

# **DIGITALIZATION, BUREAUCRATIC LOGJAM AND ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Humanity has come to the present stage through a long process of evolution as well as revolution and both have shaped us. However, one of the greatest of all the revolutions undoubtedly is the digital revolution, which has pushed through human limitations and permeated almost everything, including governance. Be it a student taking an online course, a healthcare worker using medical software to get a holistic view of a patient's health, a housewife paying bills online, or someone like me to download and read research papers, project reports and topics of interest and concern. The technology has had profound impact on our day-to-day lives so far and will continue on its path to become all pervasive despite efforts of sabotage by interest groups with ulterior motives. It therefore offers endless possibilities, needless to mention power in the hands of the public. Like in other parts of the world, the Government of India too has launched a program to digitalize India, which is coined as "Digital India" aimed at building digital infrastructure, governance and services on demand and digital empowerment of citizens. One of the best examples of digital governance is Estonia, where the government has provided each citizen with a secured unique identity, through which the government has integrated all the services and made way for transparent and accountable governance. Giving a digital edge to critical focus areas like broadband highways, internet access for all, IT for jobs, electronics manufacturing, e-governance, healthcare and agriculture to name a few of the areas. As a step further, the government aims to engage key sectors and industries from within and outside to bring in administrative transparency, expediency, and accountability. These are welcome steps devoid of traditional "slothism", which is a thing of the past. With an initial commitment by the government and India Inc to invest about USD 18 billion, the program has the potential to be a game changer as far as services delivery in rural areas is concerned. According to a 2015 report entitled "Digital India: Unleashing Prosperity," by Deloitte and others, usage of mobile devices and other available technologies can serve as complementary channels for delivery of public services and can have positive outcomes on the quality of life of the users e.g. a 'Digital Locker' facility for citizens to digitally store their important documents like Permanent Account Number (PAN) card, passport, mark sheets etc. The idea is to reduce paper work for administrative officials and delivering faster results saving time and resources, especially financial resources. According to McKinsey, the adoption of key technologies across sectors spurred by the Digital India initiative could help boost India's GDP by \$550-billion to \$ 1-trillion by 2025 (Swati Mishra 2015). Through transaction cost cutting, the program can enable more creative and service-oriented businesses and this is estimated to create about 17 million employment opportunities. One of the important benefits of the program for a country like India would be reduced carbon footprints by lowering fuel consumption and waste generation. However, all this is not without challenges and there are hurdles ahead. The overarching challenges facing "Digital India" are digital divide between rural and urban India in terms of broadband internet connections and access to mobile phones; poor quality data services and call drops; cyber security and privacy; and policy framework and regulations. India therefore will have some way to go to meet citizens' expectations and build trust in service delivery. The country, despite having a long-term digital strategy and vision, falls behind in measures like core infrastructure, service delivery experience and addressing issues of access and citizen centricity. In light of these issues, the benefits to be accrued due to digitalization and the difficulties to be faced are discussed in this article along with issues like accessibility and bureaucracy.

## 1. Introduction

Humanity has come to the present stage shaped by a long process of evolution and revolution. However, one of the greatest of all the revolutions undoubtedly is the digital revolution, which has pushed through human limitations and permeated almost everything, including governance. Be it a student taking an online course, a healthcare worker using medical software to get a holistic view of a patient's health, a housewife paying bills online or someone like me downloading research papers, project reports and topics of interest and concern. The technology has had profound impact on our lives and will continue to become all pervasive despite efforts of sabotage by interest groups with ulterior motives. Such efforts will get thwarted and power will rest with the public. Like in other parts of the world, the Government of India too has launched a program to digitalize India, which is coined as "Digital India" aimed at building digital infrastructure, governance and services on demand and digital empowerment of citizens. One of the best examples of digital governance is Estonia, where the government has provided each citizen with a secured unique identity, through which the government has integrated all the services and made way for transparent and accountable governance. Giving a digital edge to critical focus areas like broadband highways, internet access for all, IT for jobs, electronics manufacturing, e-governance, healthcare and agriculture to name a few of the areas. As a step further, the government aims to engage key sectors and industries from within and outside to bring in administrative transparency, expediency, and accountability. These are welcome steps devoid of traditional "slothism", which should have been a thing of the past by now. With an initial commitment by the government and India Inc to invest about USD 18 billion, the program has the potential to be a game changer as far as services delivery in rural areas is concerned. According to a 2015 report entitled "Digital India: Unleashing Prosperity," by Deloitte and others, usage of mobile devices and other available technologies can serve as complementary channels for delivery of public services and can have positive outcomes on the quality of life of the users e.g. a digital locker' facility for citizens to digitally store their important documents like PAN card, passport, mark sheets etc. The whole idea is to reduce the quantum of paper work for administrative officials and delivering faster results saving time and resources, especially financial resources.

Sources put that according to McKinsey, adoption of technologies spurred by the Digital India initiative could help boost India's GDP by \$550-billion to \$ 1-trillion by 2025. Through transaction cost cutting, the program can enable more creative and service-oriented businesses and this is estimated to create about 17 million employment opportunities. One of the important benefits of the program for a country like India would be reduced carbon footprints by lowering fuel consumption and waste generation. However, all this is not without challenges and there are hurdles ahead. A recent study (2014) conducted by Accenture has ranked the selected ten (10) countries on a scale of 1 to 10 based on the scores from the Citizen Satisfaction Survey, Service Maturity and Citizen Service Delivery Experience. This is shown here. Although the rank is low for India, it has embraced the idea of enabling growth through digitalization and despite some challenges it shows strong promise to implement digital solutions as an enabler of social progress.



(Fig 1: Overall Ranking of countries)

## 2. Benefits of Digitalization

It is beyond the scope of any contrary argument that digitalization has a net positive impact. It will help in providing better services to people by ensuring efficiency, reliability and transparency. It will also ensure good governance, reduce the duplication of work and communication costs, increase transparency in the functioning of various government departments currently plagued by bureaucracy and ensure faster service to citizens.

Digitalization has improved our ability to compete economically like no other method has so far been able to do. It has improved the way we think, the way the society runs and also the quality of life. It has the potential to enhance business on one hand and public service delivery on the other. Digitalization also has numerous benefits for the society and the environment because of its low carbon footprint due to reduction in resource use.

Some of the recent examples of benefits accrued due to digitalization of services are as follows:

- ✓ Estonia has estimated annual savings of up to 2% of GDP by introducing digital IDs and signatures.
- ✓ Denmark expects to save € 400 million annually by eliminating paper forms and paper mail.
- ✓ Netherlands has led to a socio-economic benefit equivalent to 0.9% of GDP.
- ✓ EU calculations show that the reuse of basic government data can create up to 2% GDP growth, while reducing bureaucracy.

### **3. Bureaucratic Impediments**

The middle layer of bureaucracy is the biggest roadblock in every e-governance project including the Digital India initiative. It is a common sight in government offices that there are computers everywhere, which are used only for typing letters, accessing e-mails and surfing the internet and the real work continues to be carried out on paper files. This is why the computer still does not get a space on the main work table but is always placed on side table next to the printer. Until such practices vanish, and files are digitized and the IT infrastructure is part of the work flow digitalization will not work. Opening a front end in the form of a portal or an app will not work. All that the portal or the app will do is become a user interface for submitting information to the government office and nothing beyond. The real work inside the office will still be done by the “babus” after a printout is taken of the information submitted by a citizen. They do not want to take any risk and always takes a path called “the file is under process” when enquired about.

So the biggest impediment to Digital India will be the same “babus” but at a more sophisticated level. This may be overcome by putting the Department of Personnel and Training (that looks after the bureaucracy) under the direct control of the UPSC (by suitably mandating it) or any other independent agency and not under a political executive to ensure that bureaucrats perform as expected. This is discussed at some length below.

### **4. Bureaucracy and Political Control**

It would not be justified to put blame squarely on bureaucracy for slow pace of work in most of the government departments/agencies. We as well know that the maligned civil servants (not always though) when freed of political influences deliver

well e.g. conduct of elections, in which it does well enough and delivers objectively under the control and supervision of the Election Commission. This is because s/he has fixed tenure and necessary independence under the statute and a well-defined mandate. This makes it abundantly clear that we need to free the bureaucracy from inappropriate and many a time undue political control/pressure. This will go when the power to transfer and otherwise control the bureaucracy is vested on an independent agency such as the UPSC (after mandating) and not the elected executive due to the fact that the elected executives come and go and hence cannot be allowed to use the system to suit their requirements. It requires mentioning here that a number of committees/commissions have been set up in India to reform the bureaucracy and they have recommended setting up of 'Civil Services Boards' clearly mandated to ensure postings on merit, fixing tenure of civil servants and administer quick penalty and reward. All these will be adequate to streamline the bureaucracy.

A system to function properly, the people who operate it must be trained sufficiently. While the bureaucrats have to be allowed to take decisions freely on one hand, they need to recognize that they have to be the agents of change and synergize government efforts with other agencies to deliver effective and timely solutions. It is seen that personnel of government departments hardly remain updated with the latest innovations and knowhow and tend to work in the same manner as their predecessors. This is a lackluster attitude and therefore makes them out of date. It is extremely important on the part of the government agencies either to upgrade their own professional strength through training or by recruiting high-skilled and dedicated specialists in each department who can deliver. There is an urgent need for the civil service to change with the times, moving away from the mindset of a regulator to one of a facilitator. In summary, the idea is to have a professionally managed bureaucratic system instead of a slow-moving and lethargic vehicle to usher in change. Digitalization in this regard would be able to solve at least 60-70% of problems pertaining to speed and transparency of delivery.

Last but not the least, an attractive delivery-based career progression opportunity as well as excellent pay-package must be in place for the career/professional and financial requirements of the bureaucrats like it is done in good public as well as private sector organizations and MNCs.

## 5. Crossing Hurdles

This author has taken the liberty to discuss sensitive issues like bureaucratic impediments in implementation of the Digital India initiative (which is e-governance in essence), the logjam in government departments, political control/pressure on the bureaucracy and bringing the bureaucracy itself outside the purview of the political system. We may now delve into the following issues.

### 5.1 Access vis-à-vis Inclusion

Limiting access goes against the tenets of inclusion. Therefore, it becomes incumbent on the part of the government to ensure access to information by the citizen. If access to government services is to be through an app or a portal then the bottleneck is the internet.

It is a matter of irony and disgrace that successive telecom ministers both corrupt to not-so-corrupt have ignored (which is a form destruction, but slow) one of our largest public sector organizations namely, the Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) that had the potential and capability of providing such an access to citizens. The logical result has been that the BSNL has never had the stellar leadership that could take it to a higher level. When the telecom sector was opened up it was assumed that the private sector would provide uninterrupted access across the country. But, it was quickly realised that the private sector was only interested in the cream of the market without any obligation whatsoever to provide access to rural areas. As a result the government had to incorporate Universal Service Obligations into the policy under the National Telecom Policy 1999 for providing access to rural areas by the private players.

A fund called Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF) was also set up with fines collected from telecom operators who did not meet their obligations. BSNL was expected to use the USOF thus created to build connectivity to rural areas. But then till 2016 there are still 55,000 odd villages that do not have mobile phone connectivity. There are villages and rural areas that are still sitting on 2G towers as they have not been upgraded to 3G. Telecom operators have done a limited roll out of 3G, and 4G will even be far more limited. Only Reliance Jio, which is a 4G operator, is reaching out across the country. But Jio cannot solve the problem of access, as there is an issue of cost here.

## 5.2 Problems of Data Access

Even in areas where there is access, the cost of bandwidth is too prohibitive for more households instead of being cost-effective, which is due to low speed and the high data charges. The evangelist who railed and riled against net neutrality little realized the harm they have caused to the country. Instead of service it turned out to be dis-service.

Access to data/information needs bars. Even when free access is provided, certain applications will have to be charged highly. Distracting sites must be kept away from young minds. Otherwise like children in urban India who cannot focus we will create a generation of distracted youths. Parents boast about their kids' ability to operate the mobile or the internet without realizing that at a formative age when the brain is still building its neuron network these devices cause more harm than good. This is so because of the fact that the brain of a person playing games on a mobile gets wired differently and they suffer from attention deficits, the reason being; every game is configured with rewards at intervals to release dopamine inside the brain, which gives momentary highs and keeps the addiction going.

The conclusion is that Digital India cannot mean a Distracted India. Thus, access and control of content will need carefully drafted laws and legislation and also to enforce the same at appropriate time and scale. There are lobbies that will push and pull on these issues but if the government stands firm, we might have something worthwhile for benefit of our citizens at large.

## 6. Face Change and Taste Success

Digitalization will not happen by default as has been mentioned above for various reasons both within and outside the system. One always finds people resistant to digital transformation and adopt the philosophy of "we are fine the way we are". Defensiveness and bureaucracy coupled with the inertia of existing processes are the most common obstacles we normally encounter in effecting any change at any scale.

Significant changes can be effected by a strong leader by arranging to conduct the much needed "change management workshops" to educate employees on the various benefits of digital transformation. It is but obvious enough that, Digital Transformation will struggle if employees

don't understand what digitalization means and why it matters. This is why one should not try to digitize every aspect of governance at once that will have the potential to run into a mess; instead, start with small changes that are easier for the employees to swallow and adopt e.g. a cloud storage system connected to existing structures could be a major step towards digitalization that doesn't significantly affect daily functions.

## 7. Improving Public Services for Future

The government should focus on the following aspects to improve public services.

- ✓ Publish information on public services so that citizens can evaluate the effectiveness and suggest improvements.
- ✓ Provide more services through digital channels, such as online or mobile.
- ✓ Understand priorities of citizens/communities better through feedback mechanism.
- ✓ Provide services in a more cost-effective way. This will result in greater inclusiveness
- ✓ Ensure that services are tailored to the needs of people using them without making them clumsy.
- ✓ Work more closely with businesses and nonprofit organizations to have wider range.
- ✓ Improve the skills of people who work in public services, the current level being abysmally low.
- ✓ Improve understanding of what works well and what doesn't to filter out non-essentials concurrently and speedily.
- ✓ Involve citizens in deciding how public services should work or can be improved instead of the "babu" assuming the position of an omniscient.
- ✓ Respond to changes flexibly, such as adopting new technologies or an increased demand for a particular service.

Above all, plan for the long-term, not just the next few years so that efficiency and transparency becomes a culture.

## 8. Linking Digitalization to Sustainable Development Goals

We all are perhaps aware that the year 2015 was very important for the global development agenda. During the Special UN Summit on Sustainable Development in September last year, large number of countries defined development goals to be achieved in the next fifteen (15) years i.e. by 2030. It was accepted that if we want the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to have a real impact, digitalization should gain more traction in the discussion on sustainable development. The SDGs have now replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were intended to drive development during the past decade and a half. The SDGs are very specific in nature and are focused mainly on developing countries, including India because by 2030 we would be a country of 1.53 billion (UN Population Division). India cannot therefore do away with digitalization and primary goals before India would therefore be.

- ✓ Stabilize population as fast as possible either through direct or indirect means. Without this all else will be futile.
- ✓ Establish megatrends such as mobile internet, the internet of things and big data to boost economic, social and political development, which are the keys to empowering.
- ✓ Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all.
- ✓ Promote sustainable industrialization and build resilient infrastructure with innovation, so as to have just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

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