

Imperatives of Local Language Initiatives in e-Governance

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Multilingual Traditions

During the decades after Independence of India the presentation of information and documents in two or more languages has become an established tradition. Conscious of the need to reach out to the people beyond the English - speaking fringe of the population, the efforts to use the appropriate local language has become a necessity not only for the governmental organizations but also for the private enterprises. However these efforts have been confined mostly to the printed material.

The railway time tables, money order forms, degree certificates, official correspondence, promotional literature and a host of other documents are in English as well as in one or more Indian languages. The internal office files and notes in some states are required to be maintained only in the local language. Many different certificates relating to citizens services are in bilingual and sometimes solely in the local language.

The textbooks prescribed for most academic courses are available in both English and local languages. The local language editions are generally more popular than English versions among students due to the ease of comprehension. A large number of technical journals in diverse fields such as agriculture, business management, computer science, information technology etc., are being published in local languages.

The rapid reduction in the level of illiteracy in most states of India has resulted in significant growth of population capable of following the local language only.

Impact of Information Technology

The introduction of computers and other information technology devices in the country has been largely confined to the English language. In the initial stages of use of computerised systems, the services that were traditionally available in local languages were restricted only to English. It is widely recognized that this is running counter to the official language policies of most governments. Private sector also feels handicapped in their interaction with vast majority of population.

On the one hand there is a high degree of interest in adopting the rapidly growing power and benefits of the information technologies for a whole range of functions with a view to increase their efficiency, transparency and productivity even if these were to be carried out in English only. The rapid growth in the hardware devices, operating systems and application software offer very many compelling conveniences to the tasks that were carried out manually earlier.

At the same time there is a high sense of inadequacy in these operations largely due to their limited reach in the absence of local language. One of the limitations in using the local language is the slow pace of adaptation of the developments in information technology to the needs of the

local language mainly due to disagreements on the local language standards compatible to the available information technologies. In the interim many organizations are adopting whatever standard available to them in introducing local language versions of their documents and services. Considering the vast scope of functions waiting to be implemented for the benefit of the non-English speaking populations, the compulsions on the organizations such as INFITT engaged in promoting technologies and applications in the local language to speed up their effort are high.

Scope for Local Language

All those societies, which have accumulated archaic administrative procedures, can substantially benefit by making deliberate choices in the use of the power of Information Technology in their governance system. They can thereby derive far greater advantages by use of local language than English alone, by reducing the degree of alienation between the citizens and administrators. The needless harassments experienced by their people, especially those with low levels of literacy, either due to the indifference of the administrative staff or the exploitation by middlemen, can be substantially eliminated. The successful introduction of the reservation system in the Indian Railways is a prime example. The proposed scheme for online reservations in Indian railways will need local language usage.

Current efforts towards e-governance in the public as well private sector organizations in the country reflect the following objectives:

- Delivery of essential government services to the citizen
- Enhancing productivity and efficiency of the administrative functions
- Elimination of undesirable practices such as touts, speed money, deliberate delays, harassment and bogus documents
- Improving the image of the government as “friend of the people”
- Ensuring transparency and right to information in governmental activities
- Establishing better information base for decision-making processes including forecasting critical phenomenon
- Maintaining due control over assets, revenues and expenditures
- Encouraging broad based public awareness and participation in key areas of developmental efforts.

Every one of the above objectives can be successfully reached only if local language is incorporated.

Categories of e-Governance Functions

Citizens' Services

Among the various kinds of e-governance functions, the one that deserves highest priority is Citizens' Services intended to benefit vast populations who would otherwise have to face serious hardships for getting essential services. Convenient delivery of these services using the facilities of Information Technology would help to propagate among the people the advantages of investing in I.T., which would otherwise be treated as an elitist endeavour. Availability of these services in local language would enhance confidence in their government and reduce the level of skepticism in the functioning of the government offices.

The State of Kerala has chosen Panchayats as the basic unit and has chosen a first list of services to be delivered in all its Panchayats at the end of its pilot trials. Tamil Nadu has chosen Taluks as the basic unit and has started implementation of an identified list of services to be available in all the 206 Taluks of Tamil Nadu. Some of these services are also made available at the level of 102 municipalities and 6 corporations of the State. Some States may initiate Citizens' Services at major metropolitan cities and expand to other areas. Whatever be the level at which the services are initiated, it will be necessary to have the benefits of these services in their own language to cover all the population.

In choosing the hardware and software systems, it will also be necessary to avoid future "captive client" and "restricted option" features. Hence some initial thoughts should be devoted to the possibility of adopting open source based software at some stage which can adequately perform the desired functions with the use of local language in creating the data systems and delivery of services.

Entitled Services

The capability to issue birth certificates, death certificates, income certificates, solvency certificates, legal heir certificates and community certificates is provided in all the systems at the Taluk level. Each of the units have set maximum time limits for issue of these certificates ranging from 3 to 7 days. The Municipalities and Corporations are also equipped to issue the birth and death certificates. In addition, the Taluk level facility contains the software for issue of certificates relating to Patta Transfers and Patta Classification. All these service are available in the bi-ligual mode.

Welfare Services

There are many services offered to specific groups of citizens as a privilege under special circumstances. Concessionary loans, special grants, subsidies of various kinds fall under this category. Those who are eligible for such benefits should be able to obtain them expeditiously. This is an area which offers temptation for even higher levels of corruption and cheating. The beneficiaries must have the information relating to the entitlement in their own language to avoid dependence on interpreters.

Grievance Redressals

The citizens should be properly guided to register their grievances and assured of satisfactory measures for the redressals. This is a complex task. A system which offers an easy outlet for their agonies and enables serious consideration beyond proforma responses will enhance the citizens' respect for the administration. This also will provide an opportunity to government for assessment of people's problems and encourage official accountability. Hence the software for the grievance monitoring system should be in the local language.

Development Schemes

Every State undertakes great many development schemes at various levels of investments that are geographically distributed. Every development ministry each year launches many such schemes. At the local level these add upto a large number. Most citizens are not fully aware

of these schemes beyond word of the mouth or sketchy news reports. In a transparent administration, it will benefit both the administration and the people at large if the essential details of the schemes, their progress or the reasons for lack of it and the benefits to be derived are available in the local language and made easily accessible as an essential part of e-governance. This will help to offset rumors of misadministration and even help to eliminate chances of misappropriation. The details of development schemes are being organized at Block levels in Tamil Nadu and will be networked at District and State levels later.

Community Internet Centres (CICs)

The scheme for Community Internet Centres (CIC) of Tamil Nadu envisages establishment of large number of them with the active involvement of government, voluntary organizations and private enterprises. Since a large proportion of the population in India, especially in rural areas, cannot afford to own computers and Internet connection, the CICs will offer them the facility of using them at an affordable cost. The CICs will be much more than ordinary browsing centres, providing multifunctional services to the population around them.

They would focus primarily on enabling the local population to use the e-mail facility in English and the local language, to seek and obtain essential market related information about commodity prices and agricultural inputs; to get rapid information about medical and educational facilities of their specific interest and need; to procure printouts of various application forms for many different services offered by government departments, educational institutions, financial institutions, scholarship schemes, etc.; and to get other information on areas of interest relating to local, State level or National or International events. These could also provide other informal and formal educational services to certain class of learners.

In establishing the CICs, all possible technological options are being explored to provide essential connectivity and adequate bandwidth to meet the requirements of the “last mile” problems. For communities situated in far-flung locations, the Wireless in Local Loop (WiLL) linked to local exchanges are economical and technically feasible. For some locations cable connection or optical fibre connection may be convenient. There have been substantial expectations on the CICs from different sections of population.

Data Warehousing

Most agencies possess movable and immovable assets which have considerable value. Some of them are in the form of real estates generating revenue. Their locations, value, assignment, rentals, maintenance, disposal, etc. often maintained in scattered registers could be organized in a manner facilitating their proper management and deployment by use of computerised and networked databases. Most of them generate vast amounts of useful data and information which have general purpose usage. The data warehouse in local language will be a valuable asset to several groups of users.

Developing e-governance procedures can enhance the process of collection of revenue due to the governmental organizations by way of various taxes and user charges. This will also help a great deal in the budgeting tasks and financial accounting and management. The bank deposits, payment liabilities and loans can be streamlined to introduce a high degree of

efficiency. The tendering process for new acquisitions and various disposals and services, in local language, can be made transparent and reliable.

Departmental Functions

The departments which have embarked upon IT initiatives include Revenue, Commercial Taxes, Registration, Transport, Municipal Administration and Water Supply, Electricity Board, Civil Supplies and Public Distribution System, Medical Services, Prohibition and Excise, Police, Rural Development, Industries, School Education, Higher Education, Public Works and so on.

Internal Administration

The functions relating to internal administration that are being computerised in Tamil Nadu are: File Monitoring System, Payroll Accounts, Leave related information, financial management, Personnel Information System, Provident Fund Accounts, audit objections etc. There is considerable scope for using Tamil in these operations for greater efficiency and transparency.

Planning and Forecasting

A large variety of reliable data and information is required for planning and forecasting. Considering the diversity of sources, the efforts required for their generation, collection and maintenance, the need for using powerful methods for managing them is obvious. Very many modern tools, techniques and procedures have been evolved in recent years, which go by the name of Geographic Information System (GIS). Whichever level of GIS is used, the benefits to the planning process should be assessed in terms of objectives. The spatial data, socio-economic data, natural resources data, geological data, infrastructure data, agricultural data, etc can all be combined into one or more convenient formats. The use of available maps, field measurement data, scientific exploration, demographic and economic information, aerial photos, satellite imaging, global positioning system, etc. along with various communication networks is now possible for development and use of GIS. The current initiatives in GIS should deliberately include local language versions of the data bases and outputs.

Prospects

With rapid increase in the general I.T. competence in the country, the availability of trained and trainable I.T. personnel with different levels of skills and knowledge and with the significant growth of I.T. infrastructure, bandwidth and connectivity, it appears that introduction of e-governance process will advance significantly. The availability of these facilities alone will not however ensure such an advance unless proactive local language initiatives are also in place.

It is necessary to point out that e-governance is not meant for governmental administration alone. There is a vast scope in introducing e-governance process in sectors such as education, particularly in the university administration. The objectives of e-governance such as efficiency, transparency and user-friendly services to the clientele are as important to university administration as for the government. The e-governance process of a university system can embrace a whole range of functions such as student services relating to

application, admission registration, examination, declaration of results, payment of fees, award of degrees, etc. Similarly, the staff services and back-office functions can be improved. The course offerings, curricular structures, revisions, etc. can be made explicitly available to anyone.

Another area which could benefit by e-governance is the judicial system. There are several ongoing efforts to provide efficient services to the legal practitioners as well as the public by creating various kinds of databases on judgments, court schedules, etc. Using computers and Internet connectivity are also improving the access to these services.

In course of time these services will be in bilingual mode. Presently about 80 percent of the websites of Government of Tamil Nadu are bilingual and the departments are mandated to maintain their sites in Tamil as well. The approval of standardized software has helped to accelerate these efforts.

Currently about 1.8 million computers are sold in India but only 40000 of them have local language software. In Tamil Nadu it is estimated that nearly 20000 systems out of about 1.5 million computers sold last year use Tamil software. In due course the hardware manufacturers in branded as well as non-branded systems will have to use local language software if they wish to improve their market share and enable higher level of penetration. The school system is rapidly introducing computer literacy courses at all levels and they are keen on use of Tamil software.

All these prospects can be considerably advanced when INFITT would come to key agreements on basic standards through the TI-Conferences, leaving the option open for future refinements, and there by accelerating the use of local languages in information technology.