

DECRYPTING E-GOVERNANCE: NARRATIVES, POWER PLAY AND PARTICIPATION IN THE GYANDOOT INTRANET

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ABSTRACT

The central themes addressed in this paper relate to the critique of the notion of e-governance as an essentially administrative innovation facilitated by ICTs. It argues the need to recognize e-governance as a social process involving not only attitudinal change and transformation of traditional forms of governmentality, but also as a contested arena of social forces shaping the trajectory of the evolution of this technocratic innovation.

The paper is based on the experiences of the Gyandoot Intranet in Madhyapradesh, India. One of the critical issues that emerge in the context of exploring the interrelationship between technology and governance is the questioning of the assumption of the neutrality of technological processes enmeshed in the notion of e-governance. Technical processes defining contours of e-governance are embedded in the structures of power that reinforces the power relations that e-governance is expected to eliminate. This is particularly obvious when scrutinizing the consequences of the introduction of ICT-based administrative projects like Gyandoot in villages where the local managers play key roles in its implementation while benefitting from its public good.

The study shows that the projects are often implemented with the active support and participation of village elites and their collaboration becomes a major aspect in the survival of the project. It discusses how the idea of ICT as an inherently liberating technology and e-governance as a new way of transcending inept and inefficient bureaucratic systems which empowers 'end-users' appears to be completely inaccurate in the rural setting. Moreover, despite the claims of active networking of people in Dhar made in behalf of Gyandoot, its ability to connect to multiple social and economic domains was found to be extremely limited and ostensibly mediated by the social power equations that enveloped its institutional setting.

Keywords: E-governance, India, Gyandoot, Intranet

1. 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-topias¹ 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

¹ For a discussion of the term e-topia, see Mitchell, 2000.

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.² 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

² For a discussion see Feenberg (1999).

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."³ 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).⁴ 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.

2. 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.⁵ 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

³ See Baddeley (1997) for a discussion of Foucault's concept of Governmentality in the context of ICTs.

⁴ A host of commentators have provided uncritical evaluation of ICT-based rural social innovations as providing liberating opportunities that members of the marginalized communities and groups can use successfully for "empowering" themselves. See for example, Bhatnagar and Sechware, (2000); Hafkin and Taggart, (2001); Rajora, (2002); Hafkin, (2002); Gajjala, (2002); Sharma, (2003); Pringle and Subramaniam, (2004); Peizer, (2005); Ng and Mitter, (2005).

⁵ For a similar description, see also Sreekumar (2007)

of the structural adjustment strategies dictated by the World Bank and other international agencies:⁶

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.⁷ 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 underlined.

Many projects were announced at the conference although many of them were eventually shelved or totally abandoned due to various reasons.⁸ However, since 1999, the proliferation of e-governance projects in India has been phenomenal. Surging numbers of what is identified as e-governance projects indicate that most of the state governments and

⁶ For a critique of the technocratic dimensions of the good governance programs of the Indian State, see Joseph, S (2001).

⁷ Also see www.ciol.com/content/services/egov. The conference was one of the highlights of the Bangalore IT.com 1999 event.

⁸ One such example is the project announced by IT secretary, Kerala, for computerizing and networking relevant applications for 1,214 local bodies, which claimed development of software for the payment of welfare pensions and a database to be used for procuring building licenses, license fees, and taxes. The secretary was confident that the system would help people living in rural areas to “find out what quotas they are entitled to, what schemes are applicable to them, or in the case of land records, where they are located and whom to contact” (Katakam, 1999: 79). Five years after the announcement, the project has not yet taken shape.

Union Territories in India claim to have accepted the need for undertaking e-governance initiatives.

Although the initial efforts on the part of the Indian State to link ICTs with development projects have been limited to localized projects and district level planning, these efforts soon advanced to centralized projects for connectivity and regulation. There are clear signs of a realization that ICTs, while providing a potential for reassuring the State's commitments to the developmental agenda, opens a gateway for strengthening the arms of governance. Nevertheless, most of the e-Governance initiatives have focused on development of infrastructure, capacity building and policy changes as well as participation of the private sector while showing a growing reluctance towards integrating civil society into its fold (Sreekumar, 2002a; 2002b).

This is true of relatively successful initiatives such as Gyandoot. The Gyandoot Project has emerged as a benchmark for innovation in the e-governance and in the e-commerce according to commentators (Sood, 2001). The local bodies in collaboration with government officials have started ICT kiosks operated by unemployed youth who were selected and trained by the Gyandoot Samiti to run these kiosks. It aimed to cater to the everyday needs of a wide section of rural consumers. The project, which sets its objective as social engineering and development through ICTs, has marked a paradigm shift in the way government functionaries relate themselves to the needs of the poor. This major ICT project was first launched in a region that is largely tribal and impoverished. Nevertheless, it remains an administered program with little relationship with the civil society. No major social organization has been made partners in its implementation.⁹

3. GYANDOOT: ORGANIZATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Gyandoot, an Intranet-based Government-to-Citizen (G2C) service delivery portal in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh, was commissioned in January 2000 with the objective of creating a cost-effective, replicable, economically sustainable, and financially viable model for e-governance. Rajesh Rajora, one of the main architects of the project and District Collector of Dhar when the project was implemented, claimed that it was envisaged to enhance participation by citizens/government in community affairs through creative uses of ICT and to ensure equal access to emerging technologies for the oppressed and exploited segments of the society (Rajora, 2002, p.66-67).

Gyandoot, managed by a society called "Gyandoot Samiti," is registered under Madhya Pradesh Societies Registration Act with the District Collector as President. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of District Panchayat function as Secretary and various departmental heads are members of the Samiti. The Gyandoot operates with a team consisting of a Project Manager, an Assistant Project Officer, a Technical Head, and a few computer operators. The promised services offered by Gyandoot encompass a wide range of government departments. These services can be accessed from any Gyandoot Information kiosk called Soochanalaya for a nominal fee. There are about 40 kiosks located in different parts of the district run by local managers called Soochaks.

⁹ The Warna wired project in Maharashtra is perhaps a significant counter example. It covers 70 contiguous villages, providing information and knowledge to increase efficiency and productivity of the Sugar Cooperatives. It aims to support the Cooperatives with agricultural and medical information besides setting up a constellation of facilitating centers for continued skills development and education. The national informatics center (NIC) of Government of India and the state's education department collaborated with the Cooperatives to launch a strong network of fiber optic cables, V-SATs, PCs, and other ICT equipments.

These Soochanalays are equipped with personal computer (PC), printer, and uninterrupted power supply (UPS), with facilities to provide e-governance services, commercial internet, and voice connectivity in rural areas. A host of government information and application forms are loaded on the net, and villagers could access these to submit applications to the government departments on the net. Inter-village communication is possible and relevant software has been developed and ported. The Sookhaks are, in a sense, rural entrepreneurs and earn a living primarily from the income that the kiosks can generate. They are trained to run the kiosks by the Gyandoot Samiti. The Dhar Internet project is one of the largest rural Internet/Intranet projects in India. It was chosen for the Stockholm Challenge Award 2000.¹⁰

Initially, the kiosks were provided intranet communication using the telephone lines provided by government owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL). At that point, communication on telephone lines being poor and unreliable and the dial-up connection charges relatively expensive, the project faced serious limitations of coverage. Later, corDECT WLL (Wireless in Local Loop)—developed by IIT Chennai and Midas Communications which provide a wireless access solution for expanding telecommunication networks integrating both voice and Internet services—was adopted with reasonable success. n-Logue Communications also offered a business model to enable rural connectivity using corDECT Wireless terminal, telephone instrument, 100 MHz Pentium PC (with color monitor, local language word processor, browsing and e-mail software) with a 16-hour power backup for telephone and 4-hour backup for PC.¹¹ Backbone Internet connectivity was supplied by Satyam Infoway. In the first phase, villages within 25 kilometers around Dhar town, the district headquarters, were covered. An Access Center was set up in the District Panchayat Computer Room in the Civil Station office premises.

The kiosks offered a wide set of facilities and services such as gathering and disseminating agricultural prices, online registration of applications, online public grievance redress, rural email, village auction sites, online matrimonial site, information regarding governmental programs, career counseling for students, a facility to ask questions to experts, technical advice channel between experts and villagers, online application formats, village newspaper, etc. If functioning properly, the centers could be of very high utility to the villagers.¹²

Nevertheless, setting up a kiosk in a village does not necessarily mean that these services were provided or were availed of by the people. More importantly, the questions of who used them and who were excluded either intentionally or voluntarily remain a significant poser in the social context within which the project was implemented. In order to understand this, there is a need to go deeper into the actual practices of these kiosks in the rural setting.

¹⁰Gyandoot was a joint winner of Stockholm Challenge Award in the category “Public Services & Democracy” along with the Australian initiative “Technology for Social Justice.”

¹¹ Discussion with Sanjay Inamdar, Regional Manager-Sales (Western Region) of n-Logue Communications Pvt. Ltd., Chennai on 13 August 2004 at the headquarters of the Gyandoot Samiti. He considers the collaboration as being mutually beneficial. See also chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the corDECT WLL technology.

¹² For discussion of the uses of the services often offered by these types of village kiosks see Seith (2000). The author attempts an outsider evaluation of the utility of the services to farmers in the case of MSSRF based on the list of services they have given in their website. He wonders how some of these could be relevant resulting in any material gains for the poor people.

4. GYANDOOT KIOSKS: THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS

This section identifies some of the key features of the Soochanalys and takes a closer look at their everyday practices. The analysis is based on the information collected from the five Gyandoot centers that were visited during fieldwork and from our visit to the Gyandoot Samiti headquarters housed in the Dhar Civil Station, Dhar.

The belief that e-governance initiatives are inherently good from a macro perspective is a major assumption in the literature on e-governance. The basic problem with this rationale is not only the hype or even the “sweeping grandiloquence” of its rhetoric, as some writers would call it (Woolgar, 2001, p.5), but more importantly, the attention to macro level impacts which often ignores what really happens on the ground. These technologies are actually used and experienced in everyday practice, quite differently from the way their potential uses and benefits are configured for public consumption by their progenitors and commentators.

The local dynamics of the operation of Gyandoot kiosks provide a specific social content to the understanding of e-governance initiatives that are based on a G2C interface. This section discusses four major issues that provide a reasonable assessment of the actual and potential abilities of the kiosks and the model of ICT diffusion it stands for. The issues mapped below are: 1) Entrepreneurship and Employment; 2) Locale infrastructure; 3) User perceptions; and 4) Sustainability. This section also looks into the major tensions and contradictions that envelop the project from a micro-level perspective.

Entrepreneurship and Employment: The entrepreneurship model of launching Soochanalays is at the center of the strategy of Gyandoot Samiti, the QUANGO (Quasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organizations) sponsored by the District administration of Dhar.¹³ The Sookhaks who run the kiosks are chosen from the educated youth of the village who are willing to explore the potential of self-employment by launching a Soochanalay in their own village. The minimum qualification requirement of Sookhak suggested by Gyandoot Samiti is education up to the 12th standard. They should also be capable of self-financing the basic infrastructure to run the kiosk either through a bank loan or through their own resources.

The user fees from the G2C services offered by Gyandoot and the additional services in using the same infrastructure that the Sookhak can provide form the earning portfolios of the entrepreneurs. The actual earnings, however, depend on a variety of factors. These include the relative prosperity of the village which will determine the demand for both the Gyandoot and non-Gyandoot services that the Kiosk can offer, the demand for computer training from students, and the number of students willing to undertake the training for a payment of monthly fees.

The employment potential of the Kiosks is, in fact, very limited. The income from the Kiosk cannot, in most cases, provide for the subsistence wages of more than one manager. The services, either belonging to the G2C categories or G2B categories, cannot provide employment opportunities in the villages. The Sookhaks supplement the services from Gyandoot Samiti with other activities, an effort also encouraged by the Samiti. Various other activities such as data entry operations, small DTP jobs, screen printing, photocopying, computer training, horoscopes, and match-making, etc. are some of the most prominent

¹³ For a discussion of the popularity of QUANGOs among bureaucrats see Flinders (1999). In India, it is preferred because of a variety of reasons. First, it gives the façade of NGO for an otherwise bureaucratic setup run by civil servants deputed by Government. Second, it provides certain leeway with budgeting since their accounting falls outside the annual governmental budgets. Third, it provides a suitable channel to receive foreign funding which can be routed only through NGOs. See Section VI for further observations on the theme.

supplementary activities that the Soochaks undertake using the facilities available in the kiosk.¹⁴

An interesting aspect is the social meaning of being a Soochak. The advantages of a being a Soochak are obviously much more than being a small entrepreneur in a village. This stems from the nature of the services offered by the kiosks, which require the Soochaks to be constantly in touch with the government officials. Many Soochaks understand that this has an empowering element ingrained in it. As one Soochak puts it:

I am happy that I can mediate between people and government officers. The close contact that I can enjoy with senior officers is really very important. Similarly, fellow villagers also understand the fact that I have contacts with officers. This is definitely some kind of recognition.¹⁵

However, the complex layers of social power that characterize the village society limit the empowerment of the Soochaks. Political parties and caste elites have a major role to play in the everyday life of the communities. The caste and social status of the Soochaks become enormously important in defining their domain of influence. The untold story of the three Gyandoot centers of Badnaver is an illustration of this important aspect of village life in rural India.¹⁶

Majority of the Soochaks belong to the educated unemployment category of the village population. Although they have been given reasonably advanced technical training in running the kiosks, they have never been exposed to any useful training on entrepreneurship or management of small enterprises. It is surprising that this aspect has been largely ignored when the model was conceived and eventually implemented. It is certainly the fact that some of the Soochaks do show innate talents as successful entrepreneurs by trying to supplement the earnings from Gyandoot services with numerous other small-scale activities that earn them a moderate additional income, although the market for such services in the vicinity of the center determines the potential of such efforts. But in many cases a shrinking stream of earnings from the Gyandoot services remains the major component of the gross earnings of the Soochaks.

Moreover, the possibility of increasing the number of kiosks and thereby enhancing the chances of educated youth becoming small entrepreneurs in places where Gyandoot kiosks do not exist is limited by social, technical, and infrastructure-related problems. Apart from the uncertainties of adequate demand for these services, unstable supply of electricity in rural India poses a major challenge for the operation of the kiosks. The Soochaks invariably reported that the availability of electricity to the kiosks averages only 4 to 5 hours in a day curtailing the running time of these kiosks. As one Soochak puts it:

How can I run the kiosk with power supply limited to 4 to 5 hours only in a day? Even this is not steady. I don't think the problem will be solved soon. We have to live with this. Working with low voltage is also a serious problem.

¹⁴ In many kiosks, additional software for preparing astral birth chart and horoscope based on the Indian system of Astrology is available. The standard rate per copy of the birth chart is INR 50. Akhil Jain, Soochak in the Nagda center reported that he has purchased the software program called "Kundli 2000" from Indore and rates the demand for this service which is essential for match making as relatively high. Interview with Akhil Jain 14 August 2002.

¹⁵ Interview with Akhil Jain 14 August 2002.

¹⁶ We would be discussing this case subsequently in this section.

The villagers understand these problems but when I can't deliver, the credibility is affected.¹⁷

Tapping non-conventional sources of energy appears to be a remote alternative to the power supply problem encountered by the entrepreneurs. There has been an attempt to deploy solar panels harnessing solar energy for the kiosks. It has been set up on an experimental basis in one of the three Gyandoot kiosks in Badnavar. The Sookhak of the kiosk was not able to comment on its utility, as it was yet to become operational.¹⁸

Local infrastructure: There is no huge disparity in terms of the kiosks' infrastructure facilities. Most kiosks have a minimum set of facilities that help them to connect with the intranet services that Gyandoot offers and supplementary equipments such as photocopier, printers, and UPS. While some kiosks have procured scanners with own resources, it is unaffordable for many smaller operators unless they take loans from the bank. This is not considered as a viable option by entrepreneurs in the rural kiosks who doubt whether the demand for the scanner services would be sufficient to cover the repayment costs. A solar panel was set up in one of the kiosks in Badnavar as we noted in the previous section after paying a safety deposit of INR 9000. It is surprising that the equipment in some of the kiosks did not include a printer as seen in the case of the Amjera kiosk. Of the five centers visited, only one (Nagda) did not have a phone connection and Internet facility. Nonetheless, the intranet of Gyandoot was operational at the Nagda kiosk through WLL.

User Perceptions: Each Sookhanalaya can presumably cater to 20-30 villages once it is set up. However, in practice the visits from people beyond a five-kilometer radius to the kiosk is rather rare according to some Sookhaks and local informants.¹⁹ These villages vary drastically in terms of population ranging from tiny hamlets with less than 500 inhabitants to large villages with nearly 8,000 inhabitants. The actual coverage of each center was very limited. The experience of many kiosk managers is that the services of the kiosk were mainly availed of by a small group of people residing in the villages surrounding the kiosk.²⁰

Not surprisingly, people belonging to different social groups had different perceptions about Gyandoot, although the villagers try to see positive elements of the project as outweighing the failures. However, many of the regular customers were dissatisfied with the range of services offered by Gyandoot. They believed that Gyandoot could do much better as many of them had attempted to articulate in clear terms how it could be improved.

¹⁷ Interview with Devendra Chauhan, Sookhak at the Amjera Kiosk on 12 August 2004.

¹⁸ Interview with Manish Sharma, Sookhak at the Badnavar (1) kiosk.

¹⁹ Naveen Prakash, Project Manager, admits that the distance between 2 kiosks vary between 8 and 40 kilometers. Catchments area of 12 to 15 villages in the case of each kiosk is seen as unviable. He believes that catering to a population of 5,000 would be ideal. This would mean increased proliferation of Gyandoot centers in rural Dhar the prospects of which does not seem to be bright. Interview on 12 August 2002.

²⁰ 36 Authors often equate the total population in the villages with people who avail themselves of the services of the kiosks. For example many case studies on Gyandoot labor the point that Gyandoot kiosks in a locality may be serving thousands of people in the nearby villages. The statement from an earlier case study on Gyandoot is typical in this regard: "20 kiosks ("soochanalays") were initially set up in various rural centers, with each kiosk typically serving a population of 20,000-30,000 villagers" (Sanjay and Gupta, undated). A similar uncritical observation can be seen in Prahalad and Hammond (c.2002:11): "Aggregating demand makes the system highly cost-effective: each kiosk serves 25-30 surrounding villages, while the network as a whole covers over 600 villages and more than half a million people."

Center/ Facilities	Tirla	Amjera	Nagda	Badnaver1	Badnaver2
Number of PCs	2	1	2	2	1
PC purchase	Own resources	Own resources (Loan from Bank of India)	Own resources + Panchayat	Own resources (PMRY)	Own Resources
Phone	Yes	Yes	WLL	Yes	Yes
Internet	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Printer	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ownership of the center	Community	Self	Panchayat	Self	Self
Photocopier	1 (Through PMRY)	No	No	No	No
Education of Soochak UPS	BA (Political Sciences) & DTP	12 th	12 th , DCOA, DTP	12 th , DTP, MS Office & AutoCAD	BE (Electronics)
Solar Panel	No	No	No	Yes	No
UPS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (Nos.2)	Yes
Scanner	No	No	No	Yes	
Generator				Yes (Hire)	Yes
Average No. of visitors/day	10-15	5-10	5- 10	2-5	2-5
Computer Training for students	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Gross earnings (INR)	6500-7000 ¹	2800-3200	3000-3500	2500-3000 ²	8000-10000 ³
Earnings from Gyandoot services (INR)	1200- 1500	1500-2000	1500-2000	500-700	1500-2000
Center wise Expenses (INR.)					
Rent	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Phone	300	300	Nil	300	400
Electricity	300	400	300	300	500
Loan Repayment	2500	1400	Nil	1550	Nil
Stationary & Other expenses	200	200	300	300	400
Total	3300	2300	600	2750	1300
Net Earnings (INR, App.)	3200-3700	500-900	2400-2900	≥300	6700-8700

Table 1: Infrastructure, Ownership, Earnings, and Expenses: A Comparative Picture of Selected Gyandoot Centers

Notes:

1 The *Soochak* reports that he could earn INR 3000 or more every month from photocopying. He explains that since the center is located in the Block headquarters there is high demand for copying.²¹

2 His income from screen-printing, an activity predating his Gyandoot Franchise, is not included. He maintained that he would not probably renew his Gyandoot Franchise.

3 The high income is from the education program conducted in the center. The *Soochak* in this center is an engineering graduate and his brother is a franchisee of AISECE with 25-30 students enrolled.²²

Source: Based on fieldwork

²¹ The CEO of the Tribal Block Development Office, S C Sharma verifies the statement by the *Soochak* and added that the Block takes services from the Kiosk and pays for it. Interview on 12 August 2002.

²² One of the students at the kiosk, however, said he does not know about AISECE and about AISECE awarding a degree. Interview with Rithu Raj Sing on 14 August 2002.

The common complaints about the operation of kiosks can be classified into five groups: 1) connectivity related problems; 2) failure to adhere to the stipulated timeframes for redress of grievances and delivery of routine services; 3) huge disparity between the range of promised and actual services available in the kiosks; 4) failures in delivering G2B services; and 5) attitudinal factors and poor performance of the Sookhaks. The connectivity problem, as pointed out in the previous section, has been crucial in creating an environment of apathy among villagers to the project.

Although many centers have been connected with optical fiber cables to overcome the connectivity problem, the instability in connectivity remains a major cause of user dissatisfaction with the kiosks. It was also widely felt that the Departments responsible for delivering the services do not adhere to timeframes set by Gyandoot Samiti, although the officials at the Gyandoot headquarters claimed that these timelines have been fixed after discussions with the concerned Departments.²³

The media reports on the delays in delivering services have also pointed to the lethargy and unresponsiveness of government employees as a major reason for the declining credibility of the Gyandoot project.²⁴ While some farmers complained that timely updating of market rates were exceptions rather than the rule, concerned officials identified the slow process of computerization of government departments as a possible reason for the delays.²⁵ Several case studies have pointed to the complaints from users that the kiosks remained closed during office hours. Sookhaks invariably tried to deny this and said that such occasions were rare and probably happened during times of prolonged failures in power supply.²⁶

An exploratory study conducted by the Center for Electronic Governance (CEG), Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India (IIMA) came to the conclusion that centers closer to the district headquarters attract more visitors but the visitors are generally the elite of middle level farmers:

Generally, awareness of Gyandoot exists among the literate and middle-income group families. The poor laborer or landless farmer is not aware or even interested, as he sees no value addition in it for him. All the 16 daily wage laborers interviewed felt this way about G2C services (CEG-IIMA, 2002, p. 10).

²³ Interview with Naveen Prakash, Project Manager on 12 August 2004.

²⁴ Hindustan Times, for example, reported that: "the entire plan can get stuck if the downside in its back-end operation continues. Largely attributed to the lethargic and ignorant government employees, the project has been witnessing snags of late. 'Against the promised reply within a week of a complaint being lodged through Gyandoot, delay has become the order of the day,' says an official of the District Rural Development Authority (DRDA), the Government agency handling the nitty-gritty of its operations. (Retrieved from <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/gyandootarticle.pdf>). Another report puts the scenario as follows: "The operator at the information center in Nalcha Block in Dhar has no clients. He has no electricity for hours and his information kiosks are deserted...It would appear as though Gyandoot has not been able to provide all the 44 services it was set up to deliver," NDTV January 27, 2003. [Archived at <http://www.apnic.net/ mailing-lists/s-asia-it/archive/2003/02/msg00013.html>]

²⁵ Media has been critical of Gyandoot on this front as well: "The mandi-rates, supposed to be updated daily, are not changed for two-three days on end. As the rates change many times in a day, the facility is more or less useless. Moreover, a farmer has a cheaper option of a telephone call at 80 paise (INR 0.80) to Dhar mandi to ask for rates instead of paying INR 5 user charge at the cyber center. Land records of only three out of seven tehsils in the district are available on the network. There has also been duplication of work. The Land Records Bureau was doing the job for the last many years while it was undertaken simultaneously by the district administration, only to abandon it later" (ibid).

²⁶ During our visits, one of the three centers in Badnaver was closed during office hours. Incidentally, this one was housed in Block headquarters itself.

The report further notes that:

There seems to be varied understanding, among the people, of what services is available through Gyandoot. At the remote soochanalays (and away from the central hub of Dhar), confusion is more widespread and awareness levels are very low or nil. Even where a board enumerating the services exists, people are unsure of the nature of services and how to avail of them from the soochanalay (ibid).

It was also widely felt that the big farmers and merchants mostly used the services. Poorer farmers and landless agricultural laborers failed to see any benefit from using the kiosks. Children from richer families were also able to avail themselves of the facilities in the kiosks at a subsidized rate compared to market rates for similar services. There has not been antipathy to the new technology from the rural elites. On the other hand, they have welcomed it, in a certain sense, to exercise control over its diffusion.

Sustainability: The question of sustainability has to be addressed on two counts: at the macro and micro levels. The macro question is related to the issue of sustaining the Gyandoot Samiti as a QUANGO with the revenue from the kiosks. The entrepreneurs have to pay a lump sum of INR 5000 every year as license fee to the Gyandoot Samiti to renew their franchise. However, this is a paltry amount given the fact there are only 30-35 kiosks operational at a time and that the proliferation of new kiosks in Dhar appears to have halted. The District Council, an elected local body at the district level, which funded the initial investments for launching Gyandoot Samiti, would have to continue channeling resources for the everyday operation of the Gyandoot infrastructure.²⁷

The sustainability of the Sookhanalays depends on the net earnings. We can see from Table 1 that of the five cases examined, three broke even whereas the other two seemed to be earning much less than a respectable monthly income for an initial investment of about INR 75000.²⁸ The Gyandoot Samiti had a modest expectation of a net income of INR 36,000 per annum for each kiosk manager.²⁹ Table 1 shows that three out of the five centers do not fulfill this expectation. In the case of the Nagda center, the kiosk is owned by District Panchayat, which pays the electricity bill.

In the case of those kiosks which appear to be financially viable, the major source of income was from non-Gyandoot services. Many of the Sookhaks believe that the income from Gyandoot services is shrinking and in order to survive they need to expand their operations. The prospects of introducing additional services depend on the local demand for such services. In Dhar District which has 60 percent of its population living below the poverty line, the chances of an immediate surge in demand for information-related services to the scale of bridging the income gap for the kiosks seems doubtful.

²⁷ The initial investment for the Government was INR 2500000, which was collected from the Local Bodies (Interview with Sanjay Dubey, District Collector, Dhar District on 12 August 2002). The District Council established the Server with a cost of INR 5 lakhs spending INR 1.5 lakhs on the machine and another INR 1.5 lakhs for software. The District Council also financed the training of the *Sookhaks* who were selected to run the kiosks. Moreover, the subsidy of INR 16,000 for each entrepreneur is also born by the District Council.

²⁸ The Sookhaks have to pay INR 60000 for procuring the machine and setting up the center in addition to a license fee of INR 5000 payable to the Gyandoot Samiti. It is likely that they incur an amount of INR 8000-10000 as other expenses including purchase of stationary to set the kiosk operational. [Interview with Naveen Prakash (Project manager) and Deepak Sharma (Sookhak, Tirla Center) on 12 August 2002].

²⁹ Interview with Naveen Prakash, 12 August 2002.

One of the most important questions regarding the operational dynamics of the kiosks is the linkages it has with the local economy. In many cases, the Panchayat is financing the infrastructure of the kiosks. This involves channeling local resources towards the establishment's expenses on a monthly basis. Since the resources of the Panchayat is drawn from the tax pool and funds allotted to them by state government, the opportunity costs of financing the everyday working of the kiosks without palpable and effective benefits for the community could be very high.

5. E-GOVERNANCE AND THE NETWORK SOCIETY: DECIPHERING THE NARRATIVES OF SUCCESS

The most interesting aspect of the ICT-based development initiatives is the accent on stories from the field that finds their way into the media and public at large. They highlight the achievements of the projects in ways that differ drastically from the narratives of successes of other developmental programs, which depend primarily on statistical data (whether engineered or real) on their performance and achievements.

These stories about the multitude of ways in which absorption and use of ICT by the rural people as facilitated by the initiatives are instructive in constructing the idea of a rural network society as it is emerging in developing regions. But in this section, based on stories told and untold, we argue that the contested nature of the emerging network society and its limitations can be fully understood only when these success stories are deconstructed in their own local contexts and when the suppressed stories of conflicts and tension that mar the implementation and evolution of these initiatives are told. This, opens a new pathway to understand the social and political structure of the nascent rural network society.

In this section, we make a provisional attempt to demystify the discourse on individual achievements that seek to glorify the relevance and role of the initiative. Further, we also examine the entrenched social factors that over-determine the delivery mechanisms institutionalized by Gyandoot. The stories that are already showcased and the story we gathered during our fieldwork narrated by a local political activist of Shivaseena, (the Hindu fundamentalist outfit) are exemplary examples of the way in which technology-society interaction could be interpreted in a deterministic paradigm while the social shaping aspect is relegated to the background or completely ignored.

The case summaries reported in Table 2 invariably point to the emergence of a rural network society. Nevertheless, the problematic nature of the network society is also brought to light with the aid of hindsight and locale specific information on social factors that should underlie any interpretation of these narratives generally considered as examples of the project's success and good performance. The anecdotes analyzed in Table 2 have some common threads. They invariably point to layers of hyped narratives that envelope the descriptions of the achievements of the project. As the first five cases in Table 2 indicate, the strategy in discourses on projects benefits have been to identify isolated cases of successful use of the project instead of using standard indices of success and achievements in terms of the overall changes it had brought to area covered under the project.

But a close look at the anecdotes would reveal that these narratives fail to account for any meaningful qualitative change in the life of the people concerned and attempt a superficial glorification of the project's benefits in particular and of ICTs in general. These hyped narratives fail to impress when they are juxtaposed against the hidden social and economic backdrop of rural realities in India. In Table 2 we have made an attempt to show

that most of the inferences drawn from the anecdotes with regard to the benefits of the projects are either misplaced or over hyped.

In case 1, for example, an email is presented as a superior medium of communication than direct or voice contact. It glorifies the fact that a bureaucrat responded to an email complaint at the expense of other channels of communication, which are in fact more effective—such as explaining over a phone—or even cheaper than sending the email costing INR 10. The anecdote, as narrated, amounts to admitting that technology involved in communication is more important than the content of the communication for eliciting responses.

In the second anecdote, the whole set of issues relating to the economic realities and market inter-linkages that characterize rural transactions are squarely ignored in order to glorify an isolated incidents of a profitable transaction facilitated by the technology without explaining if the same “knowledge” could have come only through the internet.

Anecdotes 3 and 4 also highlight the assumption that the internet has emerged as the only medium of information for facilitating rural transactions. The narratives lack credibility if the points that they try to drive home are placed in the contexts of the socio-economic realities of the rural areas in India. The email-led vaccination of the milch animals that the anecdote described in Bhatnagar and Vyas (2001) is another case in point. We asked people for such stories during field work and rarely did people have any incidents to relate regarding their use of the Internet.

One of the cases of using the Intranet for a social purpose is given as case 6 in the table. Here the anonymity of the sender played a crucial role. The cases point to the social embedment of technology which is neglected while glorifying them as “success” stories. The value of information that the new technology could generate depends heavily on context. It does not flow from any inherent virtues of the technology itself.

A detailed case study which helps examine these issues is provided in the following section. It highlights the entrenched social factors that determine trajectories of technological innovations in the Indian rural setting and challenges the futuristic e-topia of the narratives of success.

A tale of three kiosks

In Badnaver, three Gyandoot kiosks function just within 3-kilometer radius of the block headquarters. This is despite the stated position of the Gyandoot Samiti to encourage not more than one kiosk in one locality since the number of villages not covered by Gyandoot is very high in the District.³⁰ Nevertheless, it could be too early to conclude that Gyandoot’s popularity and utilization could be high enough in Badnaver to warrant the operation of three kiosks.

³⁰ Interview with Naveen Prakash, Project Manger, 12 August 2002.

The story	Source	Thrust	Remarks/Questions
1. An email complaint for INR 10 brought drinking water to a tribal hamlet of 39 households. The villagers' previous complaint to local authorities had not yielded results for six months. The complaint filed through the kiosk brought a hand pump mechanic to the hamlet within two days, and he repaired the hand pump within three hours.	Bhatnagar and Vyas (2001); Jafri et. al (2002)	Efficiency and reliability	Is technology capable of changing mindsets of government employees? Why did the mechanic fail to respond when the complaint was registered through conventional channels? Is there a production of a fear or reverence for technology in the use of ICTs as a medium of communication that prompts people to act differently?
2. Farmers in Bagadi village were quoted a rate of INR 300 per quintal from local traders for their potato crop. The kiosk was used to get the prevailing market rate in a town 100 miles away, which paid INR 100 more. Consequently, their potato produce was sold in the distant town. The prices paid to farmers have increased approximately 3-5%, keeping about INR 200 million from the pockets of middlemen and traders.*	Ibid	E-business, Liberation from middlemen	Why do middlemen get an upper hand in their dealings with farmers? In most cases it is not because of the lack of awareness of the farmer regarding the market price. On the other hand, there exist deep inter-linkages between the credit and product market in rural India that forces the farmer to sell his produce to the middlemen and traders from whom they have taken credit for cultivation. Moreover, the perishable nature of some of the agricultural products and lack of warehousing facilities compel framers to sell at a price lower than the market rates. Only the big farmers actually benefit from the information in this particular case.
3. "I asked for the price of apples at the Dhar wholesale market. The coordinator pressed some buttons, and there it was on the screen. I cannot read, but he told me it was 50 rupees cheaper per crate than the rate in the village market. Next morning, I traveled to Dhar to buy fruits."	Chatterjee (2000)	Consumer freedom	It would be a surprise if a local retailer or consumer does not know that the wholesale prices are lower in urban areas than in rural areas where incremental transportation costs might lead to a certain percentage of mark up. If everyone travels to Dhar from this village to buy apples, or any other commodity they require since the price would be invariably lower there, the retail business in the village would come to a standstill.

4. Kalsingh, a milk farmer wanted to sell his cow. He registered with the auction facility of Gyandoot (which enables trading of commodities like milch animals, cultivable land, tractors, agricultural tools etc.). He received four trade enquiries and finally sold his cow to the highest bidder for INR 3000.	Bhatnagar and Vyas (2001); Jaffri et. al (2002)	Rural e-business	Farmers will not hesitate to use Intranet services of Gyandoot for selling agricultural implements and livestock if the coverage and usage of kiosks for this purpose is high. But the limitations far more outweigh the potential in this respect.
5. 256 milch animals vaccinated in one day: Upon receiving an e-mail from a kiosk that an epidemic had broken out among the milch cattle of the village Kot Bhidota, a veterinary rescue team was dispatched the same day. The disease <i>hemorrhage septicemia</i> was detected; the team promptly started curative treatment and vaccinated the rest of the animals against the disease. They also conducted a search in neighboring villages for signs of the disease and carried out preventive vaccinations. No deaths were reported.	Bhatnagar and Vyas (2001)	Efficiency and reliability	The superiority of emailing technology in speeding up the government machinery is not clear in this example also. The alternative of dialing the office would also have worked more perfectly than the e-mail.
6. Closing illicit liquor shop: In Nagda, some miscreants ran an illicit liquor shop near the Panchayat office. The devotees of a temple and children attending the Girls School in its vicinity faced bullying by visitors to the liquor shop. Since everyone feared a nexus between the police and the mafia running the shop no one dared to complain. An activist of the local unit of Sivsena, a Hindu fundamentalist outfit, used the email facility of the Gyandoot center to send an anonymous petition to the District Collector. 3 days later the shop was raided and the perpetrators arrested.	Interview with Mohan Jat, Nagda on 14 August 2002	Anonymity, efficiency	Anonymity was important in reporting the matter and a self-styled local custodian of value (Shivsena is an organization that protests celebration of Valentines day and similar icons “western culture” in India) could make use of the facility and avoid direct confrontation with the mafia. Shivsena, incidentally, had 186 volunteers in the village and they mainly work to stop selling of cows and oxen for slaughtering. Mohan Jat is the manger of a Goshala (place to keep cows rescued from being slaughtered). The person who sent the anonymous mail keeps the <i>Soochak</i> in good humor because if he fiddles the sender by informing the mafia, his life will be in danger.

Table 2: Narratives in contexts: Understanding tales from Gyandoot villages

Source: Various sources including fieldwork

* There are different versions of this story, see for example <http://www.sustainableicts.org/Gyandoot%20F.pdf>

The first kiosk was operating within the premises of the Block office. It was not open when our visit was made. A villager volunteered to find the Soochak but after nearly one hour he returned to announce that the Soochak was unfortunately not traceable. Some villagers complained that it was not unusual that the kiosk remained closed during office hours. When asked if they had any business with the kiosks, they said they had none. They came to see the staff of the Block Development Office. Randomly quizzing a few villagers, it was found that none of them had used the Soochanalay for any of their requirements. An employee of one of the government offices housed in that campus tipped that the other two Soochanalays were quite nearby. He was right and it was only five-minute walk from the first Soochanalaya to the next (Badnaver1 [B1] in Table 1). The Soochak of B1, which started at a relatively recent period, sounded extremely resentful about Gyandoot Samiti. He said that the

income from Gyandoot services was practically inconsequential and that he was running the kiosk at a loss.

I cannot even recover my license fee of INR 5000 that I have already deposited with the Gyandoot Samiti. I survive because I earn moderately from this computer center which I started before Gyandoot franchise was taken and from a parallel screen printing service.³¹

One of the major complaints he had was regarding the unstable connectivity of the Gyandoot Intranet that he had been experiencing. However, his problem was different from the usual troubled connectivity that Sookhaks in other Kiosks were also pointing out. He said that he failed to connect whenever the results of the 8th, 10th, and 12th, standard public examination results and Mark lists are made available through the Gyandoot Intranet for INR 10 per copy. This is regarded as the most lucrative of the services demanded by the public. When the Board publishes the results, Gyandoot would immediately access it and send it to the kiosks. Students visit the center with their respective roll numbers and get the result.

I don't even have a problem during load shedding. I hire a generator. But I can't connect when the results are published. I complained to the Collector. He said, "I will take care of that." But nothing happened. I still cannot access the results. On the other hand, another Sookhanalaya here has no problem with the connectivity. I have a problem and the one housed in the Panchayat office campus also has problems. I suspect corruption. The project Manager is a very honest man. But I can't say the same about operators at the Gyandoot office."

He said that people in fact demand no other Gyandoot service. "The Mandi is in Badnavar itself. So why should they visit the kiosk for price list? All offices are housed here. What service can we offer?"³² This was getting nowhere. So I asked him a pertinent question: When there were two Sookhanalays in Badnavar why did he apply for a third one?

The Blockwala never opens. The other one is little interior (sic-just two furlongs from his kiosk). When I first approached Collector he refused. He wanted me open the kiosk in another village where no Sookhanalaya has been opened. But I was not interested. I wanted to take the franchise since I had already had the computer center here. In another village I would have had to rent in a new room. But when the CEO of the District Council visited the block I met him and later he recommended that as youngster I deserve encouragement and the kiosk was allotted to me."³³

We could see the familiar stories of corruption, favoritism, and arbitrariness in decision-making emerging as the rural network society was taking shape. Is the technology that promised transparency and responsiveness itself getting entangled in the labyrinths of corruption and nepotism? The narratives and counter narratives pointed to the social tensions created by the high profile technology-driven project in rural Dhar. It was with these allegations of manipulation at the back of my mind that I visited the third Sookhanalaya in Badnavar (Badnavar2) in Table 1 [B2].

B2 was run by an upper caste, engineering graduate from a relatively wealthy family. Before taking the Gyandoot franchise the family had already launched an Internet center under the Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL-the government owned telecommunication

³¹ Interview with Manish Sharma on 14 August 2002

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

company) scheme of 1 Internet dabha (shop) per Block along with an e-education program under the AISEC license. The BSNL scheme envisages giving 25 percent commission to the licensee with a free telephone in which only Internet could be accessed. Further, he had also acquired contracts for computerizing land records in village Patwaris, the lowest level offices of the Revenue Administration. His response was cautious when asked about his motivation to take the Gyandoot franchise when there was another Soochanalays operating within waking distance from his center:

Gyandoot Soochanalaya was opened in 2000 in the block office premises. But the Soochak was not a trained computer operator. He got the franchise due to political connections. I met the collector and the CEO of the District council when they visited the Block during the inauguration of the Soochanalaya. I personally felicitated the Collector, presented him a memento and invited him for dinner. During dinner, he asked me to oversee the working of the kiosks since the operator was not properly trained. Removing him was not possible due to his political connection. Further it could have led to some bad publicity. We were advised to send in a proposal to the Janpath Panchayat requesting them to remove him. But I thought it was unfair. I said: "I get my Dhal Roti (Food). Why should I prevent him from getting his." The Collector was impressed by my answer. So he himself took the initiative to give me Gyandoot franchise. Thus, this is the first private Gyandoot center in Dhar.

He was soon nominated to the Gyandoot Samiti as one of the two representatives of the Soochaks in the QUANGO. He said computers are being installed everywhere—in schools, offices, and the hospital in Badnavar and he has played a major role in the installation of the machines in all these places. I asked him if he experienced any problems in connectivity. I told him that in B1 the Soochak had complained about connectivity problems when public examination results are published. His response was quite characteristic:

I have no connectivity problem. Others have problems because they don't know how to operate. They are not skilled enough. They have no proper training. When private people are given Gyandoot franchise it should be ensured that they have adequate experience in handling the machine. [B1] was started after I took Gyandoot franchise. It came up because the CEO of the Janpath Panchayat who was the tenant of the Soochak recommended it. In fact, I was consulted before it was given. I tried to stop it. But the project manager told me that whoever gives INR 5000 can start a Gyandoot kiosks and anybody who is efficient can make money of it.

The narratives differ. But the story is a familiar one of bureaucratic muddle, political interference, and mutual distrust. The local elite have been effectively controlling the new technology facilitated by the interplay of cross-linked forces such as political power, influence in bureaucratic circles and caste structure. The narratives of poor farmers and agricultural laborers benefiting from the technology are often exaggerated from the contexts in which such exceptions are made possible.

6. QUANGOS, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

This leads us to the larger question of civil society participation in e-governance projects initiated by the state governments.³⁴ As indicated in the beginning, civil society organizations

³⁴ This section draws on Sreekumar (2002b)

(CSOs) appear to be kept out of the institutional structures of e-governance. Even in cases where such participation is sought, the linkages are either weak or notional. While the stated projects in E-Governance show a relative reluctance to work with CSOs, it has attempted to follow the QUANGO model wherever relevant and possible. QUANGOs, like Gyandoot Samiti, form the backbone of the projects launched by several state governments. QUANGOs are defined as organizations which essentially undertake the responsibility of implementing state-sponsored programs or public policies, funded by the state but operating at arms length of the executive without an immediate hierarchical relation to it (Van Thiel, 2001, p.5). The formation of QUANGOs is part of the general strategy adopted by the states, informed by the logic of civil society mediation. As pointed out in the Pliatzky Report (quoted in Flinders, 1999, p. 29) QUANGOs are created since:

The work is more effectively carried out by a single purpose organization rather than by a government department with a wide range of functions; in order to involve people from outside of government in the direction of the organization; in order to place the performance of a function outside the party political arena.”

Nevertheless, QUANGOs are not real substitutes for CSOs and most often they degenerate into behemoth bureaucratic entities. Further, this leads to the incorporation of individuals and organizations, not accountable to any constituency even notionally, into the governing structures of developmental and e-governance programs. Figure 1 provides a conceptual model of the emerging e-Governance programs being carried out in India. This is a complex institutional model³⁵ where sustainability issues are embedded in the policy prerogatives that mold the state’s interest in the program.

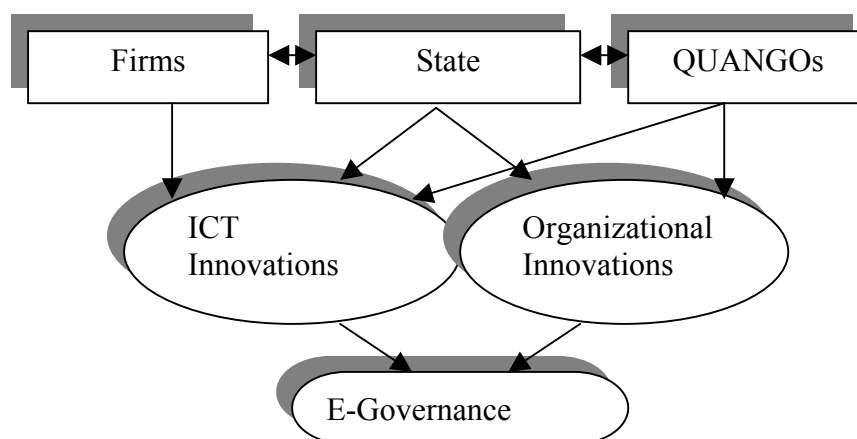


Figure 1: Emerging Model of E-Governance Projects

While the civil society involvement in e-governance projects is either notional or limited, private sector participation is seen as essential to the successful implementation and sustainability of the project. Our visit to Gyandoot kiosks also led to a chance meeting with a representative of Hindustan Lever Limited (HLL), the Indian subsidiary of Unilever who was interested in learning more about Gyandoot kiosks.³⁶ A presentation by Naveen Prakash,

³⁵ This model originally identified in Sreekumar (2002a) and Sreekumar (2002b) based on the Indian experience, which has been found to be relevant in the contexts of understanding e-governance initiatives elsewhere (see Sokolova , 2006).

³⁶ The potential of using the Gyandoot kiosks for market expansion has been explored by corporate organizations like HLL , Tata Trust, Mahindra Tractors, Jain Irrigation, and S.Kumars.

Project Manager, was aimed at exploring possibilities of future partnership with HLL. The District Collector was hoping that the private sector involvement would help overcome financial crunch and make the project viable in the long run.³⁷ Gyandoot's offers to HLL can be listed as follows:³⁸

- 1) HLL can test the success of its new products in rural areas through Gyandoot.
- 2) Gyandoot kiosks can be used for collecting feedback from HLL customers.
- 3) HLL can profile rural consumers using information available at the kiosks. Moreover, the *Soochaks* could be used as surveyors for HLL for a fixed remuneration.
- 4) HLL could also use the Gyandoot portal for marketing and advertising its products.
- 5) *Soochaks* could display HLL posters, banners, etc. in the *Soochanalayas*.
- 6) Since many of the *Soochanalayas* are located at bus stands, haat bazaars and Block headquarters etc., HLL can use the kiosks for selling its products. The brand identity of Gyandoot as a provider of quality services would be useful for HLL in selling their products. The kiosks managers need to be paid the normal commission HLL pays to its retailers.

Although private sector participation in paid technical services was visible in the case of most projects, strategic partnerships as envisaged by Gyandoot were not forthcoming due to a variety of reasons. Private companies were more interested in exploring the possibility of setting up their own kiosks instead of using the Gyandoot *Soochanalayas*. HLL, for example was looking for avenues to establish information kiosks of their own with the involvement of Women Self-Help Groups (SHGs—like Kudumbasree in Kerala) to “sell the products at the consumer's door steps.”³⁹ The e-Choupals set up by ITC has been considered a massive success in kiosk-centered rural marketing and business initiatives.⁴⁰

7. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The central themes addressed in this paper relate to the critique of the notion of e-governance as an essentially administrative innovation facilitated by ICTs and a recognition of e-governance as social process which involves not only attitudinal change and transformation of traditional forms of governmentality but also as a contested arena of social forces shaping the trajectory of the evolution of this technocratic innovation. E-governance delivered simply as an improvement in the pragmatics of governance, exemplified in the efforts to make service delivery quicker or more accessible, would probably end up in reproducing technological practices which hinge on the crucial technology component rather than on its

³⁷ Interview with Sanjay Dubey, District Collector Dhar on 12 August 2003.

³⁸ Based on Naveen Prakash's presentation “Gyandoot and HLL: Looking for Strategic Partnership” at the Gyandoot headquarters on 12 August 2003.

³⁹ Discussion with Sarath Dhall, (Marketing Manager, Rural-New Ventures, Hindustan Lever, Mumbai) on 12 August 2002.

⁴⁰ Ghatak (2002:10) describes the ITC strategy as follows: “ITC, which exports Rs. 700 crore worth of agricultural commodities (and hopes to increase this to Rs. 2, 000 crore by 2005), has discovered a way to bypass the age-old mandi system and buy directly from farmers. Launched in June 2000, 'e-Choupal,' has already become the largest initiative among all Internet-based interventions in rural India. 'E-Choupal' services today reach out to more than a million farmers growing a range of crops—soybean, coffee, wheat, rice, pulses, shrimp—in over 11,000 villages through 1,900 kiosks across four states (Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh)”.

social dimensions. This helps the consolidation of and centralization of power in the hands of those who directly or, by proxy, own, control or manipulate the technology.

The relationship between technology and governance is an area that needs closer scrutiny and is often made possible by perspectives of governmentality and developmentalism. One of the central issues that emerge in the context of exploring the interrelationship between technology and governance is the questioning of the assumption of the neutrality of technological processes enmeshed in the notion of e-governance. Technical processes defining the contours of e-governance are embedded in the structures of power that reinforces the power relations that e-governance, according to the developmental perspective, is expected to eliminate. This is particularly obvious when scrutinizing the consequences of the introduction of ICT-based administrative projects in villages where the local managers play key roles in its implementation and benefit from this public good. We have seen that projects are often implemented with the active support and participation of the village elites and their collaboration is a major aspect of the survival of the project.

We have seen that automation, on the one hand, and projects with a social content, on the other, form the key strategy for defining the pace of development of e-governance as identified by the state. The Indian state had shown an early interest in automation during the 1970s and 1980s and took a leading role in the implementation of innovative e-governance projects in the late 1990s. Our focus in this paper had been to understand the projects in the social context in which they were introduced, taking exception to an implied essentialism of both these perspectives.

The computerization of government departments and the launching of projects with a social content emerged as a near universal pattern for e-governance processes in India at the state and national level. Even states with relatively poor performance in terms of social and economic indicators surged ahead with innovative projects in e-governance. Nevertheless, many of these projects are floundering and have been unable to break the initial inertia. Even when the programs were able to make modest successes in terms of expansion and sustainability, the conflicts generated in the domain of technology- society interaction in these projects were enormous and deserved closer attention than developmental perspectives could offer.

One of the crucial aspects of networked governance is its potential for creating a network society in rural areas. Gyandoot's Intranet is an example of an emerging rural network society with its scattered nodes and decentralized delivery system. However, the sociological aspects such as power relations and the technological aspects such as connectivity are important in defining its contours of effectiveness and success.

Rural network society developed as an offshoot of networked governance could at best be considered as akin to a techno-social network with a potential to increase both citizen-to- government and person-to-person communication in a specific geographical unit. However, considering the contemporary history of projects such as Gyandoot as evolving techno-social networks, their potential for reproducing traditional lines of social inequalities and reinforcing rural power hierarchies rather than eliminating them cannot be overlooked. The idea that ICT is inherently a liberating technology and hence e-governance is a new way of transcending inept and inefficient bureaucratic systems which empowers "end users" appears to be completely inaccurate in the rural societal setting. Moreover, despite the claims of active networking of people in rural Dhar made on behalf of Gyandoot, its ability to connect to multiple social and economic domains was found to be extremely limited and ostensibly mediated by the social power equations that enveloped its institutional setting.

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