

Awareness of E-Government Services among Low-Income Group

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Abstract - We are midst the Internet revolution and are leading a digital age with all sophisticated technology and connectivity. It is widely believed and asserted that, “Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have positive impact on the economic, social, and political development of a country, region, or community”. ICT relates to benefits for civil society, and this can come from the application of ICT to improving the lives of citizens in general and the poorest in particular. Governments are becoming increasingly important users of ICT, particularly for e-government services, where Internet technology serves as a platform for exchanging information, providing services, and transacting with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. This research paper provides insight into ‘Awareness of E-Government services among low-income group’. The present study was carried out with intense interview of fifty respondents belonging to low-income group. Those who lack access, majority are aware of the E-Government services and are likely to use the services in the future provided if access is extended. It was noted that respondents were in favour of expansion of e-government related computer training and they expect the government to expand e-government services further. A positive attitude was noted among many respondents towards E-Government services, which is a healthy sign for the Government and its initiatives towards digitization.

Keywords: E-Government Services, Low-Income, Awareness, ICT.

I.INTRODUCTION

Information is critical to the growth of a country and its people. Many of us are now living in an information society, enjoying and at times complaining the way we are working, learning, interacting with others and as well entertaining ourselves. The information society has benefited many, still there are people who cannot benefit from the electronic information promises because they do not have access to or do not know how to use the technology and tools. Information and Communication Technology can be used to remove or bring down the level of poverty. People are deprived of basic necessities like food, water, health, shelter, education, protection opportunity, freedom, lack of rights, empowerment etc. Technologies can be designed to deliver economically feasible and tailored solutions for protection of the poor and vulnerable people.

ICT enables economic and social changes. Since Internet is the fastest growing communications medium in the history, it should be used for promoting opportunities for the poor.

Access to and engagement with Information and Communications Technologies are increasingly important aspects of social inclusion.

A. E-Government and India

E-Government is the government’s use of information and communication technology (ICT) to provide important services to citizens, businesses, and other arms of the government itself using a number of different electronic channels: Web, e-mail, landlines, cell phones, and kiosks. E-Government services can be categorized in two key clusters: 1) the government – to – citizen cluster, which includes income taxes, job search, registration (birth, property, business), paying bills (telephone, electricity), reserving train tickets, social security benefits and education; and 2) the government-to-business cluster, which includes corporate taxes, sales tax, employees provident fund, customs, registration and permits. E-government is also used for delivery of public services like PAN, Aadhar, Passport, Voter ID, etc and to streamline many processes of democratic governance.

The Government of India with the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) has formulated by the Department of Electronics and Information Technology (DEITY) and Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG). Where the NeGP aims at improving delivery of Government services to citizens and businesses with the following vision: "Make all Government services accessible to the common man in his locality, through common service delivery outlets and ensure efficiency, transparency & reliability of such services at affordable costs to realise the basic needs of the common man”.

With the Governments (both National and State) has striving since the late 1990's to find better ways to connect with their constituents via the Web, have achieved some mileage by providing government information online. By making the information online and easy to search, readily available, accessible, understandable, and usable, people can now interact with their government in ways never before imagined. Sharing government data and information with the public provides openness and transparency with citizens, and can improve operations within and between governments.

B.India and Low- Income Group

India being the second fastest growing economy in the world next to China, is the home for large scale export of Information and Communication Technologies sector in the world and as well home for the largest number of poor living below poverty line. To make a way out of this poverty, the advent of new Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) are seen as a massive engine which can fuel the growth of the developing nations like India. ICTs can potentially enhance the welfare of the poor. Some of the direct approaches are making available market information, creation of new economic opportunities, better access to health and education facilities, and effective governance system. It becomes mandatory that country policies as well should focus on the uplift of the disadvantaged. Development through ICT can make a lasting impact, because it has the capabilities to overcome barriers of social, economic and geographical isolation, increase access to information and education, and enable poor people to participate in more of the decisions that affect their lives.

II.SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Many Governments around the world have made significant strides in embracing e-government. Citizens need to be at the heart of e-government, which is best described as a government's use of technology to enhance service delivery to their citizens. ICT potentially improves relationships between citizens and government, and it relaxes time and geographic constraints faced by citizens who want to participate. Government agencies have the charge to make their information and services available to everyone. According to Darrell West, E-Government has the powerful potential, such as increasing public sector productivity, enhancing the adoption of electronic channels such as the web and e-mail, and encouraging e-democracy. This paper focuses on the awareness of e-government services by low income group. Within this scope, the paper explores the opportunities and way to achieve the awareness and reach of services online by the economically disadvantaged.

III.OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to investigate awareness level of low-income group and the E-government services. It further tries to find out their interest to learn computers and internet.

IV.REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Governments are becoming increasingly important users of ICT, particularly for e-government—using Internet technology as a platform for exchanging information, providing services, and transacting with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. That makes them major actors in fostering ICT uptake and setting information

technology standards. E-government initiatives can make public administration more efficient, improve delivery of public services, and increase government accountability and transparency. They can also reduce transaction costs and processing times and increase government revenues. Some e-government projects have also improved governance, so vital for development.

Researchers are exploring the possibility, approaches, activities and involvement of governments and individuals in adoption, usage and difficulty for service providers (government) and users (public) in various nations. Rey and Ozymy (2011), in their study 'Predicting E-Government Use and Public Support for Computer Access and Training: Employing Two Distinct Theoretical Approaches' conducted a survey to analyse the most common online activities related to local governments: Paying fines and parking tickets or filing service request, i.e. citizen attitudes towards local government(individual needs). The study explored the citizen attitude towards e-government and informed the government about the demands which could be addressed by government. Study further went on to analyse why low-income and minority individuals support and utilize e-government programs. It was observed that respondents counting for 38% responded that they were very likely to use e-government program. It was noted that respondents were in favour of expansion of e-government related computer training and, low income families expect the government to expand e-government services further.

When it comes to factors that could affect the citizens' trust in e-government services, privacy concerns was found to have the greatest influence, as individuals wanted to release personal information with confidence, and it should be used in the way the individuals intended to. Survey revealed that 70% of the respondents are extremely concerned about hackers breaking into government computers. Apart from the privacy concern ease of use and the reliability of technical infrastructure were the two keys for the public's ability to use e-government services. Other research has revealed that e-government services are most accessible to highly educated which is disproved by Colesca (2009), it was observed that individuals with more formal education tend to be somewhat more skeptical of the information and people accessible on the internet.

Frequency of access and use of the internet increases the understanding of potential uses of the technology for information dissemination, online transactions and interactive communication as well. When it comes to the risks experienced in using the internet are most often less than the risks imagined by non-users. It could be predicted that as use and expertise gains access to Internet resources, people are likely to be less concerned over the risks involved in Internet use (for e-government services).

When it comes to engage citizens with e-government services, various governments have signaled that forms of

citizen engagement should be part of the service transformation package. The Newzealand government in its e-government vision highlights the democratic potential of service transformation, indicating that the implementation of e-government will make it easier for people to have their say in government citizens to interact with ministry officials which enhanced participation and trust building. Similarly the UK government had planned for administrative transformation through new technologies, reinforcing the objective of citizen feeling more engaged with process of democratic government, Dutil et al 2007. Engaging citizens in all government processes online increases public participation.

It's quite interesting to know about various projects and highlights of e-government initiatives. "e-Government" can be useful: increasing the transparency and accountability of government officials by increasing public information and voice. The ability of government officials at all levels to exercise undue discretion or profit personally in the making and implementation of policies and the provision of government services can be diminished if more citizens know what services they are entitled to, what procedures are normal, and what resources government has committed to spend on public services in their community. It can also enable citizens to bond together to seek redress of grievances, push for the removal of corrupt or incompetent officials, and work for equal rights for minorities and disadvantaged groups bringing in social inclusion, McNamara, 2003.

With all the reviews and information from the secondary data the present study focuses on the awareness, and intention to use E-Government services by the low income group.

V.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research technique with a detailed interviewing was adhered to collect primary information from the participants. Participants were identified based on their household income (a family income of Rs.10000 and below per month). Both male and female participants aged 16 and above were part of the study. An interview schedule which comprised of personal and telephonic interviews based on the convenience of the participants was adhered. Fifty participants were interviewed. Interviews lasted for 10 to 30 minutes based on their awareness and interest to share information with the researcher. Interviews were conducted in Tamil and English language. Details regarding the participant's gender, age, education, occupation, household income along with their know-how of Internet and access, along with awareness of E-Government services were collected.

Hypothesis:

H₁: Demographics (Gender, Education, Age and Occupation) of the participant determine their Awareness of E-Government services.

H₂: Income of the participant determines their Awareness of E-Government Services.

VI.DATA INTERPRETATION AND RESULTS

Interview helped the researcher understand the awareness of E-Government services and their interest to take up the training for using computer and internet. Interview was conducted using structured questionnaires.

TABLE 1 REPRESENTING THE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENT'S AWARENESS OF THE POSSIBILITY OF E-GOVERNMENT SERVICES

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Yes	32	64%	64%
No	18	36%	100%
Total	50	100%	100%

N= 50

TABLE 2 REPRESENTING THE FREQUENCY OF RESPONDENTS INTERESTED IN TAKING A TRAINING COURSE ON COMPUTER AND INTERNET USE

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Yes under all conditions	16	32%	32%
Yes if it was free	17	34%	66%
Yes if other participants were people of my community	7	14%	80%
May be	3	6%	86%
No	7	14%	100%
Total	50	100%	100%

N=50

When it comes to the know how to use the Internet and E-Government services, 50% of the respondents said Yes I know how to use Internet, and 64% said I am aware of E-Government services, but I have not used it. Those who said they are aware of e-government services were all literates with least qualification as tenth standard and a maximum qualification of PG. Those who said they don't know how to use internet had qualification less than 10th standard and at times graduates. Majority of the respondents were female (70%), some employed (with computer knowledge) and others unemployed housewives. Among men (30%) majority were aware of Internet but did not use it on a regular basis as their job never required such skills (like skilled labourers like carpenter, painter, plumber,

electrician, construction worker, etc). Some respondents were unemployed.

Male respondent in the age group of 16-25 with educational qualification of secondary (upto 10th std), with no job is aware of services online like paying electricity bill, telephone bill, taxes, applying for passport, birth certificate, death certificate, land registration, employment registration and they agreed that they are aware of downloading official forms and submitting filled forms. Both male and female respondents came to know about the services offered by the Government either through family members who use Internet regularly or through friends and relatives. Those who said they are not aware of such services were of the opinion that they need some training and access to Internet for them to know and adopt those services.

Majority of the respondents wanted the Government to provide services online as it helped curb corruption, reduced travelling time and waiting, brought in transparency of services and to now the status of application without any hardship and distance (timely updating). Some of the respondents who were students said awareness was there provided they are literate, they lamented that their parents who never had any formal education are not aware. Even for those who are aware access to Internet was not proper.

Majority of the respondents both male and female are familiar with Internet as a communication tool like e-mail, SNS's as well online shopping. Though awareness was not a major problem with most of the respondents, there was a similar opinion that utilizing such services requires advanced computer skills. They were of the opinion that it is time consuming but strongly believe that it opens new prospects.

VII.RESULTS

From the findings (interview data) is clear that education, age and occupation determines the awareness of E-Government services of the low income group. Though gender is not having any significant role as both the gender have similar opinion and accept that they will be take E-government services alike if provided training free of cost.

H₁: Demographics (Gender, Education, Age and Occupation) of the participant determine their Awareness of E-Government services.

Thus the (H₁) hypothesis is accepted that demographics of the participant determines the awareness of E-Government services expect for gender as it has not left any dominating influence.

H₂: Income of the participant determines the Awareness of E-Government Services.

Hypothesis (H₂) is partially accepted because all the respondents for the study were from low income group (monthly income below 10,000) and 64% have mentioned their awareness whereas only 36% are not aware. Though income is not (100%) determining the awareness, when it comes to usage yes it does, which is evident from the result were nearly 60% of the participants have stated that they will get trained if it is free of cost.

VIII.CONCLUSION

This study clearly shows that awareness of e-government services is found almost among everyone in the low – income group. But using the services is limited due to barriers like education, accessibility and training. Participants showed motivation in acquiring the skills if provided free of cost. To sustain in the long run e-government services should reach everyone without any barrier. Since e-government services have the potential for saving time, cost, and effort and as well reduce the opportunities for corruption, delivery of services among low-income group should be equal without interruption that is continuous and mandatory. Evidence from previous and the present study reveals that Internet use has a social impact on low-income group, which can be considered as a positive sign for improved socializing. Internet use in general motivates them towards a better cognitive competency, which is considered as a healthy trend for the overall well being of the individual, community and nation as such. Equal opportunities and access are compulsory to reach E-Government services to economically down trodden for their active participation.

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