encompassing socio-economic data, socio-demographic data, public infrastructure and services, geographical boundaries of Panchayats, etc.
3. Asset Directory	Would help in management of information related to assets and utilities created and maintained by Panchayats.
4. Plan Plus	Would help in preparation of district plans starting from grassroots, enable convergence of funds from different programmes/schemes to ensure effective utilization of funds, track fund inflows and outflows and maintain sources of funding. Would enable preparation of Panchayat-wise Perspective Plan, Draft Plan, Action Plan and head-wise estimates of the budget.
5. PRIASoft	Would capture details of receipts and expenditure, automatically generate cash book, registers, Utilization Certificate for many schemes. It will enable generation of all required registers by just a few basic entries.
6. ActionSoft	Would be used for Scheme implementation and monitoring. It would allow Panchayats to enter the implementation status of each scheme on the basis of the defined monitoring parameters. This would be usable for all Central/State schemes as well as the local Panchayat schemes, if any.
7. Grievance Redressal	Would be a generic grievance redressal system allowing citizens to lodge complaints against Panchayat functionaries and report any malpractices. It would track the entire grievance redressal process until closure.
8. Social Audit	Would capture all events and details relating to social audit conducted by Gram Sabha, the action taken report, etc.
9. Training Management	Would be a portal providing details of all training programmes, that is, schedule, training material. The Panchayat functionaries will be able to register for courses online. Also the partner training agencies will be able to register for courses online.
10. GIS	Would display the maps of Panchayats and integrate with the other applications for Panchayats such as Panchayat Profiler, Planning and Budgeting, Asset Directory, etc., so that a spatial view of the profile/plan of a Panchayat can be obtained by overlaying various non-spatial data.
11. Panchayat Portals	Would generate a website for each Panchayat across the country. Would integrate with the other software applications for Panchayats to act as a single delivery gateway using a single sign-on.
12. ServicePlus	Would be a generic citizen service delivery application to capture all events and information related to delivery of services to citizens by Panchayats.

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

aspects of vital interests to the everyday lives of people. A tentative list prepared includes

1. MGNREGA attendance
2. MGNREGA payments
3. MGNREGA Asset Direction
4. Regularity of teachers in schools
5. Availability of mid-day meal and quality
6. Availability of nutrition in an *anganwadi*
7. Availability of supplementary nutrition and pre-natal, neo-natal advice
8. Status of rural roads
9. Availability of drinking water
10. Availability of water for irrigation
11. People whose houses need upgradation through Indira Avas Yojana
12. Timely availability of PDS
13. Timely availability of old age pension, etc

It helps the citizens to talk back to the system on its deficiencies and get immediate real-time redressal and participatory governance has a chance of happening.

Each panchayat level kiosk has the potential to become an e-library and reading room.

It can also become a unit for propagating Do-it-Yourself (DIY) material on areas like water conservation, health, agriculture and so on.

It can also be positioned as a unit for Continuing Education programmes for neo-literates to upgrade their skills and get score cards. It is an untried area but could be tried with panchayats getting connectivity.

Crowd-sourcing of Evaluation

Most flagship programmes operate at the community level. Our current system of feedback ranges from a reasonable good MIS for MGNREGA to far-from-satisfactory MIS for most other programmes. Evaluations are done through social science research organizations and are few and far between. Broadband connectivity becomes an opportunity for crowd-sourcing of evaluation where citizens can give a

feedback on operation of programmes. A radical change can be effected in the monitoring and evaluation system which is today mostly a post-mortem. Such feedback can be on a structured template or in general terms but would require intermediating agencies which could be Social Science Research organizations or NGOs or professional organizations identified for each state. They would screen material and pass it on to the programme management at the state capital and the Centre for programme corrections (to avoid information overload). This is a model that has not been tried elsewhere but we could strike the first blow for public accountability.

Local Language Development and Localization of a Gram Swaraj Portal

While a standard set like the one discussed above would apply across all gram panchayats, each state has its own variants in governance that can be formatted into a common Gram Swaraj Portal. The policy imperative that follows is that (a) content has to be developed locally by the states; and (b) the state is free to add to the general list (provided by the Gram Swaraj Portal of the National Innovation Council).

Conclusion

Ideally these applications can be developed in parallel even as connectivity is being effected. State governments could take the lead in piloting these applications in one select district with the district administration, panchayat leadership, reputed NGOs working in the district and a technology partner coming together. The district effort could then be mainstreamed for action across the State. This will help embellish the applications with a set of state-level schemes. Needless to say, most of these applications would be M-ready or enabled to use mobile technology. Expansion of rural broadband could be a game-changer in the move towards accountable and transparent governance.