



T. T. Sreekumar

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**Decrypting E-Governance:  
Narratives, Power play, and  
Participation in the Gyandoot Intranet**

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**Communications and New Media Programme**

11 Law Link, AS6 Level 3 • National University of Singapore  
Singapore 117589 (65) 6516 - 4671  
<http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/cnm>

Milagros Rivera, Head  
[mriviera@nus.edu.sg](mailto:mriviera@nus.edu.sg)

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# **Decrypting E-Governance: Narratives, Power play, and Participation in the Gyandoot Intranet**

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T. T. Sreekumar is an assistant professor at the Communication & New Media Programme, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences National University of Singapore, Singapore.

## I. Introduction

Construction of the notion of “e-governance” along with such other “epithetized phenomena” as e-learning, e-banking, e-marketing, etc., played a major role in shaping the futuristic e-topias<sup>1</sup> of the global information society discourse. Woolgar (2002, p. 3) points out that “epithetizing” various existing activities and social institutions with notions such as “virtual,” “digital,” “electronic” (or simply “e”), “cyber,” “tele,” etc. “conjure up a future consequent upon the effects of electronic technologies.” Given the backdrop of the increased involvement of new media technologies in delivering e-governance, it is important to understand the social and historical specificities of the emerging technological systems that facilitate the construction of the notion. It is also pertinent to take a closer look at the relativity of technical design and absorption to the culture and strategies of actors (Feenberg, 1999) to discuss e-governance from a non-essentialist perspective.

Social constructivism provides some provisional but meaningful theoretical foundations to look at e-governance in non-essentialist terms. One of the important conceptual endeavors from the constructivist perspective in understanding e-governance initiatives would be to disaggregate the question of technology from the differential perspective of the dominant and subordinate subject positions of the actors involved.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, e-governance projects are rationally planned and implemented by technocrats in an effort to exercise a far more effective control over resources and social organization. Nevertheless, common people encounter these technologies of systematization as part of their lives and, as deemed appropriate, would reject or force revisions in the design and implementation of the systems. As Feenberg (Ibid, p. xiii) argues:

*(T)he invariant elements of the constitution of the technical subject and object are modified by socially specific contextualizing variables in the course of the realization of concrete technical actors, devices and systems. Thus technologies are not merely efficient devices or efficiency oriented practices, but include their contexts as these are embodied in design and social insertion.*

In the case of information and communication technology (ICT)-based network governance, the possibility of the formation of a rural network society is imminent. Its proto forms with deep crevices and conflicting layers of incorporation of different actors have appeared in the contexts of many e-governance projects where the person-to-state interface and, to a limited extent, person-to-person relations are reaffirmed by the technology of the Intranet.

This paper attempts to understand the social dynamics that underlie the practices of e-governance in India on the basis of an analysis of the Gyandoot Intranet, a massive e-governance project launched in India in the state of Madhya Pradesh. The relatively weak but undeniable structuration of the rural network society is manifested in the narratives

of networking facilitated by the design of the project with scattered nodes connected to a centralized service monitoring center. Nonetheless, the rural network society is a complex social domain of opposing interest groups where some of the political and ideological conflicts in the larger society manifest in newer forms. The fact that the technology itself gets enmeshed in the relatively autonomous logic of the network society partly explains the inertia that stops the inevitable progress envisaged in the visions molded by concepts informing paradigms of rapid social change consequent on the implementation of e-governance projects.

The notion of e-governance, as it is practiced and promoted in third world contexts, has close resemblances with scenarios of neoliberal discourses of new media technologies that Armitage (1999) powerfully criticized as a “pan-capitalist theory and practice of explicitly technologized, or ‘telematic,’ societies.” He argued that this discourse is primarily “concerned with legitimating the political and cultural control of individuals, groups, and new social movements” through the “production, promotion, distribution, and consumption of new media technologies” both at the material and ideological levels. Rhetoric of e-governance in the Indian context is also deeply enmeshed in a larger discourse of cyberlibertarian developmentalism that brings together the idea of economic development and neoliberal discourse of technology arbitrarily to rationalize ICT-based State and civil society interventions for social and economic transformation in the rural setting (Sreekumar, 2003, 2006).

Following Armitage’s discussion (1999) and the analysis on the Foucauldian notion of Governmentality, Navarria (2006, p.126) argues that “the concept of e-Government does not only signify efficiency gains and economical benefits—for both the government and its subjects,” but, in the long run, “the overall e-government project, broadly understood as a product of the neoliberal discourse of technology and the contemporary development of pan-capitalism, could represent a greater and long lasting threat for citizens’ life and freedom.”<sup>3</sup> The mapping of the social and political constraints that marginalized communities and individuals encounter in their interface with e-governance projects, perhaps, has implications for the optimistic political vision of new media technologies as a decolonizing force facilitating development of “cyborg skills” required for their survival under techno-human conditions theorized in the cyber-feminist approaches to new technologies (Haraway, 1991; Sandoval, 1995).<sup>4</sup> Identifying the structural factors that envelop human technology interaction in the rural setting in South Asia is thus an inevitable step in understanding social innovations and its impacts either initiated by the State or by civil society or by State-civil society partnerships.

This paper is an attempt in that direction. Section II, following these introductory remarks, provides an outline of the recent developments of e-governance in India. Section III discusses the technological organization of the Gyandoot project and section IV takes up the question of the social dynamics of the Gyandoot cyber kiosks, which provide access to the Intranet. Section V takes a closer look at the meanings of the seemingly hyped anecdotes and narratives of success along with the exposition of realistic tale that explains the interplay of technology and power enmeshed in the local dynamics of absorption and appropriation of Gyandoot’s Intranet technology. Section VI outlines the contours of the emerging model of e-governance. Concluding observations are offered in the final section.

## II. The Beginnings of e-Governance in India

The Indian State began to design and execute rural development programs with a

relatively visible ICT content in the 1970s, while international attention on the potential of harnessing ICTs for developmental activities can be considered as a relatively later phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> The early attempts to use ICTs were applied in development planning, a key area of State action in the import-substitution era. Examples of early attempts to use computer applications for cost optimization and decision-making were the deployment of ICTs in the Dharampur Sub-District Infrastructure Planning for Development (1977) and in the Karwar Rural Development Information System (1984). The latter initiative was designed with a focus on reducing delay and curbing corruption—key concerns of the matured model of e-governance in developing countries—through a monitoring program based on computer applications (Kaul, et al., 1989 quoted in Bhatnagar, 1990, p.7).

“Electronic governance” became a buzz word in the Indian State’s efforts to revamp its administrative system in late 1990s based on the principles of “good governance” as part of the structural adjustment strategies dictated by the World Bank and other international agencies.<sup>6</sup>

*In the second phase, the implementation of the national IT Task Force and State Government IT policies symbolized a paradigm shift in e-governance policies towards using IT for a wider range of sectoral applications reaching out to a large number of people in rural as well as urban areas. Moreover, there has been a movement towards a greater input of NGOs and private sector organizations in providing services to the public. These projects have been influenced by the increasing focus of international agencies such as DFID, G-8, the UNDP and the World Bank under the banner of “E-Governance for Development” (Madon, 2002, p.2).*

The Ministry of Information Technology was constituted and the Central Government initiated some tentative projects aimed at testing the potential of e-governance. Besides the Central Government, many state governments also responded seeking the possibilities of improving administrative functions by introducing e-governance at different levels of the bureaucracy. Specialized agencies in government also initiated innovative experiments. In 1999, a national conference was organized in Bangalore attended by 75 senior bureaucrats including IT secretaries of 32 States and Union territories in India.<sup>7</sup> The conference affirmed a resolve to create “one-stop, non-stop, efficient, effective, responsive, transparent citizen governance through the use of information technology” (Katakam, 1999, p. 78).

The conference came up with a declaration on the intent and content of e-governance program in India, although it was criticized as bereft of specificity and the plans lacking timeframes (ibid). The declaration emphasized the need for shifting the focus of governance from government-centric to citizen-centric in the wake of the opportunities opened by information technology for large scale delivery of quality services. The use of IT was expected to facilitate efficient delivery of government services to citizens and business, “to anyone, anytime, anywhere through a variety of channels at a reasonable cost” (quoted in ibid., p. 79). The declaration recognized the need for re-engineering the process of government to achieve synergy with technology. A critical factor identified was the centrality of upgrading skills of the existing workforce, while also underscoring the necessity of industry-community-State partnerships in e-delivery of services. A sound communication infrastructure for ubiquitous access, a conscious effort to harmonize IT with regional requirements, and innovative use of IT to prevent possible social exclusion were considered essential components of the future e-governance strategy. The role of central government in supporting capacity building efforts of state governments was also