Digital Governance

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced his commitment for a Digital India, and demonstrated it by visiting Silicon Valley. I hope this happens soon, but there is smaller step which he can take within two years if he wishes.

All the government work is done on paper files. When a citizen goes to any office for some work, he is often told that the relevant file is unavailable. If he pays a bribe it becomes available. It is common knowledge that depending on the amount of the bribe in many offices a record in the file can be altered, replaced or lost. A significant percentage of corruption and inefficiency is a consequence of this method of keeping paper files. Many government offices create records which they cannot access after a few months! Most have computers which are usually used as electric typewriters. There is a fairly simple solution available. If all the work was done on computers and each day the default mode was that it would be displayed on the website, there could be a sea change in our governance. Only some information, which is thought to be exempt as per the RTI Act should not go on the website. If parliament proceedings can be telecast live, there is no reason why our executive cannot function in a transparent manner. Only with transparency can there be hope of accountability. If purchase orders of CWG ordering toilet paper rolls for Rs. 400 each had to be displayed on the website, such orders may not have been given. The fact that the information on decisions will be available transparently will itself curb some of the arbitrariness and corruption. Unfortunately, most powerful people subscribe to the idea of transparency for others and are reluctant to practice it themselves. The corrupt obviously dislike transparency, whereas the honest have the arrogance of believing they know best and informing citizens and exposing their actions hinders their work. This is the big challenge. Accountability will

automatically follow transparency. Corruption reduction and greater efficiency will be natural byproducts.

Information in various files and registers is usually collated manually. Errors in this consolidation are common and difficult to identify. If all government offices work only on computers and transmit files on intranet or internet the decision making process would be much faster. Transparency could be achieved by design if all the files,-except that which is thought to be exempt as per the RTI Act,- were to be displayed at the end of each day on websites. If any change is made or any record deleted it is possible to identify the person who did it and also what it was initially. Backup could be taken at regular intervals in a different city, so that even an earthquake would not be able to destroy the records. As for the argument that government servants cannot use computers or security issues cannot be handled, we merely need to look at our public sector banks to see that they are able to do this quite efficiently, with no major problem to the security of data, or their operations. India prides itself on superiority in Information Technology, but fails to use it effectively for governance. Reports could be extracted from the computerized data which could be as accurate as the data collected and decision making would be more efficient and reasoned. We would also save thousands of crores spent on paper, files, printing machines and cartridges, and the space for keeping the files. What is well known is that a greater amount and time is wasted on locating them, and many cannot be found.

Presently, thousands of crores are being spent by government on 'digitization'. This involves scanning all earlier files and sometimes even the files after they are closed. This has no real benefit, but is only an expense with no benefit. Besides, most government departments say they will go digital after all the files are scanned and this is never completed. If a decision was taken to go digital say by 2017 April, all

new files should be only on computers after that day, and only earlier files on which further work has to be done need to be scanned. Accountability to citizens is the rationale and foundation of democracy and this cannot be achieved unless transparency is built into our governance as a default mode. Digital working can achieve this and the Prime Minister only needs to decide on a timeframe of say two years to achieve this. We have the need, the benefits would be enormous and we would have a meaningful democracy, where government will have credibility and citizen's trust. Instead of piecemeal e-governance solutions, a commitment for digital governance would make a discernible change in our governance. There is really no obstacle to improving our governance and transparency and one hopes the Prime Minister will bite the bullet.

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