

Digital Interventions in Rural India: A Fresh Look

Shyam Kumar Katta, Dr. M.P. Shiva Kumar

Research Scholar, Shri Venkateshwara University, Gajraula, U.P. Assistant

Professor, Amity Global Business School (AGBS), Hyderabad.

Abstract

The Paper initiates and supports the argument which suggest that digital technologies can help directly and indirectly for development and growth of rural economy in multiple directions. To initiate and support the above said argument few areas are taken for intensive field based observations and bring understanding. The areas include agriculture, banking and financing. This paper essentially offers a fresh look at various Digital interventions in rural areas Both government and private agencies have come up with various Digital interventions at rural areas with an aim to connect rural with urban by doing so achieving the ultimate national goal of making the nation a Digital nation. Government of India has named the mega project as Digital India: New India initiative. As a part of it first it came up with an initiative called good governance. Good governance is nothing but adopting good and best practices in everyday administrative activities in order to keep the administration easily and accessible and user friendly to users and especially for citizens. The efforts of government to make governance a good governance can be achieved through making use of digital technologies.

KEYWORDS: *Digital India, Rural India, Empowerment and Governance*

Introduction

In the previous chapter we have examined the meaning and different digital technologies including different types of digital tools and platforms. It has also covered their potentiality in enabling economic growth. Also discussed about potential sectors in rural areas in which digital tools and platforms can be introduced and used at their best to boost rural economy. However, the present chapter discusses various digital interventions either by government or by private /non-government agencies that were brought into rural areas. Further, it discusses the pros and cons of those interventions in the context of the existing rural economy. Steps towards bringing and promoting digital technologies in India can be prominently traced back to the times of economic reforms of 1990s during P.V. Narasimha Rao¹ and Dr. Manmohan Singh² which opened Indian industry for foreign direct investment (FDI) in almost all sectors including manufacturing, processing, and most importantly Information Technology. This eventually gave biggest boost ever that Indian economy has ever seen in its post-

independence history. Even before that, Mr. Rajeev Gandhi, the then prime minister of India, to promote computer education, Information Technology (IT) and digital initiatives during his regime cannot be ignored and worthy to mention here. Especially, his move to bring a national education policy to unify and stabilize the education system in India was worth mentioning as it was anticipated that bill would have brought English and computer education to the masses in a rapid scale if implemented. However, bill was not passed in Parliament for various reasons. Presently, the Prime Minister Modi has taken and promoting the Digital India initiative aggressively to see India digitalized in the next five years with an advocacy/ argument that India can become 5 trillion dollar economy in the coming 5 years and digital tools and platforms are going to play a major role in realizing this goal. In this context, the following section gives a detailed description of various digital initiatives implemented in rural areas. The following description is aimed to throw some light and bring understand about what good the digital platforms have done to the rural economy so far, what are the challenges faced by rural people in utilizing the digital technologies and what further can be improved.



Fig 1: Digital India initiative by present government.

II. Digital Initiatives

The Government of India has envisioned the importance of digital technologies to improve economy especially rural economy by providing the digital solutions for the existing problems in rural areas. Further, private firms and non-government agencies have also realized the importance of digital technologies to boost the rural economy. Since India has opened its doors to foreign investment as part of globalization there have been attempts by both government and private entrepreneurs including non- government (both profit and non-profit oriented) agencies to introduce and make available the digital technologies to the rural masses in order to enable them to explore the benefits that the digital tools and platforms offer. Few of these attempts are presented in the flowing section.

1) Good Governance

The good governance initiative can be mentioned as a first and foremost important digital initiative ever introduced by the government of India for public administration, especially administration at rural areas. Though the sentence “Good Governance” has no widely accepted definition yet, it can be generally understood as good practices of government in governance to public in a way that it is beneficial and positively useful for public. According to United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) governance is nothing but “the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented or not implemented”. However, ESCAP has stated that the good governance is characterized with at least eight main attributes i.e., “participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. Further, it assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society.

Besides ESCAP, the World Bank has also made an attempt to define good governance. According to the World Bank governance as the traditions and the institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes

- (1) The process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced;
 - (2) The capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies;
 - (3) The respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social communications among them.
- While having the governance and the good governance at this context is making citizen centric governance. However, without a proper explanation one may wonder about how the good governance can contribute or promote economic development or growth. To clarify, whenever the mention about good governance comes into discussion it is always about putting citizen first approach or to say it simple, it's citizen centric governance. By saying this it implies that citizen are given smooth, secure and effortless governance without falling short of any of the human and citizen rights in the execution. Further, good governance is applicable and implementable in almost all both public and private sector provisions including environment, social welfare, judicial and public security, human resource development, public health, agriculture, commerce and industries and so on and so forth.

It is clear that good governance is all about putting citizen as first priority in governance by providing smooth, secure and effortless government processes to the public. However, the aims and goals of the concept of good governance can only be realized when adopted or applied digital technologies appropriately. So, this chapter aims to present detailed description about major digital interventions initiated either by government or by private agencies in the field of good governance in order to make accessing government services easy for public, especially for rural masses where accessing various government services felt bit difficult when compared to the population in urban places.



Fig 2: Implementation of Good Governance in Different Sectors

III. Digital Initiatives by Government and Non- Government Agencies in Rural Areas

This section is aimed to look into digital initiatives by both government and nongovernment agencies for rural areas, especially in the areas of governance, agriculture, banking and financing and health.

e-governance

A simple and general understanding of e-governance is “using digital technologies for delivering governance”. The e-governance usually practiced to improve administration and processes of government for public to prevent difficulty and improve accountability and to providing ease of access by making use of different information technology tools and platforms. To say it in other words, e-governance essentially is to provide governance with a citizen friendly approach. The e-governance can enhance accountability and transparency in day to day governance, which further improves the effectiveness of the services provided by the government. E-governance works in a way that it is two way beneficial; first, it eases the job of government to reach out people so that makes it sure for every citizen of the country conducts his or her duties without a fail. Second, the use of technology in the form of e-

governance makes it easy to people to access the services of the government and at the same time provides for improved transparency and accountability.

Gyandoot

For example, Madhya Pradesh state government has initiated a digital kiosks services known as Gyandoot to bring governance to its rural population. Gyandoot is a state government initiative to set up a chain of computers kiosks in rural areas of Dhar district of MP in order to provide easy access to information related to government. The state government has set up a total of around 40 kiosks with in various rural places of Dhar district with an anticipation of each kiosk serving around twenty to thirty villagers.

The kiosks were installed with an intention to provide few main services to rural masses in Dhar district of MP. The facilities are as stated in the following.

- i. To make registration and accessibility of land records seamless and easy for rural farmers: through the kiosk the facility has been brought to local accessible areas in the district so that farmers can easily make use of this facility to avail geo-maps and registration / ownership records from this facility as these records are mandatory if a farmer wants to apply for agricultural loans.
- ii. To make it easy for anyone to identify whether or not they are in BPL list by using the facility. Not only BPL list but also voter list, beneficiary list under government schemes i.e., different welfare schemes and programmes intended for eligible families and individuals. Such information of lists is only used to available only for government officials or appointed persons at village administration, which limits accessibility to common public. But, now with the introduction of digital services through kiosks anyone can avail the information from website.
- iii. To make the facility serve as tool to receive grievances from public on issues related to governance may it be ineffective administration, inappropriate behavior of government servants, or delays in due deliverables. Previously the rural population of the district had to travel distances to register their grievances. But with introduction of digital services in their locality, the villagers are no more required to travel distances.

e-Choupal

Apart from as mentioned the above, private organizations have also came up with their own solutions and initiations to reach out rural population. For instance, Indian Tobacco Company (ITC) has initiated a digital platform called e-Choupal through which farmers are approached directly in order to purchase or procure agri. and aqua products produced by farmers. The ITC initiative of e-Choupal is particularly helpful for farmers in eliminating middlemen, overcoming shortage of agriculture related infrastructure including storage and marketing facilities by providing them updates about current status of market prices and information related to agriculture. For this to happen ITC has provided internet facility and computers in focused rural areas so that farmers can reach out to ITC in order to sell their products at an agreed price. The agreed price usually is better price than what the farmers used to get for their products. In each selected rural area few farmers were given training on how to operate

and run kiosks that is equipped with computer and internet facility. The facility usually installed in trained famers (Sanchalak) so that the trained farmer (Sanchalak) will help the other farmers in the area to access the facility seamlessly. However, the Sanchalak can charge the users with a prefixed minimal price for rendering services. This will cover his costs on running the facility. On the other side the user farmers will not find the service cost as burden as it is very minimal at the same time available locally. Further, It is projected that each such facility can serve the needs of around 550 to 650 farmers and can cover around five kilometer radius of the area it is installed. It is observed that due to introduction of e-Choupal famers have seen that their incomes have grown to a considerable extent.

n-Logue

Considering low levels of tele-density⁷ in rural areas, which is less than 1.5 percent when compared to urban areas, which is around 20 percent (Ramachander, 2007), IIT Chennai in collaboration with state government has initiated n-Logue. The main aim of the n-Logue initiative is bringing communication facility to rural masses at low costs. Besides communication facility, internet facility is also introduced. The usefulness of providing accessibility to telephones and the internet facilities in rural places can be quantified. The telephony and internet facilities allow individuals residing distance places can be connected and so the resources and opportunities that are available at faraway places can be accessed. These facilities enables users to access services related agriculture, health, education, governance etc., so that they help improve quality of living in rural places. Especially, in the areas of agriculture and health the internet and communications are very important, in rural areas there is dearth of information related to agricultural information, storage facilities and marketing. In the area of health, diagnostics facilities are very poor. All these limitations can be addressed using the internet and communication facilities as they facilitate experts to meet the requirements of rural places remotely. Further, in education sector these facilities can be applied to promote distance education so that the students of schools and colleges where there is dearth of subject expert can now learn from experts so that it improves the skills of rural people so as the employability. In addition to the above, e-Governance services can also eases the access to government related information, as well as they can take their grievances to the notice of government officials quickly and without much difficulty.

Gramdoot

Rajasthan government in 2003 has taken steps to bring internet and telecommunication facilities in its rural areas as part of digitalization of rural places. This initiative popularly known as Gramdoot 8, which literally means that village messenger.

Through Gramdoot the government aims to provide internet facility by establishing public internet kiosks and connecting them with broadband lines, training facilities including computer education and related skill development training programmes. To provide the facility the government has come into partnership with private companies including Aksha Broadband Ltd (ABL) for laying optic fibres in order to create accessibility to the villagers, Aptech and Compucom companies to give training and promote IT education in the area.

Bhoomi

As far as the land records are concerned, government maintains the Record of Rights, Tenancy and Crops (RTC) by updating time to time and makes it available for further usage. On the other hand, the land owners including farmers may require producing their land details accurately in case of applying for loans. If it is for farmer, he / she might require to produce their land details to get farm related loans including crop-loan, compensation in case of crop failure due to natural calamities such as floods, draught etc., agriculture-subsidies on fertilizers and seeds etc.

IV. Digital Initiatives in Marketing in Rural Areas

In order to promote digital marketing in India Government of India has initiated

National Optical Fiber Network (NOFN) by installing Optical Fiber Cable (OFC) at all the urban as well as semi-urban places in the country, so that villages and rural places surrounded to these urban places can be connected easily by further extending the OFC from urban areas to rural areas. As per Bhart Broadband Network Limited (BBNL)¹⁰, the data in 2015 the OFC the network covering all the State Capitals, District Head Quarters and up to Block level area. The plan is to utilize existing Public Sector Units networks such as Bharath Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL), Railtel, Power-Grid etc. and laying fibers wherever needed additionally. The additionally laid fibres, which are considered dark fibre will lit be suitable technology so that adequate bandwidth can be created for the use at villages and rural places. This facility is called NOFN. However, the initiation mainly is to empower people at rural areas to actively participate and make use the digital technologies for digital marketing.

This facility is anticipated to be able to secure digital facility for rural populations by providing affordable internet facility. For the purpose, the NOFN is to provide 100mbps broadband connectivity to all gram-panchayats. India has around 2.5 lack Gram Panchayats, and there is a plan to bring all those Gram-Panchayats under NOFN by connecting to the network with an estimated cost of Rs. 20,000 Crore and funded by Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF). The NOFN can be utilized in order to provide various services at rural areas. For example, telecommunications, Internet, Cable TV etc. can be provided for rural masses by using the facility opened up by NOFN.

Types of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing can broadly be categorized into two separate streams, though it is not so much different from offline marketing, it has its own uniqueness in marketing. When it comes to digital marketing, the first thing that comes to mind is advertising for businesses.

Influencer Marketing

This involves; first, identifying potential influencers by assigning a particular rank in order to make a list of importance based on certain or given criteria. And then make these influencers be aware about the target product or business by selling a product to the influencers or giving it for a review to them. It is anticipated that these influencers to whom the products were sold / given for review will be effective to influence positively a large section of consumers to buy these products. If the chosen influencers are really working well then the company or the

product can get into an agreement in which the company of the product may ask the influencer to work with company. Celebrities, famous YouTubers, are some of the influencers to mention a few.

Viral Marketing

It's nothing but a strategy for businesses to advertise or promote a product or a business using widely established social media. When a product is promoted in these networks it becomes viral because large number of people is connected to each other through social media. Just one person who is part of this widely established social media can spread the news to hundreds and thousands of other members across the boundaries without consuming much time, energy and money.

Mobile Marketing

In the digital era almost every individual has mobile phone facility and majority among them has smartphones too. Therefore, the strategy in mobile marketing is that reaching out individual consumer at personnel level rather than mass advertising, it is anticipated that such strategy works because some individual consumers may not pay attention to mass advertising strategies in such cases mobile marketing works.

Radio and Television Adds

This digital marketing strategy is one of the oldest strategies of all exiting strategies digital marketing strategies. However, it is a popular and most consumer connected marketing strategy when compared to other strategies as there is a huge scope for dramatizing and makeup to promote a product in the form of advertisement.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Search Engine Optimization or SEO digital marketing strategy has been considered as crucial in recent times. The reason behind why businesses should consider it as important is because, it makes easy to find a particular product or service for customers when they search online for it. Another, reasons is that there are thousands of companies may be selling or offering similar products / service so SEO brings customers to the particular product / service easily without getting lost among other similar products.

Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing primarily and entirely designed and implemented targeting social platforms like Facebook, twitter etc. these platforms are used to listen and gain feedback from customers about a product, service or a business. The main advantage using social media platforms for marketing is that customers and users directly interact and give feedback in the form of opinion sharing. Both small as well as big businesses can use these platforms without much difficulty.

V. CONCLUSION

It is known that digital technologies are redefining almost all the fields and sectors equally. As mentioned about various digital initiatives, which description has ran through a length in this Chapter, covering Governance or Good Governance, Agriculture, Banking and

Financing, and Education, has shown us that there have been some efforts were already made to provide digital technologies and services which actually can benefit the rural masses including households, farmers, teachers and students. As far as the government's digital initiatives are concerned, considerable attempts were made in the direction of bringing digital technologies and services to rural areas. For example, in the form of Good Governance it simplified the processes, by going digital, to access various benefits that government provides under different programmes and schemes on the one hand. And on the other hand it tries to close the existing gap in terms of digital infrastructure and connectivity by laying down optical fibers under NOFN programme to connect the remote and unconnected rural areas. Further, the government also went on to extra mile to collaborate and associate with private players by encouraging and funding them to provide digital technologies and services to rural areas in order to take the grand plan of Digital India forward, therefore making India's dream of \$ 5 trillion economy possible. Though there are several initiatives and attempts already in place to bridge the existing gap between rural and urban places in terms both digital infrastructure as well as digital services, sadly it can be noted that the rural areas are still not able to catch up in terms of reducing poverty, illiteracy, disease and illnesses when compared to urban places. The ground level realities needs more attention. The reasons may be attributed to the poor strategic attempts and adoption of digital technologies in terms of digital platforms and digital tools for rural areas.

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