

Lately it seems that India is waking up to the concept of e-governance. The irony is that our government has yet to understand what governance is and they are already moving forward with automating whatever we have in the name of governance. When President Clinton visited India he proudly proclaimed that India is far ahead of US because he could get an Indian driving license over the Internet – although I wonder if we should take it as a compliment or sarcasm!

Douglas Holmes, the e-governance guru, visited India and am sure had great seminars on the subject. I could not attend the seminars but thought of taking this opportunity to add my two cents to the subject while the world is still listening. Here's my tongue-in-cheek view of how we can approach e-Governance.

Right to Information & Transparency

Automating existing bureaucracy & processes will only accelerate the frustrations of Indian citizens and does not comprise e-governance. The person who coined the phrase - ignorance is bliss - must be talking about the inner workings of a government office. The less visibility you have into the actual workings in a government office the better it is for your blood pressure. Rather than looking at which processes should the government put on the web, let's look at goals behind e-governance. In fact, from my point of view the more important thing to think about is *what should be the role of a government in an Internet society?* The current political system was developed on the foundations of an era which has been turned upside down by the interconnectivity and access to information that has been brought around by Internet. It's time that we rethink and revamp these systems that have become more of a hindrance to the progress of nations than being a helping hand. While the think tanks mull about my recommendation and the politicians try to figure out what does it really mean to 'govern' there are few things the government can do to bring transparency to the citizens.

The key problem faced by governments today is lack of trust. With Internet the information, opinions along with heresy and rumors travel at the click of the mouse. When people get access to dissent and opposing views right along with the news story, every intent and action is shadowed by a doubt. Coming out clean becomes almost impossible because the media, including electronic media, never give the whole truth. In a country like India, the problem is compounded because the image of politicians is so tainted that even if we fire all politicians and bureaucrats and replace them with brand new people, the citizens will still not trust the government! While many may get overwhelmed with the problem and come to the conclusion that there's no way out, I think differently. The first step that our politicians and political parties can do is to start building the trust level of people by providing access to information and releasing most of it in public domain.

The corruption-o-meter

America is very proud of its rags-to-riches stories and they keep marketing their 'American dream' to the rest of the world. I think we have better living examples and should be marketing our 'Indian dream' too. The government should launch a portal that should have case studies of all our leaders and government employees that shows the 'before' and 'after' indicators like the photos of the leaders, wealth accumulated, their immediate close relatives' photos and wealth accumulated and reports from lifestyle audits that are conducted by the media or ordinary citizens who would want to realize the Indian dream too. Now that web-cams cost less than a dinner in a three star hotel the political parties should think of installing few of these cams in each leaders' house and office to give a live view of the 'lifestyle of rich and famous'!

Access to information and transparency to the working of our leaders will be a giant step towards creating the trust between the leaders and the led. Jokes aside, just knowing the fact that your public life is not private anymore our leaders will be under pressure to behave like they are expected to behave and it may trigger a competition between the politicians to come out clean!

Let's keep them busy

Whenever I travel by air in India I cannot help but chuckle at the announcement they make - *It is illegal to photograph the Indian territory from air!* In the age of GPS and satellites that have mapped every inch of this planet why do we still have the laws that were passed in the beginning of the last century? On second thought I think the real reason why the government does not want us to photograph our own land from the air is because it will show the filth, dirt and the ugliness that they want to hide! Our politicians are so busy passing new laws that they forget to implement the existing laws or revising them when they become outdated.

So, here's another idea! Let's put all our laws on an e-governance website and create a workflow such that if any law is more than 10 years old the parliamentary session is prompted to revise the law. Not only that, the politicians and the political party that proposed and fought for the law to be passed should put on the same web site the ROI (return on investment) of that particular law. This will make sure that during parliamentary sessions the politicians are busy making sure that the laws are indeed up to date and provide the benefit to normal citizens that they intended to.

Let's not just automate the bureaucracy let's really ponder on the real question - *what should be the role of government in Internet age.* The existing political structures were based on an industrial age, which has now been replaced with information age. Maybe India can leap-frog the rest of the world in this area just as it did when it gained the edge by skipping the main-frame era and directly jumping into the client/server era. Maybe just maybe procrastination has its virtues!

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