

PRAJA

Introduction

Researching people in the rural areas, Praja is a concept of providing all government and allied services to the people in the district and mandal (for Block) level. This unique experiment taken up for the first time in West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh was coordinated by the District Collector, * West Godavari, technically supported by National Informatics Centre, West Godavari District.

The Project Praja (The Citizens) is an effort to bring government close to the people empowering them through IT. In other words, it makes government more accessible to the people. It is an effort to delivery various G2C and C2C services to the citizens in rural areas. The project opens web-enabled rural kiosks termed Praja Seva Kendrams at the mandal level and also at village level. The fully computerized Praja Seva Kendrams are on a district wide network connected through the dial up circuits and interact with the district server acting as a remote access server. This project has been implemented in West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh by the District Collector. The technical responsibility in terms of network support and all software development, support and coordination has been provided by National Informatics Centre (NIC), West Godavari District Centre, Eluru, Andhra Pradesh.

* We thank the District Collector for providing this information for this case study.

The Praja Seva Kendram runs a district portal Centre, Eluru, Andhra Pradesh, citizen centric services. These services range from the issuance of various certificates to getting information about various programs and also go to the extent of networking citizens to each other and allow them the flexibility and extent of networking citizens to each other and allow them the flexibility and convenience of mutually beneficial transactions. The horizontal portal is eventually put on the global World Wide Web and thus it allows vertical integration with the expanding frontiers of universal knowledge and information bank. The project allows access to hitherto marginalized communities and therefore helps bridge the existing information gaps and is a step towards digital unit. One unique thing about this digital unite experiment is that many of these Kendrams are run by the women self-help groups, a movement that has been gaining grounds by the day in this district. Many of the Praja Seva Kendrams are run as self-employment units and are manned by unemployed youth from CMEY¹ and PMGRY² beneficiary groups. The project would thus provide Information Leadership to these groups and would help them act as change agents and would make it possible for them to grow in strength and stature along with the project. As a result, the self-help groups and strength and stature along with the project. As a result, the self-help groups and CMEY and PMGRY would draw strength from the project while they would buttress the project with their existing strength, a win-win situation for the twosome.

There is also a myth under circulation that the IT solution is anti-poor and is an unaffordable luxury to nations like India. The digital divide is said to be inevitable. Once has to only realize that IT is only a tool that influence the objective and if the objectives is to make the system more transparent, open and accountable, there is no way it can be anti-poor. Most of the rural areas suffer on account of lack of right information regarding the markets, products, agriculture, health, weather, education, etc. and if all this can rural areas suffer on account of lack right information regarding the markets, products, agriculture, health, weather, education, etc and if all this can be addressed though connectivity and IT, a sea change can be brought in the conditions of the rural communities. This is why creation of a knowledge and information economy can bring in more opportunities and thereby prosperity to the impoverished areas. The project recognizes this fact and envisages that all the village can become knowledge hubs and gain symbiotically from each other and derive benefits from the global networks.

Services Offered

The kind of service offered through this project are described now.

Online Filing of Complaints and Grievance

Governments enter into daily of the common citizens in rural areas in many ways. There is a fair degree of discontent amount the citizens about the delivery of these services. The craving for better services couldn't have been delivery of these services. The Craving for better services couldn't have been stronger. Everybody wants an outlet to report their individual or communal grievance and would be very happy if the same is attended to with alacrity and promptness.

¹ Chief Ministry's Employment Plan.

² Prime Minister's Rural Employment Plan.

Project Praja allows citizens to file their grievance with their centers. Every grievance is acknowledged and transferred online to the right office for bringing in prompt field level action.

Grievance have been territorially and functionally categorized allowing ease of registration. Every grievance is given a unique number (year, mandal code and serial number) for easy retrieval to monitor and do know the status.

As the grievance is uniquely numbered and recorded in real time in the central database, there is no way it can miss the attention of the concerned officials. Registered grievances can be easily monitored by concerned departments by logging on using their user id and passwords specifically assigned to them for this purpose.

Every grievance can be monitored at the highest level, leading to prompt and effective redressal. Real-time summary statistics and performance summary statement of the individual department can be seen and verified. The citizens can verify and track the status of its disposal online.

The project works on the principle that the citizens need not go to the authorities personally if someone can carry his grievance, and in this case if a telephone wire can do that, where is the need for them to act otherwise? The citizens now need not wait if there is a drinking water problem or a nonfunctioning fair price shop or a government functionary not doing his duty. All this is only one click away now.

Online Application Registration

There are host of area where the citizens approach various their and areas of governments for getting benefits out of various government program. These areas range from getting a loan under self-employment schemes to applying for an old age pension or asking for subsidized agricultural inputs. Instead of moving from offices to offices and getting harsh responses, the citizens just need to come to the Praja kiosk and apply online. They get their acknowledgment number and the rest is taken care of. The module provides for online forwarding, transmission, handling and disposal of such requests, and would therefore minimize the disposal time and the concomitant citizens effort to get their cases redressed. The interconnectivity and linkage with the citizen database would also help in weeding out bogus and repeat cases.

Issuance of certificates

There are many kinds of certificates that the citizens need from the governments, the important among them is the integrated caste, nativity and income certificate. The citizen need not go to the integrated caste, nativity and income certificate. The citizen need not go to the Mandal Revenue Office, but can apply directly at the Praja Kendram, from where the request is transmitted online; the certificates would be prepared and would be made available to the applicant at the kiosk itself without any inconvenience and without the drudgery of shuttling through offices. The project would also provide for the issuance of death and births certificates at panchayat level (with the implementation of e-panchayat) and also at MRO office.

The philosophy behind this intervention is that the citizen always loathes approaching a government department for the fear of getting discourteous treatment and being subjected to corrupt practices. The project therefore improves upon this interface and expects them to come to a center run by their own peers, a place that is much more accountable, open, transparent and subject to public scrutiny. This will automatically mean spending some nominal amount of money (Rs. 56 or Rs. 10) for getting the work done from the Praja Centre in the Village/Mandal so as to compensate for the self help group members or PMGRY/CMEY beneficiary

Issuance of Land Records

The plan document of the Seventh Five Year Plan rightly observed, "Land records form the base for all land reforms and therefore regular periodic updating of land records is essential in all states."

The information relating to land plays a very important role. These may include primary information about land presented in terms of its geological information like the shape, size, land forms, soils; economic information related to land use, irrigation and crops; and the information pertaining to the legal rights, registration and taxation.

The manual system of land records maintenance was highly opaque wherein the land records were maintained by the village accountants and therefore there was a situation of virtual monopoly of village accountants over these records. Records were not open to public scrutiny and were update many and extortion for not only provision of land records to them from the village official but also for processing request for change in land title.

On many occasions such delay was unintentional. Even if a village accountant was willing to give such records in time, he was not available when farmers wanted him most as he was manning more than four to five villages. Therefore, there was no certainty about timely availability of such records when a farmer required them.

Land records contain various useful data such as soil type, irrigation details, trees, crops grown, crop yield etc. All such data are very valuable for various administrative purposes. As data were previously maintained manually, it was not possible to collect and analyze such data with the result that mine of such useful data was not used in any meaningful way. However, keeping this in view, the land records in the state have been computerized and all the mandal revenue office now maintain these records.

But despite the availability of computerized database, no public outreach to this database was put into place. Further validation of data was also not properly done leading to errors in database. The printed records were distributed to the farmers with proper validation and the updating or any use of the database was mostly forgotten.

The process of mutation (Change in land title) was also very cumbersome. Applications were being given to mandal/office village official was virtually enjoy discretion of either processing them or not. As records are maintained to decentralized manner, there is no reporting mechanism available at the district level about the pendency of such applications. Lack of any monitoring mechanism in the manual system makes farmers amenable to all pressure from the hierarchy of the department.

The project Praja envisage putting this data into the public domain to support development of citizen centric land records system . The result would be evolution and a transparent and effective land record delivery system which would fully address the insecurities and concerns of the farmers.

The farmers can approach the Praja Kiosks in the village itself and ask for the land records abstract for the Fasli for which Jamabandi has been done and get that instantly. In these kiosks farmers can see their land related information without any intervention or help. They can also apply for the latest extracts and their request can be processed online by a connection to the Mandal Revenue Office and the land record extract can be produced and offered as a print out to the owner of the land who requested for it. The monitoring of such requests and their disposal at higher levels would ensure timely compliance and would greatly benefit the citizens.

Besides these, they can also lodge request for mutation to their land records (change in land title) at the computerized kiosks, get acknowledgements for the same and can monitor the process at the Praja kendrams themselves without going to MRO Office. They would then get their updated land record in fixed time frame without the need of approaching any authority. As against earlier time of 70-200 days, mutation would now require less than 30 days, that too without going to any government office. It is also envisaged to have a fully online system to carry out mutations on land records data and the manual changes without moving through the database are proposed to be banned.

Farmers can also get the official status report of their request for mutation which would let them know the stage at which their request is pending. This status report would help them in enforcing their right of getting the record mutated in the prescribed time.

The entire Land Records Management Information System (LRMIS) software (similar to BHOOMI) software of Karnataka) has been developed by NIC, Andhra Pradesh State Unit, Hyderabad.

It is also proposed to network the SROs with the mandal revenue offices so that the changes in title taking place are incorporated in the village accounts within the stipulated time without fail. The necessary software has already been developed by NIC, Andhra Pradesh State Unit, Hyderabad and Implementation of this software is under progress.

Online Auctions and Biddings

One fundamental reasons for the rural- urban divide is the lack of well developed market in the rural areas hindering efficient sale and purchases of goods, As a result most of the decision made by the farmers and the rural poor are based on insufficient information and are therefore sub-optimal, and in majority of the cases go against them. The middlemen present in all such areas therefore are having a field day and the citizens suffer. The project envisages filling in these information gaps and allow the citizens enjoy the facility of posting their products, for online auctions at any of the Praja kendrams. They have the convenience of posting their product details along with the specification and the expected price. As the information is shared by the other mandal kiosks, by online bidding there is a possibility of giving a beneficial

situation to both of them. As the portal is vertically integrated through internet, online queries from other parts can improve the available choices.

The kind of product that can be put for auction may include agricultural commodities, farm implements, land or buildings-literally anything that a rural household would like buy or sell in the rural areas. This also opens the possibility for the DWACRA to citizens horizontally within the district and vertically outside. In short, as days go by and as the citizens get used to this facility, it may trigger a chain reaction for opening up the window of opportunities to rural populace to have more information choices in their trades. In other words, this will enable rural e-commerce.

Online Mandle (Market) Rates

Ideally an average household makes a decision before buying or selling the goods and products based on the information they collect locally. The advent of communication facilities like telephone, Television, etc. have widened their information base. Nonetheless it would have been much better if they had an easy access to the rates prevailing as on that moment in various PACS or rythu bazaars and other mandis within the district and elsewhere. The project Praja envisages doing that right.

Every kendram will upload the market rate prevailing in their area which would then be available to everybody else. The rates in other market elsewhere in the state would also be available for the citizens to watch the trends and make the right decision after weighting all options. This can be achieved by using the portal on agricultural markets maintained by Marketing Department of Government of Andhra Pradesh, with technical support by NIC, Andhra Pradesh State Unit, Hyderabad.

Payment of Dues

The citizens requires a friendlier environment to pay their dues, be it the payment of electricity bills or the telephone bill or the land revenue. The Praja Kendrams envisage offering this facility to the citizens so that while transacting other services they can clear off their pending accounts as well.

The individual departments have the benefit of expeditious collections and also save on collection costs and at the same time also monitor their collection performance. In future, payments of private organizations like cellular phone can also be dovetailed.

Easy Access to Information

The right to information has now been recognized by the parliament, Praja kendrams through the District portal would allow access to all kinds of value information to the citizens not just with respect to the government programs but also would allow access to the databases like old age pensions, ration cards, multipurpose household survey records, beneficiaries under various self-employment schemes, children database, civil works and so on. This would induce transparency in the implementation of these programs and would facilitate weeding out ineligible cases so that corresponding benefits can be passed down the needy. Efforts in this direction are being taken by National Informatics Centre, Andhra Pradesh State Unit, Hyderabad by hosting online databases on the above mentioned topics.

The project recognize that no matter what rhetoric is, real right to information is possible only if the information is put into the public domain and new technologies provides the most cost effective solution for doing that.

Matrimonial Services

The networking of citizens with each other for mutually beneficial transactions should be the ultimate objective for a vibrant civil social. Other than the government-citizen service, host of citizen-to-citizen (C2C) service are proposed to be rendered through this project.

As a part of that, a marriage bureau would be operationalized so that prospective bridges/grooms can place their bio-data eliciting suitable offers and gradually as things move along, a huge record of eligible bridges/grooms is created making search for life partners easier and cost effective. The package designed would also keep matching points so that the search is quick, accurate and fast.

Online Civil Supplies Allotment

The Public Distribution System through a string of fair price shops (FPS) provides access to the citizens to many essential commodities. The project proposes to bring the card holders' list into possible domain to so as to weed out ineligible citizens.

There is also a need to prevent frequent movement of FP dealers to various offices. The facility for online stock entry to the dealers through the kendram is being provided and they also would have the ease to collect allotment order online from the Praja center without wadding through the civil supplies offices and greasing palms at various tables.

Tele Medicine

Provision of basis and primary health care is the principal duty of a welfare state. There are, however, many situations when expert advices is needed and instead of the patient travelling all over, the request can travel on wire and he right prescription can be obtained in return.

This can also minimize citizens' dependence on the hospitals, and their falling prey to quacks. Soon, the physical barriers of distance would hold no meaning. Also, the gradual linking with other health sites would improve things further.

Tele Agriculture

The district, being predominantly agriculture based, generates lot of questions related to farm practice which many times go unanswered, resulting in incorrect input applications. The portal would act as round-the clock helping for handling such queries. The only things the farmer need to do is to come to the kendram and place his question for an answer from the experts. Some of these are million dollar questions and a timely redressal can impinge greatly on the productivity.

Consumables Management

The management and procurement of consumable required by various wings of administration including the primary health centers is being provided through the Praja Kendrams. This also would have a bearing on reducing the procurement costs by effecting economics of scale. The cost of procurement would also be available for public scrutiny so as to make it more transparent and accountable.

Forms Download

There are various forms that every department has for use by the citizens. The Praja Kendram would act as a one-stop shop for downloading all such forms. Any changes in them would also get reflected in real time.

The Praja kendram, through its portal, expects to provide a virtual meeting place for the citizens to discuss issues relating to the district/villages. Its problems and prospective solution. The citizens can now freely interact with each other and post their ideas. This would act as an online forum for them to ventilate their grievances, air their opinions and cause necessary social changes. It also provides opportunity to conduct opinion polls on important topical issues leading to improved decision making.

E-Education

The digitized inputs on computer enabled education would also be made available in due course so that the analytical and thinking abilities of rural students are enriched opening to them the advanced frontiers of knowledge's. Internet, being the worlds' biggest library, would also help the citizens gain access to a new world of information.

Common Accounts Keeper for Self-Help Groups

The Praja kendram, which is run by the women self-help groups, would provide a virtual meeting place and a focal point for synergizing and pooling in their efforts. Instead of individual groups maintaining their own accounts, they would be in a position to use the Praja Computer for maintaining their internal lending records and also to enter into online transactions with their banks. Some of the banks also propose to install all ATM in some kendrams which would further facilitate the groups.

Message Board

The portal, through the kiosks, would enable the administration to pass down important social communications and advocacies for broadcast to the communities. Private advertisers can also use this medium for popularizing their brands. The citizens can also make use of this facility for sending quick information to their near and dear and the SHGs running these kiosks can literally act as a courier service with minimal effort.

The list can become even lengthier as the areas where technology can make governments do their job better are endless and as the days go along project would keep evolving with innovative ideas.

To say the least, if we fail to act now, the information gap risks may widen into an unbridgeable gulf that may increase global inequality and leave the poor further behind. But if we approach the matter with the same kind of urgency and application as the commercial "dot.dom" sector, then we have every chance of building a strong, new wired future that not only includes the world's poor but gives them an unprecedented opportunity to left themselves out of poverty.

Additional Services in Phase II

Following are the services being added in Phase II as a part of Village Panchayat Function:

- (i) House/Property tax. The citizens will be able to pay House/Property tax to the Village Panchayat in this Service.
- (ii) Trade licences. Citizens will be able to obtain trade licences in this service.
- (iii) Works monitoring. The rural citizen can make proposals for certain works such as roads, school buildings, culverts, bridges, etc. to be carried out in the village to the village Panchayat who will approve it in Gram Sabhas and pass resolution to the effect. Such works are taken up by Engineering Department by assigning contracts. The progress of such works can be monitored by this software.

All the above software modules are developed as a part of Village panchayat Information system under e-panchayat project by National Information Centre, Andhra Pradesh State Unit, Hyderabad.

Conclusion

In this case study on Praja Rural E-Seva Project of West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh, we learnt about the various services from the Government offices that can be carried to the people's by people participation. Even though this means additional cost to the people, it is still a successful service especially in terms of its ease of accountability and utility for common people especially in terms of its ease of accountability and utility for common people in the villages. In addition to providing government services this project encourages rural e-commerce and rural cyber forms in the villages. This project has been emulated by other districts of Andhra Pradesh and a Statewide rollout plan for 6000 Rural Service Delivery Points (RSDPs) by connecting the telephone booths into Kiosks is in the pipeline.