Can E-Government Give Voice to Citizens? An Empirical Examination of the 'Jaankari' Project

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Abstract. This study examines the use of the `Jaankari' e-government project by marginalized communities. The Jaankari system, implemented in the state of Bihar in India, enables people to call in and make information requests to government departments. Citizens may speak in their own language and from their own location. Results of an analysis of the data of the call records, when regressed against socio-economic parameters, show that people from marginal communities rely on this service. Those from non-dominant castes and women, in particular, use the system in excess of those from more privileged backgrounds. The paper shows implications of these findings for e-governance research and practice.

Keywords: E-government, Right to Information, Marginalized population, Transparency, Developing countries.

Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) has the potential of transforming governance [1]. Diffusion of ICT in 1980s caused significant change in governance in public administration, leading to e-government model [2]. E-government is the use of ICT to empower citizens, reduce corruption, and increase transparency and accountability of the government services by disseminating information [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Thus, use of ICT is central to e-government. Despite its potential to combat issues of corruption, increase transparency, accountability, bridging digital divide etc., many e-government projects, especially in developing countries like India, have failed [7, 8]. Prior e-government projects in developing countries have relied on text-based provision of services. For example, in India, computer kiosk-based e-government projects were initiated in the early 2000s, where the idea was the citizens could access government services by visiting these kiosks that were located in remote areas, pay a small fee and demand a service. These were entirely text based and needed a certain level of literacy in the dominant language in which the kiosk operated to use them adequately. Most of these projects failed, one reason for which was the inability of many marginal citizens to access the services.

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This failure of e-government leads us to ask, "Can e-government services provide a 'Voice' to citizens?" in developing countries. Since the purpose of e-government is not just to transmit information in form of data, but to empower citizens by ensuring transparency and accountability, it is imperative to provide 'Voice' to the citizens so that they can, amongst other things, denounce corruption and seek transparency and accountability in government practices by acting on information provided by e-government [9]. However, enabling voice in developing countries like India using e-government would mean to overcome various social barriers including caste [6] which make a certain section of people marginalized and expect them to be silent [9]. Providing voice to these marginalized people would require adoption of 'localized form of media' [9]. This study examines this question of voice in e-government in the case of 'Jaankari' project which is run under the Right to Information (RTI) Act in the state of Bihar in India. 'Jaankari' adopts a localized media 'voice calls over the phone' to make RTI reach masses by overcoming the social barriers.

1. Theory of Voice

Identification of conditions and means that facilitate voice making is of critical importance to the scholars working on the issues of empowerment [9]. Voice is traditionally understood as the right to speak and ability to create sounds. It is considered as the basis for meaningful social change. Voice has a very local meaning; its true meaning has to be understood in the local context where voice is made. For example, in India social structure gives power to a privileged group of the population, who may stand against marginalized people. Indian social structure expects these marginalized people to remain silent and not let them exercise their voice. This has led to an alternate theorization of voice. An alternate theorization of voice goes beyond the traditional understanding of voice as simply the right to speak and make sound, and defines voice as the 'right to be understood' [9]. It stresses the importance of empowering and giving voice to those marginalized people who, because of socio-economic conditions, often remain silent. It asks to alter the social structure and turn the power equation of society in their favour by making them the center of discussion [9]. Voice is both value and process [10]. It means voice should be seen as the act of valuing those frameworks of organizing human life which give importance to the process of giving right to marginalized people to make voice and be understood by the larger community. Voice is also the sound of specific encounters in social life. Specifically, this alternative view defines voice in following way:

"*Voice needs to be seen not simply in terms of human capacity to create sounds but the politics of speaking in contexts in which the right to speak is a privilege associated with the structures of domination undergirded by the caste, class and gender* " [9; p.141].

Media is the principle vehicle for making voice. Scholars with an alternate perspective of voice question the use of traditional media for making voice which might be controlled by government [11] and private firms [12] to support the status-quo [9]. Thus, traditional media are not suitable for changing the status-quo of power structures. Designing of media within the local context might be one solution to ensure inclusiveness [9]. Local media would provide the opportunity to marginalized people to collect information and make it their voice that may be heard by others. There have been several efforts in the past where local media has been designed to raise voice against the status-quo such as 'Jan Sunwais' [9] and Gandhian Ahsram in India [13]

and media for freedom struggle in Rhodesia [11].

2. E-Government and Voice

E-government focuses on the use of ICT to disseminate information about government service. Use of ICT is critical to e-government. It traditionally uses internet based, portals-based or kiosk-based ICT models to provide such government information. However, these projects often reinforce the existing social and political structures [6], [14], [15], [16] and create a digital divide [17]. Thus, use of such traditional media for empowering citizens (in other words, giving 'voice') in e-government raises the question of whether marginalized communities are able to make their voices heard. To provide voice to the marginalized community, e-government needs to adopt a local media by which information could be shared. Prior research in e-government has considered the role of voice in governance [18], where the idea of enabling voice is drawn from Hirscheim's theory, which emphasizes the ability of citizens to express their views to the state. Voice is then seen as an enabler for citizens to inform the state of their views, desires and frustrations. The form that this voice assumes is not important – it may be through written messages, through protests, through official complaints; the difference in this research is that voice is being embodied in the ability to speak, in the natural language of the region, and communicate views to the government. Prior research on this particular aspect of voice is absent..

3. Methodology

This study has used case study method and collected two types of data: data on 'Jaankari' project and data on socio-economic factors which characterizes the marginalized population of Bihar. Data on 'Jaankari' has been collected from the coordinating institute and data for socio-economic factors has been collected from the 2011 census data available on the government of India website[2]. Case study method is appropriate for such studies where multiple sources of data are used [19].

4. Case Description

4.1 Jaankari Project

'Jaankari' is an e-government project which runs under the Right to Information Act (RTI), 2005. RTI Act came into force on 12th October, 2005 with an objective to provide 'right to information' to citizens for accessing information under the control of public authorities, to promote transparency and accountability in the working of public authority. Information means *"any material in any form including records, documents, memos, e-mail, opinions, advices, press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, contracts, reports, papers, samples, models, data material held in any electronic form and information relating to any private body which can be accessed by a public*

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[2] https://data.gov.in/catalog/villagetown-wise-primary-census-abstract-2011-bihar

authority under any other law for the time being in force"[3]. Right to Information means the right to *"(1) Inspect works, documents, records; (2) take notes, extracts or certified copies of documents or records; (3) take certified samples of material;(4) obtain information in form of print outs, diskettes, floppies, tapes, video cassettes or in any other electronic mode or through print outs*"[3]. Standard process for filing RTI application is to fill and submit the application form either in English or other official languages of every state in India. The form has to be submitted either by hand or through post to the respective Public Information Officers (PIO) of the department where the information is sought from. All these PIOs offices are usually situated in the respective state capital. While submitting an application, citizens also need to deposit Rs. 10 (approximately 0.15 USD) either in post office or make a demand draft. While implementing 'Jaankari', Government of Bihar realized the need of addressing various social and economic issues that might cause its use to be limited to elite class population only. Some of these issues are; caste, class issues, disadvantaged groups and vulnerable groups, particularly the women, the aged and the people who are traditionally isolated from the government programmes. Followings are some of the specific issues which Government of Bihar considered while implementing Jaankari: *"(1) Inability of people to fill the form for filing RTI application, (2) Ignorance of the department to approach for the information, (3) Identification of the right PIOs to approach for the information, (4) Plurality of languages such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Magahi, Angika etc. which makes the filing of application in 'Hindi', official language of Bihar difficult, (5) Uncomfortable with meeting government officials face -to-face for seeking information, (6) Sending RTI application by post was not feasible option because citizens won't be sure whether the application would reach on time, (7) Depositing application fee of Rs.10 was challenging, (8) People need to go either to post office for depositing the money or to banks for making demand draft. This could cost them lots of time, and (9) If one does not get the right information, filling an appeal is even more complicated.*"[4]

Keeping these issues in mind, government decided that ICT need to be innovatively employed for expanding the base of the RTI access and hence adopted 'Call Centre' (also known as facilitation centre) model. It was decided that voice communication over phone line will be the better solution of above problems for taking RTI to masses. This facilitation centre model ensured that citizens don't need to do any physical movement and physical transaction for filing an application. Citizens could make phone calls from their home without physical movements. A dedicated number '15531' was allocated to the centre. Government partnered with Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) to use its premier service plan for charging the RTI application fee from applicant. Whenever a person makes a call to facilitation centre, BSNL automatically deducts Rs. 10 from the phone balance of applicant. Premier Service plan is special service for subscribing premium services like Doctor's Advice, Fortune Telling, and Exam Results. Service providers (government in the case of 'Jaankari') get their share of revenue from BSNL at the end of every month.

4.2 Procedures for filing "Request for Information":

'Jaankari' follows a unique process for filing RTI application. Citizens need to call, tell

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[3]http://righttoinformation.gov.in/rti-act.pdf

[4] http://cic.gov.in/CIC-Articles/JAANKARI-pdf-26-03-07.pdf

their name and address, and tell the information and name of department s/he wants information from. This call is recorded and typed on computer by the call centre executives. If in case, citizens don't know the name of department, executives help them in identifying. Staffs are also well trained to handle a situation where citizen only knows the problem but not the exact information s/he needs. Once application has been made over phone, executives will confirm with the caller and make its two copies. First copy is sent to the applicant and second copy is sent to PIO. Each application has a unique reference number. PIO gets 35 days of time (from the date of application) to respond to the applicants directly. Call centre executives remind PIOs on 34 day. Delay in reply without adequate reasons invites penalty. If applicant has either not received or not satisfied with the information, s/he can call up the call centre again and explain dissatisfaction after quoting reference number. This call is also recorded and called as 'first appeal'. It is forwarded to the first appellate authority in the same manner as the RTI application. If the applicant is not satisfied with the first appellate order, s/he can file second appeal. Both first and second appeal will have the requisite charges of Rs. 10/per call. Table 1 gives the comparison of 'Jaankari' with standard RTI model.

Table 1: Comparison of 'Jaankari' with standard RTI model

Particulars	Standard RTI model	Jaankari
Medium to file the application	Filling an application form	Making a voice call
Language(s) used to file the application	English or other official language of the state	Citizens can file the application even in local languages such as 'Bhojpuri' and 'Maithili'
Mode of application fee payment	Demand draft or cash deposit	Payment through phone call via BSNL premier service
Pre-requisite to make an appeal	Applicants need to have the clarity on the type of information and name of department where is sought from	Knowledge of the problem is sufficient to file the application. Applicants need not know the department. Call centre executives help in identifying the department

5. Data Collection and Analysis

This study has collected data on total number of calls made for first type of enquiry during January 2011- December 2014. Total number of calls consists of (1) number of first time calls made for filing application, (2) number of calls for first appeal, and (3) number of calls second appeal. Total numbers of calls have been divided across various districts of Bihar. There are 38 districts, each with different socio-economic factors. The study has done analysis on aggregated number of calls made during 2011-2014 from each district and following socio-economic factors of respective districts:(1) Number of females, (2) Number of illiterates, (3) Number of illiterate females, (4) Number of Schedule Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) (5) Number of cultivators (6) Number of agriculture workers (7) Number of marginal workers and (8) Number of non-workers. Linear regression was run to examine the influence of each of these 8 variables on total number of calls. Table 2 reports the findings of the analysis.

Table 2: Regression output for 'Total calls'

SN	Variables	Correlation	R-Square	P-Value
1	Illiterate Population	.557	.310	.000[***]
2	Female Population	.528	.279	.001[**]
3	Illiterate Female Population	.510	.260	.001[**]
4	SC+ST Population	.354	.125	.029[*]
5	Cultivator Population	.484	.234	.002[**]
6	Agriculture worker Population	.474	.225	.003[**]
7	Marginal Worker Population	.424	.180	.008[**]
8	Non-Working Population	.545	.297	.000[***]

***Significantat.001
**- Significant at .01
*-Significant at .05

Table shows that each of these eight variables has significant influence on total number of calls. They independently explain a significant variation in total calls. For ex., Illiteracy, female population and non-working population independently explain approximately 30% variations. Similarly, Marginal workers, cultivators and agriculture worker population independently explain more than 20% variations. Moreover, these variables have significant positive relationship with total number of calls. Illiteracy, female population, non-working population and illiterate population variables have more .50 correlations. It means that a district with more illiterate population has made maximum use of 'Jaankari'. Similarly a district with more number of female populations, more non-working population etc. has made more number of calls. This shows that use of 'Jaankari' is significantly related to population characterized by the socio-economic factors which represent marginalized community.

6. Discussion

E-government concerns the dissemination of information to bring transparency, accountability, thereby empowering citizens. However, its purpose is achieved only when it reaches the masses and offers inclusiveness. In other words, it should give voice to the entire population. However, raising voice in a country like India is highly influenced by various social factors such as caste, race, and gender etc. which make a group of people marginalized and expect them to remain silent. A traditional medium of communication always reinforces the status-quo and hence proves to be little help for these marginalized people to make their voice heard. Giving voice to these marginalized people is even more difficult in the context of e-government where the use of ICT is essential. Because of its use of traditional media, use of most of the e-government projects becomes a privilege of elite classes and hence inclusiveness remains a challenge. Voice theory says that adoption of a localized and non-traditional media could be a solution to this issue. Building on the concept of this theory, this study examined the case of Jaankari e-government project which has adopted a localized media 'voice-based technology' to demand information. This study has examined whether the adoption of this media has resulted in giving voice to the

marginalized citizens. It has used eight socio-economic indicators of marginalized population and has examined the use of Jaankari by the citizens with these socio-economic characteristics. Findings from this study confirm the argument of voice theory. Jaankari has been able to reach those marginalized people. Its use is highly related with the population of these marginalized people such as females, illiterate, non-working and so on. This paper contributes to e-government literature by showing that enabling marginal citizens to speak directly to the state has a significant impact in enabling them to obtain government services. The results show that those in marginal categories, non-dominant castes and women, are most prone to use these voice-based e-government services as opposed to those who are from dominant communities. This finding has strong implications for design of e-government systems in developing countries, which have hitherto ignored the inclusion of voice-based services in e-government systems. Further, the findings have implications for practice, as government managers can enable greater inclusion and participation by marginal populations by explicitly enabling voice-based services.

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