

Digital Panchayat: Vital to Shape India's Future

The soul of India lives in its villages. More than 69 percent of 1.21 billion Indians, i.e. nearly 830 million people live in different villages. While the urban population has been dramatically increasing in India since the last decade, the rural economy and life is still central to India's existence and identity.

Our country cannot develop without developing its villages. The digital revolution in each and every Panchayat is a must in a bid to make India's growth inclusive. Without this revolution, the fully flagged e-Governance for India will only be a dream.

There are 245,525 Panchayat offices in India. It includes offices of 525 Zila Panchayats, 6,299 Block Panchayats and 238,644 Gram Panchayats.

As per the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, only 58, 291 Panchayat offices have computers. In Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, barely one or two Panchayats have computer facilities. This is not the end of challenges. The irony is, most computers in the states' Panchayats are either non-functional, or there is no trained person to operate them.

The truth is that internet revolution bypassed these Indian villages. Meanwhile, some villagers are able to receive the advantages of mobile phone revolution.

With this background, the concept of 'Digital Panchayat' (DP) has been ideated by Digital Empowerment Foundation and rolled forward for implementation. Having a web interface at Panchayat level connected to the grassroots has tremendous relevance and utility in overall governance and development of our grassroots constituencies.

Initially, National Internet Exchange of India (Dept of IT, Govt. of India) has helped a lot in rolling forward this project.

But, since last so many years, we are working without any other organization's support. The objective is that every Panchayat has its own website, profiles of the members, their e-mail ids and details of development works of the Panchayat. Our goal is to realize various development objectives at grassroots level.

Besides this, on every 20-25 Panchayats there must be a Digital Panchayat Centres where people can access complete information on their society, profession and the government schemes. But, the challenge is to convenience the people that Digital Panchayat can play a vital role in changing their lives.

Such revolution doesn't happen overnight. The majority of the people of these regions are landless farmers and daily labourers. Among the daily labourers most of them are below the

poverty line. The Adivasi communities undertake shifting cultivation and responsible for reduction of forest coverage resulted to global warming like situation.

In such scenario, these Digital Panchayats can be workable only when they have been groomed with experienced NGOs. It is quite a challenge for them since most of the people of these Panchayats are illiterate.

Keeping in mind the history, education, upbringing and the other challenges, I talked to nearly one thousand Panchayat Representatives, who had never been used any Digital equipment except mobile phones. Though, they have encouraging Passion and enthusiasm for the use of computers and Internet but at the time of training, most of them are absent.

They are interested to see their and their villages' pictures and details, but they don't show their interest to provide required details and pictures.

Besides, all these challenges, Panchayat are the most important link of our governance. We are completely dependent on Panchayats on 29 development schemes related to education, agriculture and poverty alleviation.

We have to evolve unique ways to implement such schemes deliverable and effective. The Digital Panchayat Programme is moving slowly but steadily. In this programme, nearly 2,000 Panchayat members have been trained. And, more than 500 Panchayat websites have been prepared. For more details visit <http://epanchayat.in>.

Digital Panchayat is a story illustrating how every Panchayat used the believe in a ray of hope. Also, at Digital Empowerment Foundation, we are looking for people in various areas who can help members of Panchayats in order to make them part of Global Digital Revolution.

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