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The Contribution of E-Governance Initiative Common Service Centers (CSCs) in the Technological Advancement of the Rural Population

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this study is to determine whether e-governance measures such as implementing common service centers (CSCs) helped in contributing to the technological knowledge, advancement, and awareness of the rural population especially in the case of rural Kerala. This research uses a qualitative approach for collecting primary data by using questionnaire from respondents belonging to the study. Also, the study uses secondary data from government reports on e-governance, journals, books, websites, and others as main sources to define e-governance and to familiarize in what ways and how the ICT-driven e-governance initiatives are providing services to rural populations. This paper focuses on CSCs and its contribution to technological advancement in rural Kerala.

Keywords: E-governance, Common Service Centers (CSCs), Technological advancement, Rural population, Kerala

Introduction

From the age of technology to advanced technology, the world is changing quickly. In one way or another, technology is now influencing every aspect of our lives. As a developing country, India has used information and technology (ICT) as a catalyst for its explosive growth in almost every field. Delivering government services digitally for citizen-centric and advanced governance is one such example. With the help of information and communication technologies, governments are delivering better services to their citizens across the globe. Even though it sounds familiar, there are some differences between e-government and e-governance. E-government is the modernization of processes and functions of the government using ICT for information and service delivery. E-governance on the other hand goes beyond the service delivery aspects and is seen as a decisional process. It uses ICT to involve multi-stakeholders in decision-making and in making the government open and accountable[3]. This paper discusses e-governance but defining e-government will make a clear differentiation between the two. The government of India and state governments have introduced and implemented various e-governance projects for an ease and effective administration processes both in urban and rural areas. In a nutshell, through e-governance, governments are trying to make their services be made more open to the people in an easy, effective, and transparent way.

One such initiative was that of the implementation of Common Service Centers (CSCs) across the country. The CSC is a strategic cornerstone of the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP), approved by the government of India in May 2006 with the aim of "Make all Government services accessible to the common man in his locality, through common service delivery outlets and ensure efficiency, transparency & reliability of such services at affordable costs to realise the basic needs of the common man."[3] Compared to other e-governance projects (webpages, software etc) CSCs had a great impact over the rural population. CSCs use various technological tools such as computers, printers, broadband, etc on a large scale. As they are kiosks that act as a mediator (a service delivery channel) for providing all these services from the government to its citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders CSCs can be seen as a channel in contributing to technological knowledge, advancement, and awareness in their particular areas.

The state of Kerala is a pioneer in implementing and introducing e-governance projects in the country. Kerala was the first to introduce 5000 multi-purpose community technology centers across the state which was called Akshaya e-Kendra (a CSC-like initiative even before implementing CSC projects across the country). Furthermore, Kerala is among the states which have a higher computer literacy rate and better technological infrastructures. This research is making an effort to find the answer to the question, of whether these e-governance initiatives specifically CSCs have in any way been a catalyst in contributing to the technological knowledge, advancement, and awareness or even to the computer literacy in the rural population of Kerala.

Methodology

For the collection of primary data, this study made use of a structured questionnaire from respondents belonging to the study area. Also, with an intention to get a better outcome, the questionnaire was distributed at random but considering age groups of youngsters, middle-aged, and old (3 age groups respectively). The findings have also made use of informal conversations with those who participated and answered the questionnaire, panchayat officials,

and CSC workers. Secondary data were also collected from the government reports on e-governance, journals, books, websites, and others for getting insight into e-governance history and initiatives such as CSCs and others in India and their impacts.

Results and Discussion

The state of Kerala is among the states which are already ahead in implementing e-governance measures. Kerala was the first to introduce community technology centers across the state called Akshaya e-Kendra even before the implementation of CSC projects across the country. A Common Service Center is basically a kiosk or a center to provides government services with one or more personal computers, a high-speed internet and other ICT equipment and services. As this is a public-private model anyone can apply and become a Village Level Entrepreneur (VLE). The VLEs and the employees will be trained with the required knowledge. The CSC report shows[6] that, of the total CSCs, approximately 19 percent are operated and managed by women which shows its vision to create a technology-enabled socio-economic change, and thus acting as catalysts for digital literacy, financial inclusion, and gainful economic activity across rural India.

The primary data collected to understand whether these e-governance initiatives specifically CSCs have in any way been a catalyst in contributing to the technological knowledge, advancement, and awareness or even to the computer literacy shows some interesting facts.

The findings show that the third age group i.e., mostly with the age of 40 and more agree in some ways CSCs have been a factor in technological advancement in such a way as popularising devices like photostat machines, printers, and scanners, etc. Thus, there is a boom in internet penetration through small-scale internet cafes because of overcrowding in CSCs and other reasons. It then even contributed to the introduction of new broadband connections in the area.

The second and first age groups of people with age between 18 and 40 mostly rely on CSCs for availing the services. However some negative responses they faced from the CSCs like overcrowding and time lag at times and others made them to explore and become aware of themselves and others on the benefits of individual service availing through individual portals in e-district websites. Thus, creating a technological awareness among peers.

However this group has the view that CSCs aren't providing any technological advantage as they are behind in network speed than most of the internet cafes and others. Also, they are of the opinion that CSC workers aren't rigorously trained to become professionals in e-skills such as fast typing and others.

The CSCs workers, who are mostly women find it very beneficial in to be trained as an employee. They in their free time help people with digital disadvantages and also encourage and make aware of the younger generation to acquire e-skills.

The rural administration also became part of this technological knowledge and awareness as part of e-governance measures as everything is getting digitalized and transactions of services from various stakeholders including CSCs are now happening through ICT.

Suggestions

1. Even though it is a public-private initiative, governments should try to give more grants and benefits for CSCs to introduce more advanced and latest technological tools and thus make CSCs hubs for G2C service delivery and a catalyst for the technological advancement of the particular area.

2. Encourage more women VLEs and employees as it will surely help in encouraging the younger generation and others to learn e-skills and thus achieve total computer literacy.

3. CSC workers, VLEs, and rural administration employees should be encouraged to learn more about the security threats and prevent them in these service delivery channels. This study found that they lack in knowledge to face such a situation. These training workshops can also be used to train people and to spread awareness.

Conclusion

E-governance is a very effective service-providing tool which helps governments to offer services online by saving a lot of costs and resources. The extensive use of computerized e-governance in rural areas is helping the country in many ways. By decreasing the digital divide, by providing a transparent administration from the base, and so on. The implementation of CSCs were a milestone in e-governance measures. E-governance through CSC initiatives contributed to technical advancements among the rural population by introducing and popularising several ICT tools printing machines, scanners, and others in certain areas. It also helped in increasing awareness of technological aspects and opportunities and the importance of computer literacy among the rural population. Implementing CSCs helped local bodies to avoid people's rush and made services in a plate to citizens and thus became part of and lead the technological advancements and awareness in particular panchayats.

The efficiency of CSCs in Kerala is satisfactory at this point. But implementing more CSC, like one in every ward of a panchayat will be more effective as it can make services more accessible to citizens. It also contributes in the technological advancement of the particular area by installing the latest technological infrastructures. Also, in e-skill development and computer literacy, we are to use more spacious CSCs as an education hub too. However, this may require governments to provide adequate grants or concessions to VLEs.

In the case of Kerala, the government has mostly tackled challenges like low literacy, lack of awareness, low broadband penetration, lack of system integration within the department, etc. Now the need of the hour is to empower CSCs as a hub to ensure privacy and to protect data leaks from its systems. The government should introduce protective measures according to rules and regulations and without compromising on data privacy and should also train CSC workers, rural administration employees, and even to citizens on the matter.

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