

Gaps and promises in govt's e-agenda

I have not gone as deep into finding how much of the total outlay in the 12th Five-Year Plan each ministry and department has proposed as how they are going to use ICT (information and communications technology) for efficiency and the larger good of the masses and good governance. But I got a chance to look at the total outlay of the department of electronics and information technology (DIT) of the ministry of communications and information technology for the next five years—it is Rs. 81,378.45 crore. The broad categories of the division of allocations of funds are: e-government, e-learning, e-security, e-industry, e-innovation, research and development, and e-inclusion. Interestingly, e-inclusion, which is about how to reach and benefit the masses through the use of ICT tools, has been allocated just Rs. 160 crore in five years. My purpose of reviewing the 12th Plan was to let all the stakeholders know what lies in it and act accordingly.



Some of its highlights are: the meta-university concept will be operational from the academic year 2012-13, ensuring a network of universities that will enable students to pick any course from any discipline across universities and institutions; the information technology (IT) and electronics manufacturing policy will be launched shortly; India will hold spectrum auction for fourth-generation (4G) mobile services by the end of this year, and finalize plans to sell radio waves for 2G services.

The plan document of DIT recognizes IT-enabling as a key precondition for higher competitiveness and social and economic modernization as well as a powerful instrument for bridging the social and economic divides and reducing poverty. Among the seven thrust areas mentioned above, on e-government, the focus will be on strengthening and extending core infrastructure projects for more horizontal connectivity, leveraging core infrastructure including fibre optic-based connectivity, and setting up additional 150,000 common service centres (read rural information kiosks). The plan highlights that mobile penetration will be leveraged and the electronic delivery services law would be implemented. There is a promise of creating a national application store, perhaps to avoid a duplication of efforts. There is a mandate to expand the national e-governance plan with an increase in new mission mode projects in the areas of health, education, the public distribution system, posts and skills upgradation, among others. There are proposals for an e-governance innovation fund and an open data platform and institutional structure. For all these, the proposed outlay is Rs. 20,551 crore (Rs. 15,000 crore for e-governance alone).

Electronic infrastructure creation continues to be a focus area in the plan in the e-learning domain. For example, the setting up of a virtual or a central university with multiple campuses and blended learning mode. The capacities of the National Institute of Electronics and Information Technology and the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing will be

enhanced to generate 10 million skilled manpower by 2022. The proposed outlay for e-learning is pegged at Rs. 15,237 crore (Rs. 6,000 crore for skill development in IT alone).

There is a focus on cyber security in the Plan, which will be concentrated on six key areas including enabling a legal framework, security policy and security research and development. The outlay proposed in this domain is Rs. 1,533 crore. The twin focus on electronics hardware and IT-enabled services (ITeS) continues to receive larger attention in the 12th Plan. The electronics hardware segment is seen as promising and is expected to generate exports of about \$20 billion (around Rs. 1.1 trillion), direct employment of about 3.5 million and indirect employment of 6.5 million. The focus in the Plan is to turn India into an electronics hardware manufacturing hub and a global destination for electronics system design and manufacturing. The objective is to achieve domestic production of about \$122 billion by 2017 by creating an industry-friendly policy. Two key attempts will be on the electronics development fund and the national electronics mission. The total outlay proposed for electronic hardware promotion is Rs. 34,121 crore.

IT and ITeS exports grew from \$40 billion in 1999-2000 to \$59 billion in 2010-11. This sector accounts for over 5% of India's gross domestic product and employs 2.5 million professionals directly and another 8.3 million indirectly. The outlay in the Plan period for this segment is about Rs. 7,263 crore. There is a special focus on entrepreneurship creation and innovation in the ICT field. The total outlay pegged for innovation, research and development, and promotion of research in manufacturing is Rs. 8,085 crore. Digital inclusion of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, minorities, differently abled, senior citizens and below poverty line households has been taken into consideration, but ironically, is provided only Rs. 160 crore.

What is inspiring is that there are many plans and activities in the Plan that are bottom-up. There is a significant thrust on ITeS with the rural business process outsourcing trend in mind. ICT Academy will be another propeller in the rural employment growth story and will help bring jobs to the people rather than make people migrate for jobs. Interestingly, the power of more than 800 million mobile outreach has made sure that mobile governance, is in the 12th Plan. However, the real challenge in integrating m-governance will be whether it is treated in isolation or is treated to complement the e-governance infrastructure and leverage the larger outreach of mobile phones.

What we must appreciate is the ministry's thrust in making e-inclusion a more vocal subject component for the Plan period execution. This reflects the larger digital equity principle that is necessary. The focus on backward communities and backward region is well understood. However, one feels to raise a query on how a meagre outlay for e-inclusion will serve the larger agenda of IT for all.

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