

Sanjay Jaju



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It's never too late

When was the last time you had to go to a bank or to a travel agent or to a stock exchange or a post office for getting a transaction done? I think you would be seriously starting to scratch your head to figure this no brainer out. Why only these, there is actually a big list of things that have gone into the virtual mode where our physical presence to get an act done has faded into oblivion. The transformation has been so swift and the impact so widespread that even those cynics who thought that Information Technology Revolution is only a passing phase and would gradually pave the way for the traditional to take over have now been reduced to a small minority. It is almost hard to imagine life without the gizmos that the Communications Technology has offered. Would you mind shifting back to your traditional means of existence with a land phone, thick account books and documents, having to stand in queues as somebody there is taking his own sweet time to get the calculations right with the frailties of human mind, I think the answer though pretty obvious is an astounding no.

Information Technology has transformed the way we conduct our lives. It has comprehensively changed the business of doing businesses globally. Although one talks of Globalisation as a discreet event, it would be futile to imagine that this event would have taken place had Information Technology not concomitantly evolved and grown not just besides it

but also for it. Every conceivable means of production has been impacted upon and the global efficiency and productivity of delivering the output has gone many notches up because of the advent and advances in Information and Communications Technology. I don't think the world had the capacity to support the requirements of the present population with the existing resources had the push to convert these resources at the exponential rates not come from the ICT.

We have been seeing a similar situation in India as well. Be it the mobile phone revolution that has practically swarmed the Nation including the Countryside or the reach of Desktops and Internet, every bit of our life is practically under the perennial influence of the net. A debate that raged in this Nation when the Indian Railways first introduced Computerisation of its ticketing regarding the adverse impact of ICT on employ-

ment has turned practically on its head. No other sector has generated more jobs than ICT in the last twenty years in this Country. In fact, it has been the Service sector and the outsourced IT jobs that have catapulted India into a Nation that's getting beginning to be counted.

Although the impact of ICT on our Nation has been far reaching to say the least, the contribution of ICT in improving Governance in our Country is still an unanswered question. Even here it is not the Contribution of ICT to Governance

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which is in doubt; what is in doubt is the use to which it has been put to in the process of Governance.

Governments wherever they are and at whatever level they are leave a huge mark on the lives of the Citizens. An efficiently run government that's close to the needs of its citizens plays a huge role in spurring growth and providing good quality of life to its people. It is this aspect of governance that can easily be transformed if right tools, techniques and methods available in ICT are applied. What is required for

that is not the technology which is available in ample but the willingness and commitment to use that, something that is still in serious short supply. This attitude is partly because of the fact that a transparently run government would offer minimal opportunities for rent seeking behaviour and nepotism while it is also because enough pressure is not being put by the Citizen groups and the electoral system on the governments to fall into line and transform themselves towards better governance.

If you really ask me the one visible change that I can see in the Governments over the last ten years especially on IT use, I can safely tell you that once ubiquitous typewriter has now been replaced by PCs. These PCs fully decked with multiple variants of Microsoft have made life easier for the clerk to process words and his boss to impress his political masters with colourful slideshows. In many places they have started to use emails and faxes but don't be surprised if they ask you for a signed copy to be delivered to them physically. The Governments everywhere lay a huge importance to file building, paper files of course and for them digitally signed and authenticated documents though cleared through legislation are just not enough. Still reams and reams of paper move from table to table to create work for everybody, work that has no bearing on the lives of the people and work that is simply avoidable and dispensable. The Business Process Reengineering and Work Flow Automation though tried out in few places have only met with partial success. There are few islands of success but with no interoperability across the larger system, the process of governance is still saddled with red tape, delays where one has to move heaven and earth to make the paper move from a table to another.

Amidst all this, there are many success stories and the

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story would be incomplete if one does not talk of them. There are umpteen examples of many local bodies that have improved their citizen interface through web or through Citizen Service Centres delivering host of civic services, the delivery of which made the Citizens run from pillar to post in the past. There are many government departments that have created spunky websites to deliver bits and pieces of information. It's albeit a different story whether these sites are updated.

Although this does add to the comfort, this would still however be falling into 'too little, too late' category. In this scenario, one can only hope that at least these gains are passed across the entire cross section of the Country so that what then remains is the filling up of the missing links in the Jigsaw.

In today's kinetic economy, there's an entirely new set of challenges facing policy makers, decision makers, public sector professionals and citizens. One thing that is clearly evident, through all the dynamics of this Information Age, is the increasing need to make the public sector more responsive to the private citizen. This means, the very paradigms of traditional governance have to undergo a full-scale transformation. In the light of the fact that the average citizen now is more aware of his rights, more demanding of quality and more conscious of his responsibilities, the need for effective governance is more critical than ever. The recently enacted Right to Information Act is therefore a path breaking piece of legislation. The only challenge is to use it effectively and also that it is taken in the right spirit both by the user as well as the provider. Information Technology can play a major part in operationalising the RTI.

Effective governance demands mastery over certain essentials: far reaching vision, strategic planning, extended reach, easy accessibility, rapid turnaround, citizen delight. If ICT could bring in paradigm change in businesses everywhere, it's high time that the governments realise its potential and put its acts together. In that sense, it's never too late.

The views expressed here are personal.

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