

Futuristic Role of Public Libraries – A Case Study of E-Governance Programmes in Karnataka

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ABSTRACT

One of the issues often discussed of the impact of ICT is the concept of digital divide. The role of many e-governance initiatives is studied in this context. These programmes are conceived to narrow the gap between the communities with different levels of acquisition of ICT knowledge and skills to its beneficial use. The public libraries, besides their traditional roles, have also been involved in literacy campaigns, and they have played a significant role in the adult education programme in the past. The Karnataka Public Libraries Act 1965 has created a strong network of public libraries up to the level of Gram Panchayats. The paper conceives futuristic role of public libraries in Karnataka for the promotion and bringing awareness about the e-governance programmes in the State. The National Informatics Centre (NIC) has planned for establishment of CICs, hence, a proposal is made in this paper as how the public libraries and the CICs should be brought together to implement the proposal of this paper.

Keywords: Digital Divide, E-Governance, Public Libraries, Karnataka, India

1. Introduction

It is a well known fact that public libraries are regarded as 'people's university' long ago. Among the three basic objectives of a University, one of them significantly comparable to libraries is the dissemination of knowledge and the libraries are performing this function since ages. As a people's university, public libraries, besides their traditional roles have been playing different roles that include the literacy programmes. One of the means of spread of literacy is through "Adult Education". Johnson as early as in 1938 identified three possibilities for the development and spread of adult education" and one of them as he states "the third and best possibility of is to develop public library into a permanent centre of adult education, informally, a people's university" (Johnson, 1938). The library's role is identified as to bridge the gap between the 'literacy divide' in the age of spreading the literacy.

In the digital age there is also need for many formal and informal organizations and/or agencies to bridge the 'digital divide' gap. In this context the advent of Information Literacy, Computer and Internet Literacy has been one of the means of empowering users with these skills. The knowledge society per se has now opened up new challenges to individual in the acquisition of formal 'ICT skills' without which the access to knowledge will be comparatively a difficult task. In the educational sector, in particular in higher education the Academic Libraries play a vital role in installing the 'information literacy' skills among the students and faculty to enable them to search, identify and access to information from the vast store of World Wide Web, using relevant tools and methods. So the situation in the community as such is totally different where the academic libraries cannot perceive to reach every nook and corner of the society to the knowledge of application of ICT and its use, and the public libraries spread all over a societal environment can take up this task of bridging the gap of digital divide. In this context the paper has identified several projects of e-governance implemented by Government of Karnataka and shows how the public library system in the State can play a complementary role in the spread of the knowledge of such programmes and help the community as a whole.

2. What is Digital Divide?

In simple words the term digital divide refers to "variable distribution of ICT access and advantages among beneficiaries". The concept of digital divide was first realized when it was difficult to access to computers and use of computers which changed over a period of time. It existed when the access to computers and related technologies was vastly different among the rich and the poor, among rural and urban communities. At

that time the high cost of computers created a large divide between people who could not afford to have the computers and also to the advantages and benefits of computer and communication technologies. But the falling cost of computers and community computer and communication technology facilities like the "Internet Access" through broad band has made more and more people to gain access to some form of ICT facilities. With the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), access to knowledge has become a potent force for transforming social, economic and political life globally.

As more and more people gain access to computers, the term digital divide has been extended with the growth of technology and technological literacy and the total cost of utilizing the technology in terms of cost of running a computer, the technical and financial ability to make full use of technology available. The digital divide now takes into consideration access to or lack of access to the INTERNET. To go a step further there are efforts going on trying to close the digital divide gap using the free and open source software (FOSS) and though this has eased end user but many programs do not include support for more languages. However it is found now that more and more FOSS is providing the translation and localization facility to enable the users at local levels too. Despite all these efforts the developments in technology has been adding new facilities and to put in additional efforts to 'educate' the user to the services which need minimum knowledge of the technology. Today, the dividing lines between the rich and the poor, between urban and the rural and the fiber-optic and high speed digital lines has to be still narrowed down to bridge the gap. It is found that 15% of the world's population controls around 80% of the world's telephones and about 90% of access points to the Internet, and they are 13 times more likely to own personal computers than the rest. And the rest are 85% of the world population living in low and lower middle income communities. For instance in India the communities identified as "Below Poverty Line (BPL)". It is estimated that 41.8% of rural and 27.5% of urban population is defined as poor and categorized as BPL. So these figures are self evident that the gap is 25-40% and the gap is still wider than expected. Apart from this the two common factors have made the divide more wider with the "Language and Information" characteristics. As it seems most ICT systems use English and only about 5% of Indian population knows English, and use of Hindi and other local languages is yet to be picked up. Hence what are the solutions? One of them is visualized by democratizing the technology and the adopting the technology to implement simple e-governance projects which need minimal technological skills – facilitating access to information with the touch of a screen, even avoiding the use of keyboard.

3. Bridging the Digital Divide

Several projects and programmes are being planned and implemented by several nations to bridge this ever widening gap due to technological developments going on at a very high speed. It has become almost impossible for any individual or community to meet the both ends Ñ growth and ease of use. The following aspects are considered by India to bridge the digital divide.

- a. Technology that makes rural access inexpensive and robust
- b. Applications that draw a large clientele that pays for service, ensuring economic viability of access to information
- c. Content that empowers rural citizens and enable formation of information user communities
- d. NGOs and grass root organizations like public libraries that catalyse and manage community building process.

4. E-governance in the Process of Bridging the Divide

According to Wikipedia Ñe-governance is referred to as Çe-government, also known as e-gov, digital government, online government or connected governmentÉ primarily is vested with digital interaction between a government and the citizens (G2C).

The focus is on:

- The use of Information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government.
- The use of information and communication technologies in all facets of the operations of a government organization.
- The continuous optimization of service delivery, constituency participation and governance by transforming internal and external relationships through technology, the Internet and new media.

This digital interaction consists of Governance, information and communication technology, Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) and e-citizen at all levels of government. **e-Governance** is understood to extend the scope by including citizen engagement and participation in the governance (Wikipedia). The Government of India, Ministry of Information Technology, recognizing the potentiality of Information and Communication Technology has drawn a National Plan on E-governance. The importance of e-Governance has been recognized in the National Common Minimum Programme which inter-alia states that e-Governance will be promoted on a massive scale (GOI, MIT, 2004). In this context the National and State governments have undertaken several citizen oriented projects for the better utilization of the ICT and extending its benefits to the common man. The digital divide is also attributed to the under-utilisation of the technology-based services. The gap gets widened if less and less people use the ICT infrastructure. In

India in particular the use of Mobile communication and its applications in various services is visualized as one of the means to narrow down the gap between the have and have nots. Even a common man is as familiar with the mobile communication as much as with a person high business and or financial profile. So number of such projects are completed and implemented by the Government of India and the State Governments. In this paper some National Level E-governance projects and the projects implemented by the Karnataka State are also listed. It is found that some of these projects lack people awareness and participation. In this context the public libraries in the state and country as a whole would be able to play a significant role to reduce the gap of digital divide among the respective communities.

5. National Level E-governance Projects

Some of the National Level Initiatives to Bridge Digital Divide E-governance projects of the Central Government are;

- **SIMPUTER** – Low cost, portable alternative to PCs.
- **AGMARK NET** – Agricultural Marketing Information Network which links various Agricultural Produce Market Committees and APMCs have hosted a portal for this purpose.
- **GRAMEEN PHONE SEVA** – 2500 Villages, 110 Towns, 7.5 Million people.
- **Cor DECT** The Telecommunications and Networks (TeNet) Group IIT, Madras in Chennai, have developed this low cost Internet access technology.
- **SHIKSHA INDIA** – Working for the success of 5 Cs Computers, Connectivity, Content, Coaching and Commercial Sustainability
- **COMPUTER EDUCATION IN VILLAGES** – Computer education to 1-million students in the age group of 3-19.
- **TARahaat.com-** Technology and Action for Rural Advancement (TARA): Designed by the Development Alternatives Group.
- **Vidya Vahini** – For schools, teachers and students to share their views across the country.
- **SETU** – A bridge for facilitation between Citizen & Government
- **INDIAN RAILWAYS** – Computerisation of passenger reservation systems and other online enquiry system – IVRS>
- **E- POSTAL SERVICE**

6. Some E-Governance Projects of Karnataka

The Karnataka Government has successfully implemented number of E-Governance projects to facilitate the use of ICT by every citizen both in Rural and Urban areas in order to bring G2C connectivity. The projects have been very successful and they need to be promoted for their full

complement of use by the agencies like the Public Libraries to enhance their utility and popularization. Some of the projects with their potentiality to bridge the digital divide gap have been highlighted here.

1. **Bhoomi:** Land Records on the web developed by National Informatics Centre and facilitates Online Delivery of Land Titles. It has become a trendsetter for e-Governance projects in the state as well as other parts of the country.

The screenshot shows the Bhoomi website interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links: "About Bhoomi", "Procedure for Connectivity", "FAQ", "Feedback & Suggestions", "Contact Us", and "Home". The main content area features a large heading "Bhoomi" and a sub-heading "LAND RECORDS ON WEB". Below this, there is a paragraph explaining the project: "Bhoomi (meaning land) is the project of on-line delivery and management of land records in Karnataka. It provides transparency in land records management with better citizen services and takes discretion away from civil servants at operating levels." Another paragraph states: "The Revenue Department in Karnataka, with the technical assistance from National Informatics Centre (NIC), Bangalore, has built and operationalised the BHOOMI system throughout the state. The BHOOMI has computerised 20 million records of land ownership of 6.7 million farmers in the state." A sidebar on the right contains a "Verify RTC" button and a "View RTC/Mutation Extract/Mutation Status" link. At the bottom, there is a "About NIC" section with a logo and text: "NIC has been a Top Performer in Government Services" and "EYEOPENING CHALLENGES Faced in the Government Change-IMPACT".

2. **Mahiti Sindhu:** project, a programme to implement computer-aided education in high schools. The Mahiti Sindhu programme aims at teaching conventional subjects like mathematics and science with the aid of computers, besides providing students with a basic course in computer applications.

3. **Kriya Katte** – A Right to Information Act by which the citizen can seek the information from officials.

4. **Nemmadi** – A rural business kiosk project, known as 'Nemmadi' in Karnataka is worth investigating for two reasons: (i) it is providing financially viable rural kiosks that are realising 'development' benefits in terms of delivering government-to-citizen services (G2C) and business-to-citizen services (B2C), and (ii) Nemmadis are increasing employability prospects through education and rural Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) services.

5. Other ICT initiatives of Karnataka include : **NONDINI** (Registration), and the **KHAJANE** (Treasury Services), **THERIGE** (Online House and Property Tax payment Services), and the **Students' INTERNET World** which conducts high school based Internet Service

week every year during the month of November as part BangaloreIT.com.

6. Bangalore ONE Ñ One of the most widely used public services in the State. Bangalore One provides the citizens of Bangalore with a one stop interface with the Government of Karnataka. The Citizen's interaction with the government departments will be under a single umbrella. These services are incorporated under the Government to Citizen (G2C) facilities provided by the Government of Karnataka. This facility allows the citizens of Bangalore and in other district places to avail numerous services of several government departments, through one window i.e. BangaloreOne. On the parallel lines (One) service facilities are created in other cities of Karnataka. Various government departments who have integrated their services with BangaloreOne are given below.

The screenshot displays the BangaloreOne website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for HOME, LOGIN, REGISTER, HELP, ABOUT US, and SITE MAP. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Govt. Services for Citizens:** Includes links for BMC, RTO, BSNL, BPS, APTE, BESCOM, and Tata Tele Services.
- Govt. Services to Business:** Includes links for BMC, Police, Train Booking, Flight Booking, Services on Internet, Karnataka BSNL Center, Bangalore Current Weather News, and Western Union Money Transfer.
- Business to Citizens:** Includes links for Top 10 Search Engines, Top 10 Search Engines, and Top 10 Search Engines.
- Information:** Includes links for Karnataka, Bangalore, Mysore, and other regional information.
- OUR OFFICIAL BANKERS:** Lists various banks including Axis Bank, State Bank of India, and others.
- SECURITY NOTE:** Provides information about SSL certificates and security protocols.
- CONTACT GOVT:** Provides contact information for government departments.

- Bangalore Electricity Supply Company (BESCOM)-
- Bangalore Mahanagar Palike (BMP)
- Bangalore Police Service (BPS)
- Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL)
- Regional Transport Office (RTO)
- Regional Passport Office (RPO)
- CellOne-CellOne is a popular post paid service offered by BSNL.
- Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB)
- Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Service (BMTCS)

7. Role of Public Libraries in Implementing E-governance

The public libraries have been closely associated with the social, cultural and educational functions since their inception. As a social institution the public libraries have been catering to the educational, recreational and cultural needs of the society and they are established by the people, for the people and of the people. It is a common belief that the public libraries are established only for the purpose of acquiring and lending books to the members of the community. This is a largely conceived feeling of the public and not beyond this objective. They have adopted several outreach programmes such as Mobile Library services to reach the population at remote places, as one of the diverse function. Their futuristic role can be very well envisaged here in taking up the promotion of e-governance programmes of the State. As a matter of fact this will enable the public libraries to diversify their functionalities beyond only the conceived function of lending of documents. This will help the public libraries to be more visible and will enable them in building their images as people centric organization. The NIC has planned for the establishment of 1 lakh Community Information Centres (CICs) as a part the ongoing Five Year Plans. The CICs can be made as integral units of the public libraries at strategic administrative levels, such as in Districts and Cities. The e-governance programmes of the State can be given a wider public awareness jointly by the public libraries in association with the CICs. A framework of implementing this action plan is presented here below.

The Public library infrastructure in Karnataka consists of the following levels.

- State Central Library
- District Central Libraries (with several branches spread all over the district)
- City Central libraries (with several branches spread all over the city)
- Gram Panchayat Libraries (approximately 5600 libraries)

The Plan of action includes identification of nodal libraries, for instance libraries coming within the purview of Zilla Parishaths (ZPs). The CICs will also be located in each of these nodal libraries. A programme of action with the Deputy Director of the district s central library will be chalked out and the proposals for implementation of these programmes will be taken up for approval and implementation with district library authority. A separate budgetary provision and also the manpower for successful handling of the programme have to be worked out. The personnel earmarked for this task should be made to undergo training under each of the e-governance programmes. This training should be

planned on continuous basis to augment the developments and the up gradation of the stated programme.

8. Conclusion

The paper has conceived a diversified and futuristic role of public libraries beyond the traditional services being offered by them since centuries. The impact of ICT has always been attributed towards the internal development of the public libraries. But the public libraries can foresee more constructive programmes with the adoption of the developments of ICT for instance E-governance programmes of State and Central governments. This can be adopted by the all the States through their respective public library system so that the entire scheme of implementing of the proposal of this paper can get spread to the entire country.

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