Digital India Programme: Going Full Circle

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Abstract

The Digital India programme of the government of India, launched in 2015, is an ambitious initiative which seeks to effect both process improvements as well as transform governance for the future in India through massive digitisation efforts. Numerous initiatives, particularly in the works of the Indian federal government have been initiated and have also delivered successful outputs and outcomes. Digitisation efforts are also being applied to comprehensively cover the functioning of local self-governance institutions like the Panchayats for easing processes as well as enhancing transparency aspects in their day-day operations. In the sense of coverage, thus, the Digital India Programme has come full circle. Apart from the usual challenges in any government programme of scale in India, like economic costs, illiteracy etc., lack of digital literacy, attitude of citizens as well as government departments and personnel resisting change, redressal of digital grievances, wide range of cyber-crimes and policy issues emerge as the major challenges facing Digital India. Continued support to Digital India, from both the federal as well as state governments is therefore necessary to achieve its objectives comprehensively.

1.0 Introduction

Digital India is a flagship programme of the Government of India with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. It was launched on 1st July 2015 by the Prime Minister of India and is presently in the 7th year of its journey. (Press Information Bureau, Government of India (PIB), 2015, 2021; digitalindia.gov.in)

Even though India is known as a powerhouse of software, the availability of electronic government services to citizens was still comparatively low even in the first decade of this century. The National e-Governance Plan approved in 2006 deployed Mission Mode Projects and Core ICT Infrastructure, but they could make less than the desired impact due to their limited features. The isolated and less interactive systems revealed major gaps that were thwarting the successful adoption of e-governance along the entire spectrum of governance, necessitating a more comprehensive planning and implementation to establish a more connected government. The Digital India vision provides the intensified impetus for further momentum and progress towards this initiative and this would promote inclusive growth that covers electronic services, products, devices, manufacturing and job opportunities. It aspires to meet the demands of India of the 21st Century that must strive to meet the aspirations of its citizens where government and its services reach the doorsteps of citizens and contribute towards a long-lasting positive impact. The Digital India Programme aims to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy by leveraging IT as a growth engine of new India. (PIB, 2014; india.gov.in; digitalindia.gov.in)

Ours is a TERI-Columbia University collaboration project where we are interested in the use of ICTs in the Sustainable Development Goals. The project title is 'Towards a New Indian Model of ICT led Growth and Development'. This paper deals with the Digital India programme of the government of India. After a brief literature review, we list features of the Digital India programme and list significant initiatives and achievements of these initiatives. Then we delve into the extension of the Digital India programme to the 3rd tier of constitutional governance in India, i.e., the Panchayats and Local governments and elaborate the role of digitization in these governance institutions with respect to service delivery and transparency aspects. This is especially important in view of 2 aspects. First is the important role of these local self-government institutions as these have a very high stake in day-day life and well-being of the citizenry. The second aspect is that the gradual movement towards comprehensive coverage of these institutions under the Digital India programme indicates a sort of completion of the Digital India programmatic cycle as far as coverage of all 3 tiers of governance are concerned. We then move to challenges of digitization both on the broad level as well as programmatic aspects before concluding.

2.0 Literature Review

In her study of Digital India, Borah B. (2020) stresses that digitization was need of the hour in order to make everything accessible digitally or electronically and hence, Digital India Mission was launched by the government of India in 2015. Her paper tries to give a brief understanding of the Digital India program, the visions, pillars, initiatives under the program, challenges faced in the implementation of the program and possible suggestions to achieve the desired goals. As a result of Digital India, digital literacy of India has improved. The Digital India program is likely to benefit citizens by generating employment opportunities, creating new chances in regard to start-ups, quality of service delivery. The main objective of the program was to push digitization and connectivity as a vehicle for boosted economic growth. Even though the paper states that there are a lot of issues that the programme has experienced in execution, but at the same time it lauds the contribution it has made towards economy, health, governance sector making everything more transparent and closer to people. In conclusion, the paper suggests that the problems being faced in implementing Digital India can be resolved by creating awareness among the people, maximizing internet connectivity, improving skills in cyber security, participation of various departments and amendments in various relevant legislations.

Anantha Lakshmi V. and Anandhi G. (2020) start their study by stating the ubiquity of technologies and the digital world. According to them, the digital world is a world where the best possible use is made of digital technologies. Thus, the 'Digital India' programme targets to make government services available to people digitally and let them enjoy the benefit of the newest information and technological innovations. It is a programme to prepare India for a knowledge future. The motive behind the concept is to connect rural areas with high speed internet network and improving digital literacy. According to the study, Digital India is a great plan but one which requires proper and efficient implementation. Few barriers of the Digital India programme are as follows:

1. Each pillar of the programme has its own barriers
2. Infrastructure deficit such as lack of towers, especially in the countryside.
3. Implementing entities on the actual field

Some suggested remedies as per the study are:
1. A few new programs may be needed-particularly in electronics manufacturing and skill development
2. Have a dedicated training institute in each state to aid in augmenting the digital literacy and awareness level.
3. To inspire the youth for making the programme effective

Vijayan A. (2019) states that countries embracing technology for the benefit of citizens have recorded high national and per capita income and growth. India has emerged as one of the

countries where the government has initiated Digital India programme, propelled by the force 'Technology', as a development programme to stimulate economic development as well as to provide employment to young generations. The main objective is to provide all services to every citizen through web portals or electronically for making the transactions smooth and transparent. Another objective is to eliminate black money and corruption from public life, by investing more in technology. According to this paper, India has started experiencing the digital transformation, but it takes some time to feel the full impact of this change. This paper also links this initiative to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Goals Agenda by 2030. This paper helps to understand the economic impacts of Digital India and to how far it has accomplished its targets.

The objective of a study by Mohanta G., Debasish S. S. and Nanda S.K. (2017) is to know the impact and challenges of digital India on all aspects of governance and improvement in the quality of life of citizens. According to the paper, Digital India impacts the following aspects:

- Technology- The digital India project provides a huge opportunity to use the latest technology to redefine India the paradigms of service industry. A digitally connected India can help in improving social and economic condition of people living in different geographical area
- Economy- GDP growth, employment generation, labour productivity, growth in number of businesses and revenue leakages are positively impacted
- Social Sector- easier access to services and resources is ensured; programme opens a complementary channel to public service delivery apart from creation of entirely new services.
- Environment- lowers the carbon footprint by reducing fuel consumption, waste management, greener management and greener workplaces
- Agricultural Sector- Farmers can access all kind of information though their mobile phones as when required boosts the agriculture sector

Shallu, Sihmar D. and Meena R.K. (2019) study the Digital India program and consequent impact of digitalization. They find that the impact will be on:

- Economic Impacts -macro-economic factors such as GDP growth, employment generation, labour productivity, growth in number of businesses and reduction in revenue leakages for the Government
- Social Impact – better provision and access to welfare
- Environmental Impact – Positive changes and impact on the environment

They also identify challenges for Digital India, some of them being Lack of education, Lack of infrastructure and required technology, Financial and technical issues, Attitude of citizens as well as government personnel, Cyber-crimes and Lack of confidence, High Costs and Training Needs.

Boro M.C. (2017) in his study 'Digital India: Concepts and Implications', finds that the goals of Digital India are laudatory and can boost India's economy but they are still far away since most of the nine pillars of Digital India mission are facing serious challenges in implementation. He suggests that for successful implementation of Digital India, there must be amendments in various legislations that have for long hindered the growth of technology in India. There is need for effective participation of various departments and their commitment and efforts. Various policies in different areas should support this goal. PPP models must be explored for sustainable development of digital infrastructure and the private sector should be encouraged for development of last mile infrastructure in rural and remote areas. We need a strong anti cyber-crime apparatus and courses should also be structured around cyber security.

3.0 The Digital India Program

Digital India was launched by the Prime Minister of India to prepare India for a knowledge future and to make technology central to enabling change. In the Prime Minister's articulation, Digital India can be transformative for Indian future so as to realize IT (Indian Talent) + IT (Information Technology) = IT (India Tomorrow). It is designed as an Umbrella Programme – covering many departments. The programme weaves together a large number of ideas and thoughts into a single, comprehensive vision, so that each of them is seen as part of a larger goal while at the same time, each individual element stands on its own. This weaving together makes the Digital India Mission transformative as a concept. Towards these ends, the Digital India Programme pulls together many existing schemes which were restructured and re-focused and are being implemented in a synchronized manner. The common branding of the programmes as Digital India seeks to highlight their transformative impact. Digital India is to be implemented by the entire Government with overall coordination being done by the Department of Electronics and Information Technology. Government of India estimated Rs 1.13 trillion for the project to prepare the country for knowledge-based transformation. (PIB, 2015; Ministry of Electronics and Information technology, Govt. of India, meity.gov.in presentation, Boro M.C. (2017))

The Vision of Digital India is centered on 3 Key Areas:

- Digital Infrastructure as a Utility to Every Citizen
    - ✓ High speed internet as a core utility
    - ✓ Cradle to grave digital identity -unique, lifelong, online, authenticable
    - ✓ Mobile phone & Bank account enabling participation in digital & financial space
    - ✓ Easy access to a Common Service Centre
    - ✓ Shareable private space on a public cloud

- ✓ Safe and secure Cyber-space
- Governance & Services on Demand
    - ✓ Seamlessly integrated across departments or jurisdictions
    - ✓ Services available in real time from online &mobile platform
    - ✓ All citizen entitlements to be available on the cloud
    - ✓ Services digitally transformed for improving Ease of Doing Business
    - ✓ Making financial transactions electronic & cashless
    - ✓ Leveraging GIS for decision support systems & development
- Digital Empowerment of Citizens
    - ✓ Universal Digital Literacy
    - ✓ Universally accessible digital resources
    - ✓ All documents/ certificates to be available on cloud
    - ✓ Availability of digital resources / services in Indian languages
    - ✓ Collaborative digital platforms for participative governance
    - ✓ Portability of all entitlements through cloud

Digital India aims to provide the much-needed thrust to the below listed nine pillars of growth areas:

1. Broadband Highways - This covers three sub-components, namely Broadband for All - Rural, Broadband for All - Urban and National Information Infrastructure (NII)
2. Universal Access to Mobile Connectivity - This initiative focuses on network penetration and filling the gaps in connectivity in the country
3. Public Internet Access Programme - The two sub-components of Public Internet Access Programme are Common Services Centres (CSCs) and Post Offices as multi-service centres
4. e-Governance: Reforming Government through Technology - Government Process Re-engineering using IT to simplify and make the government processes more efficient
5. e-Kranti - Electronic Delivery of Services – Transforming e-Governance for Transforming Governance
6. Information for All - Online hosting of information & documents would facilitate open and easy access to information for citizens
7. Electronics Manufacturing - This pillar was to promote electronics manufacturing in the country with the target of NET ZERO Imports
8. IT for Jobs - This pillar focuses on providing training to the youth in the skills required for availing employment opportunities in the IT/ITES sector
9. Early Harvest Programmes - Early Harvest Programme basically consists of those projects which are to be implemented within short timeline (digitalindia.gov.in)

Some of the well-known initiatives under Digital India and Achievements under them:

- Aarogya Setu App– it is a digital contact tracing app in India and 192 million downloads have been made across Android, iOS and KaiOS platforms (Businessworld, 2021)
- Cowin portal is the vaccination against covid-19 registration portal of India and has seen 458 million Registrations till date (cowin.gov.in)

- e-NAM is the electronic trading portal for farmers and has onboard 17.1 million farmers (enam.gov.in))
- Jan Dhan Accounts- universalizing bank accounts for every household 428 million bank accounts (pmjdy.gov.in)
- Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)- 17.6 trillion Rupees government welfare benefits cumulatively transferred directly to beneficiary bank accounts (dbtbharat.gov.in)
- Svanidhi Scheme to facilitate street vendors to access affordable working capital loan 4.3 million applications (pmsvanidhi.mohua.gov.in)
- Aadhaar- unique number assigned to an individual and can be used as an identity document in India 1.24+ billion. Aadhaar enabled Direct Benefit Transfer has delivered around 6 billion transactions worth Rs 5.25 trillion in Financial Year 2020-21. The removal of ghost accounts and checking the leakage has saved the Government exchequer of value worth Rs 1.78 trillion (Businessworld 2021, uidai.gov.in)
- Jeevan Pramaan digitizes the whole process of securing the life certificate required for purposes like accessing pensions 45.8 million pensioners have submitted digital life certificates (jeevanpramaan.gov.in)
- PM Kisan DBT income transfer to around 100 million farmers (pmkisan.gov.in)
- UMANG is an M-Governance application that provides a single platform for all Indian Citizens to access pan India e-Government services ranging from Central to Local Government bodies of 259 Departments providing 21500+ services (umang.gov.in)
- Common Service Centres are centres that ensure that the government services are available near the locality of citizens living in villages and remote areas. 350+ services are delivered to citizens near their locality through the network of 374 thousand CSCs (Businessworld, 2021)
- Digi Locker aims at 'Digital Empowerment' of citizen by providing access to authentic digital documents to citizen's digital document wallet 74.2 million users and 4.3 billion documents (digilocker.gov.in)
- Government e-Marketplace- dedicated e market for different goods & services procured by Government entities has 2.3 million sellers offering 3.7 million products and 0.1 million services and Rupees 1.26 trillion in transactions already (gem.gov.in)
- Eshakti NABARD 1.25 million SHGs digitized (digitisation of all the SHG accounts), covering 14 million women leading to 'one-click' availability of social and financial information of all the members of the Self Help Groups and the SHGs (eshakti.nabard.org)
- MyGov platform; it is a citizen engagement platform. MyGov users have increased from 11.1 million on 1st April 2020 to 18.6 million in August 2021 (Businessworld, 2021, mygov.in)
- Unified Payment Interface – Launched in 2016, it has assumed leadership position in only 5 years and contributed 3.24 billion transactions valued at more than Rs 6 trillion in the month of July 2021 alone (npci.org.in)
- GST Network – it is the platform for the goods and services tax; it has on boarded 12.8 million taxpayers and has processed Rs 34.14 trillion worth of payment (Businessworld, 2021)
- Sectoral Platforms for health, education and GIS like the e-Hospital platform (for Healthcare), e-Sanjeevani (Tele-medicine consultation), DIKSHA and SWAYAM

- (for education), National Centre of Geo-Informatics (for 580 GIS applications having 600+ GIS layers), etc. (Businessworld, 2021)
- PMGDISHA programme i.e., Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan, the world's biggest digital literacy program has trained 40 million beneficiaries out of total targeted 60 million(Businessworld, 2021; twitter.com/_DigitalIndia)
- To provide IT jobs in semi-urban areas, the govt. opened 202 BPO centres in 100 towns like Muzaffarpur, Patna, Sangli, Imphal, Kohima, Jammu, Bareilly, Unnao, Guwahati, Srinagar and Guntur (Financial express, 2019)
- India emerged as the second largest mobile phone manufacturer in the world with 268 mobile handset and accessories manufacturing units started functioning from very few units before the Digital India period (Financial Express, 2019)
- Bharatnet, India's rural broadband project to provide broadband connectivity to all the 250 thousand gram panchayats (GPs), the constitutionally mandated 3rd tier of government and key institutions for local self-governance in the rural areas deserves a special mention. Coverage of Panchayats with Broadband Internet Connectivity has a great potential for empowering rural masses by giving them access to information, public services including those of education, health and financial inclusion. Under this project, already 173 thousand GPs out of the 250 thousand already connected through optical fibre to provide broadband internet. (bbcl.nic.in)
- PM-WANI- Prime Minister's Wi-Fi Access Network Interface. The PM-WANI framework envisages provision of Broadband through Public Wi-Fi Hotspot providers. Under this, more than 48000 access points have already been made functional. (pmwani.cdot.in)
- Svamitva Scheme- The scheme aims to provide an integrated property validation solution for rural India. The demarcation of rural inhabited areas would be done using Drone Surveying technology and consequent to validation, the 'record of rights' to village household owners would be provided which, in turn, would enable them to use their property as a financial asset (svamitva.nic.in)
- One Nation One Ration Card- One Nation One Ration Card ensures availability of benefits of subsided foodgrains to beneficiaries under National Food Security Act (NFSA) and other welfare schemes, especially the migrant workers and their families, at any Fair Price Shop (FPS) across the country. This is possible because of the digitization of the ration shops and Aadhaar Seeding of all the ration cards and beneficiaries in the State (PIB, 2021)
- Faceless tax assessments: Income-Tax Department on Monday launched a faceless e-assessment scheme to eliminate interface between an assessing officer and a taxpayer. National e-Assessment Centre (NeAC) was setup to operationlise the scheme of faceless assessment in electronic mode as a part of Digital India (Times of India, 2019)
- e-RUPI, a person and purpose-specific digital payment solution was launched on the 2nd August, 2021. e-RUPI is a cashless and contactless instrument for digital payment. It is a QR code or SMS string-based e-Voucher, which is delivered to the mobile of the beneficiaries. It has been developed by National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) on its UPI platform, in collaboration with the Department of Financial Services, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and National Health Authority (PIB, 2021; www.npci.org.in)

4.0 Digitization of the 3rd tier of governance institutions viz. Panchayats and Local government with respect to Service Delivery

e-Panchayat is the Digital India initiative for the rural sector providing comprehensive software solution attempting automation of Gram Panchayat functions. The key objectives of e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project are to use ICT for:

- Automation of internal workflow processes of Panchayats
- Improving delivery of services to citizens
- Capacity building of Panchayat Representatives and Officials
- Social Audits
- Transparency, Accountability, Efficiency and RTI compliance of Panchayats
- Improving Governance of local self-government (panchayat.gov.in/e-governance)

As part of the above mission, the Government has been implementing eGramSwaraj in the country to revamp the functioning of Panchayats. It provides a single window for capturing Panchayat information with the complete Profile of the Panchayat, details of Panchayat finances, asset details, activities taken up through Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) etc. Through eGramSwaraj, technology has been used in various aspects of panchayats' functioning as per the following details (data upto July for FY 2021-22; total Gram panchayats in India approx. 2,53,000) (PIB, 2021; panchayat.gov.in):

- Planning- 2,53,000 GPDPs have been prepared under eGramSwaraj
- Accounting- 2,25,000 GPs have adopted eGramSwaraj for the purpose of accounting
- Budgeting and online payments through eGramSwaraj-PFMS Interface for services delivered- 1,09,000 Panchayati Raj Institutions have carried online payments worth Rs. 77 billion. This amount was Rs. 482.9 billion (including all the onboarded schemes) for FY 2020-21

5.0 Digitization of the 3rd tier of governance institutions viz. Panchayats and Local government with respect to Monitoring and Evaluation and Transparency aspects

The Gram Swaraj Portal and application seeks to provide a boost in decentralized planning of development projects, with progress report updates and increased accountability. It aims to bring better transparency through decentralized planning, progress reporting and work-based accounting. Furthermore, the application provides a platform for effective monitoring by higher authorities. Towards these objectives, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has put in place an e-Financial Management System (e-FMS) and also introduced online auditing of panchayat accounts via the AuditOnline application. (egramswaraj.gov.in)

AuditOnline: AuditOnline application was launched in April 2020 for carrying out online Audits of Panchayat accounts. It facilitates the auditing of accounts and also provisions the

maintaining of audit records that have been carried out. Thus, processes like audit inquiries, draft local audit reports can be streamlined. It is a completely configurable application i.e., the application can be customized as per different states' audit processes flow, for ease of wide deployment. Moreover, because of a mandate by the 15th Finance Commission, mandatory online audit of at least 20% GPs needed to be carried out by the states and from the current financial year (2021-22), it is proposed to be made mandatory for 100% of the panchayat bodies. (PIB, 2021, auditonline.gov.in)

Geo-tagging of assets: Panchayats undertake a variety of works related to natural resource management, water harvesting, drought proofing, sanitation, agriculture, check dams and irrigation channels etc. For all such works and assets generated from these works, as a part of effective monitoring, it is imperative to have field-level monitoring of physical progress of the works. Geo-tagging helps in effective monitoring of assets. Accordingly, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has introduced mActionSoft – a mobile based solution to help in capturing photos with Geo-Tags (i.e., GPS Coordinates) for the works which have asset as an output. Geo-tagging of the assets is done in at least 3 stages viz. (i) before start of the work, (ii) during the work and (iii) on completion of work. Thus, a centralised repository of information on all works and assets related to is generated for effective monitoring. As of November 2020, around 13.4 million photographs (cumulative count) of the assets have been created through Fourteenth Finance Commission Grants. States have also initiated Geo tagging for Fifteen Finance Commission in the current year. (PIB, 2021)

6.0 Challenges involved in Digitization

From the literature review section above, there are certain common challenges identified by different scholars who have studied the Digital India programme. Some of these are:

- Each pillar of the programme has its own barriers, meaning that the universe of areas to be covered is vast and diverse and thus presents a huge challenge for a single programme to effectively address digitization needs.
- Related to the above is that implementing entities on the actual field also vary greatly on their resources capability, both human and material as well as reach and at times may have different priorities and motivation towards digitization.
- Infrastructure deficit such as lack of towers for mobile connectivity, especially in the rural areas.
- Technology adoption also takes time to feel the full impact of this change.
- Lack of education and attitude of citizens as well as government personnel also plays a role in slowing of effective digitization.
- High number of cyber-crimes is a major reason for this lack of confidence.

In addition, some other challenges are:

- High initial costs for transition from legacy systems also require economic resources, proper training and continued human will for success of digitisation.
- Some initiatives towards digitisation that were ongoing even before the launch of Digital India (Computerisation of Land Records (CLR) & Strengthening of Revenue Administration and Updating of Land Records (SRA&ULR)) and which were merged to become the Digital India Land Records Modernisation plan haven't yet achieved their comprehensive objectives. This is an instance which illustrates the role of policy thrust that is required to move ahead from legacy systems towards digital systems and processes. (dolr.gov.in/en/programme-schemes/dilrmp)

7.0 Way ahead and conclusion

Digital India seeks to achieve process improvements, easier and faster access to government services, less human interface between government and citizens and better transparency in government works through digital tools of monitoring and evaluation. It is for such purposes that all initiatives (e.g. faceless tax assessments, online audit of panchayat accounts through AuditOnline and geotagging of public assets created etc.) are being undertaken as part of Digital India. It is clear that these initiatives signal a departure from legacy systems and signify change. As is well known, change is difficult to effect at any scale and more so at a scale as large as government processes and systems. Thus continued support for Digital India is necessary. At the same time, grievance redressal in digital initiatives has to be quick, hassle free and readily accessible (decentralized) to counter the inhibition of citizens towards digital initiatives. State governments also have a bigger role to play as far as policy matters are concerned. Moreover, because of the fact that states in India have larger interfaces in the daily lives of citizens, their role and willingness to digitize is crucial for the eventual Digital India objective of citizen digital empowerment. Hence, states' adoption of the essence of Digital India in their functioning will lead to eventual and comprehensive digitisation in India. The Digital India programme is a timely initiative and its continuation beyond its initially targeted time frame into the 7th year of operation points to its continued relevance as well as the challenges of digitisation that the initiative seeks to achieve.

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