

Citizen-centric e-government

The government's new regulatory and institutional initiatives are positive. However, much depends on whether new legislation is effectively implemented and whether the committees are successful in mainstreaming ICT at both governmental and citizen access levels.

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THE State of Governance in Bangladesh Report is an annual report of the Institute of Governance Studies (IGS) of Brac University. This report analyses governance in the country in sectors of topical interest. In this year's report energy, food security, labour migration, and e-government have been covered. The chapter on e-government looks at initiatives by the government to leverage ICT under the banner of Digital Bangladesh.

In its election manifesto, the incumbent Awami League government declared a desire to make Bangladesh digital by 2021. The Digital Bangladesh (DB) vision is being developed by the UNDP funded Access to Information (A2I) Programme and is based in the Prime Minister's Office. The two key pillars of the DB vision -- connecting citizens and reaching pro-poor services to the citizens' doorstep -- if successfully implemented will exemplify innovative and pluralist service delivery models that cater to the poor.

The context of ICT in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has not kept up with ICT developments worldwide, and the overall ICT infrastructure is woefully inadequate to support DB goals.

The World Economic Forum-INSEAD prepared "Global Information Technology Report (GITS) 2009-2010" reviewed Bangladesh's placement on three key ICT indicators: (a) environment (infrastructure, market and political), (b) readiness and (c) usage. Bangladesh ranks 118 out of 133 countries. The country's overall low ranking highlights the urgent need for improvements in areas such as (i) the regulatory framework, (ii) developing human resource capacity, (iii) providing greater access and increasing usage of ICT by citizens and (iv) investing in ICT infrastructure.

What is Digital Bangladesh (DB)?

During the 2008 elections, the Awami League's election manifesto "Vision 2021 Bangladesh: A New Horizon" introduced the concept of "Digital Bangladesh." The concept was also reiterated in the government's updated manifesto (July 2009). The DB agenda is composed of four pillars that outline key areas in which ICT can be utilised immediately:

- Human resource development
- Connecting citizens
- Digital government
- Private sector (ICT in business)

The DB agenda is a long term-vision, which views ICT as an enabler for socio-economic

and human development by 2021.

Digital Bangladesh and "e-government"

Over the years, a number of definitions have conceptualised e-government. However, this chapter bases its analyses on the one below from the World Bank's E-government Handbook (2002, p.1) as it emphasises the core principles of good governance: "The use of information and communications technologies (ICT) to transform government by making it more accessible, effective and accountable. E-government includes: providing greater access to government information; promoting civic engagement by enabling the public to interact with government officials; making government more accountable by making its operations more transparent and thus reducing the opportunities for corruption; and providing development opportunities, especially benefiting rural and traditionally underserved communities."



Overview of ICT laws

- National ICT Policy: Bangladesh introduced its first ICT Policy in 2002. Due to weak implementation capacity, this policy was never fully realised. Post-election, the government revived the ICT policy and legal framework to enable their DB vision, and approved the new ICT Policy in 2009.
- ICT Act 2009: In addition to the ICT Policy 2009, the ICT Act 2009 was also promulgated. This was almost exactly the same as the ICT Act 2006, which was never adopted. The only change was an

amendment to Clause 18, which had stipulated that the Controller of Certifying Authority (CCA) should be appointed within 90 days of the promulgation of the (2006) Act.

Overview of institutions

There are multiple institutions implementing ICT-related policies and legislations in Bangladesh. The findings reveal that the institutions responsible for the oversight and nurturing of the ICT sector have limited implementation capacity and unclear, sometimes overlapping, mandates that severely weaken sectoral policy execution and programme implementation.

Improving the legal and institutional framework

- Ensure business process-engineering and adequate ICT infrastructure allowing automation to make processes faster and more efficient for citizens.
- Establish adequate data privacy and security provisions that ensure the confidentiality of sensitive personal information and prevent unauthorised access to it.
- Provide a roadmap for ICT Policy implementation. The ICT Policy 2009 has 306 action points, which seem disjointed and are bound to experience challenges in its implementation.
- Implement the Right to Information Act 2009 to make the government more transparent and accountable to citizens.
- Institutional restructuring, reforms and

Programme provides additional hardware and digital content. The UISC model is, however, not new in Bangladesh. D.Net's Pallitathya Kendra (PK), i.e. village information centre, has a similar model that has been implemented in selected rural areas.

Visits to two UISCs in Sirajganj and Tangail districts and conversations with local entrepreneurs, service users, the union parishad chairman and staff were used to study the UISC model and explore whether they were successful in using ICT tools to improve rural citizens' lives with access to information. While UISCs are a useful approach to sensitise rural people on what ICT can do for them, the current model does not meet the primary objectives of facilitating access to information and delivering pro-poor services.

The government's new regulatory and institutional initiatives -- in particular passing the ICT Act 2009 and establishing high level committees devoted to the proliferation of ICT for development -- are positive. However, much depends on whether new legislation is effectively implemented and whether these committees are successful in mainstreaming ICT at both governmental and citizen access levels.

The following are some recommendations:

- Implement institutional restructuring and process reforms: A centralised body must be institutionalised that can coordinate with ministries and execute the necessary reforms to make achievement of the citizen-centric pillars of the DB vision a possibility.
- Strengthen the regulatory framework: The ICT Act 2009 must be amended to provide adequate data privacy and security provisions and the Right to Information Act 2009 must be put into action using enabling ICT tools, so that citizens can access information quickly and effectively.
- Build ownership within the bureaucracy and depoliticise the agenda: The DB agenda is being planned and implemented by the UNDP funded Access to Information (A2I) Programme without building adequate ownership within the bureaucracy. True political will from all political parties that is sustained over many electoral cycles is required for ICT tools to facilitate true empowerment.
- Bridge the digital divide through greater community awareness and pro-poor service provision: UISCs as they are currently designed and implemented have not been able to meet the needs of the poor. Awareness raising and competitive pricing are essential as people need to see a value to these centres in order to use them. The A2I Project should offer flexible, responsive, and innovative investment mechanisms. If not, "Digital Bangladesh" will continue to be seen as just another clichéd political slogan that in reality does not create positive development outcomes for citizens, particularly those who are poverty stricken and marginalised.

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Growing fascist intolerance

We become numb towards the value of freedom for a healthy social life and the public sphere. A society which cannot countenance multiple ways of looking at reality, or diversity of cultures and beliefs, and which cannot peacefully debate differences, isn't healthy.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

BHARATIYA Janata Party Mahila Morcha activists attacked writer Arundhati Roy's residence in Delhi on Sunday for her remarks on azaadi in Kashmir.

This marks a new low for the forces of bigotry and intolerance in India. The attack, the Morcha said, was timed to coincide with the birth anniversary of former home minister Vallabhbhai Patel, whom Hindutva groups are trying to appropriate.

But it's Patel who banned the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP's parent, after Gandhi's assassination, and warned Hindutva supporters against trying to subvert the Indian state.

The events leading to the attack follow a definite pattern. First, Roy's remarks on Kashmir are distorted to mean that she favours India's break-up. What she said -- like many Kashmiris, including Chief Minister Omar Abdullah recently -- was that the status of Jammu and Kashmir is not settled despite its Maharaja's accession to India in October 1947.

In deed, the Shimla agreement of 1972, and efforts by various Indian governments, including Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee's, to reach a settlement on Kashmir with Pakistan, testify to the existence of an issue or dispute.

Roy also spoke of Kashmir's brutal military occupation. But it's undeniable that over 400,000 security forces are present in the Valley, and some 20,000 deaths have occurred there over two decades.

Second, the BJP demands that the government sue Roy for sedition. By saying it is examining the issue, the government partly legitimises the repugnant idea that Roy's sober reflection on Kashmir was meant to create "disaffection" and "hatred" against the state.

This erases the vital distinction between remarks which are controversial, even disagreeable, but acceptable in a democracy, and those which explicitly incite violence.

Three, mercifully, the centre drops the idea of prosecuting Roy, but sections of the media call Roy an "impostor" and a "traitor." TV channels send outdoor broadcasting vans to Roy's residence ahead of the BJP mob.

They become an accessory to a criminal attack and violate the fundamental right to free expression -- to earn higher Television Rating Points!

The hysteria against Roy goes back to the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, when a Right-wing TV anchor screamed: "Arundhati Roy, where are you? We want to tell you we hate you" This is akin to the fascist targeting of dissidents and critics.

The Supreme Court too had punished Roy for contempt of court for saying, in the context of the Narmada dam, that the judiciary complacently believes that those who build large dams respect the Constitution and the human rights of displaced people.

This interpretation of contempt of court, against which truth is no defence, elevates the higher judiciary to divinity, and victim-

capacity building required to mainstream ICT in the provision of government services to citizens.

The main initiative under the Access to Information Programme, the Union Information and Service Centre (UISC), aims to achieve the two citizen-centric pillars of the DB agenda -- (i) connecting citizens and (ii) delivering services to the citizens' doorsteps. The centres are housed at a publicly accessible location, e.g. a union parishad office, and are run by a villager or local entrepreneur.

As a means of start up funding, the A2I

ises a writer with the courage to speak the truth about the state's excesses and destructive projects.

One needn't agree with Roy 100% to say this. I disagree, for instance, with her analysis of the Naxal movement in Chhattisgarh. But I unconditionally defend her right to express herself.

The anti-Roy attack has a context. The Hindu Right has launched a two-pronged offensive on freedom and democracy. Its first campaign is against books, plays and films, which it dislikes for arbitrary, irrational reasons. It wants them banned for offending the sentiments of "the majority community" (which it doesn't represent).

This has culminated in the Shiv Sena's successful attempt to get Rohinton Mistry's fine novel removed from the reading list of Bombay University's English literature course.

The parivar has attacked exhibitions and academic institutions in different cities, and driven MF Hussain, India's best-known modern painter, into exile. Over the years, India has accepted such offences against freedom and tolerance, which degrade its democracy.

If we tolerate the intolerance of those who claim to speak for "the majority," for "the real India" (as if there's only one!), for "Indian culture," for "Bharatiya Nari," we destroy the soul of tolerance and punish those we might disagree with, but who cause no harm to others.

We become numb towards the value of freedom for a healthy social life and the public sphere. A society which cannot countenance multiple ways of looking at reality, or diversity of cultures and beliefs, and which cannot peacefully debate differences, isn't healthy.

Tolerance is an essential attribute of democracy. The Right is driving India towards a devalued and majoritarian half-democracy.

The Hindu Right's second campaign aims to shield some of its most violent elements, implicated in numerous recent

bombings of Muslim dargahs and mosques. The Rajasthan Anti-Terrorism Squad's charge-sheet in the October 2007 Ajmer dargah blasts, which killed three persons, names five accused, of whom four are associated with the RSS.

Suspicion centres particularly on RSS national executive council member Indresh Kumar. He organised a secret meeting in October 2005, which discussed the strategy for conducting the blast. He was in regular contact with Sunil Joshi, who is believed to have made and triggered the Ajmer bomb with Harshad Solanki.

Solanki has just been arrested by the Rajasthan police. He's a prime accused in Gujarat's Best Bakery case -- an ominous connection.

Indresh Kumar and other RSS members are connected with the shadowy Jai Vande Mataram -- itself linked to Abhinav Bharat, which was behind the September 2006 Malegaon blasts and Hyderabad's May 2007 Mecca Masjid bombings.

The RSS has responded to these disclosures by deciding to launch nationwide protests (read, political bullying) against "a political conspiracy" to link it to terrorist activities.

If the link is established, the RSS's "nationalist" and "patriotic" credentials would collapse, with consequences similar to those in 1948-49, when it was accused of involvement in Gandhi's assassination.

The RSS believes it's legitimate to kill the religious minorities to fulfil its narrow political goals. But it hides behind labels like "cultural nationalism" to deny it has a political agenda.

The Hindu Right's terrorism is no less pernicious than Islamic-jehadi extremism. It's often more insidious -- when it's treated with kid-gloves by the state and successfully infiltrates the police.

Punishing Hindutva terrorism is a litmus test for India's democracy. It must not fail it.

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