

# **ACCEPTANCE AND PERCEPTION OF E-GOVERNANCE AMONG ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES OF LOCAL BODIES IN KANNUR DISTRICT**

## **Introduction**

The concept of government dates back to the emergence of political society. Earlier it was identified as the machinery through which the will of the state is formulated, expressed and realised. It refers to formal institutions of state and their monopoly of legitimate use of power. However the development of modern technologies along with economic reforms and trans-national transactions transformed the expectations of the citizens. Government was described as a service provider authorised by its customers. Political power was diffused among various groups in society. This led to a shift from government to governance. Governance is concerned with creating conditions for ordered rule and collective action. The growing demand for good governance along with developments in Information and Communication Technologies gave way to E-Governance.

E-Governance means the use of information and communication technologies by governments, civil society and political institutions to engage citizens through dialogue and feedback to promote their greater participation in the process of governance of these institutions. E-governance will involve the application of new technologies to bring about more speed, transparency and responsiveness to the various government activities resulting in increased accountability and consequent empowerment of people.

With the advancement in technology more and more governments and public entities turned to computerisation. Government websites also appeared. By the end of the nineties the use of technology was acknowledged as an inevitable part of good governance. Governments became more citizen oriented and new technologies were used to ensure citizen participation in governance. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are presently offering advanced tools for democratic renewal. With these tools state-citizen interaction is rendered to higher levels of collaboration and co-operation. E-Governance promotes democracy by ensuring transparency and increasing the degree and

quality of public participation in government. With the Internet and intranet citizens will get complete access to governmental information. There will be free consultations among people and groups. Political power will be diffused among citizens enabling them to be better participants of democracy. The fast moving technologies and better informed citizens force all governments to shift into an electronic environment of governance.

## **E-Governance in India**

In tune with the global trends, E-Governance initiatives in India started in the early seventies. In mid 80's the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi initiated the task of computerisation on a large scale. Along with this, infrastructure development in communication also accelerated. Many departments were computerised. The Information Technology Act- 2000 gave legal sanctity to all activities carried out by electronic means.

Even though efforts for E-Governance in India are still in a developing stage, observing other indicators like telephone monthly subscriber growth of 0.85%, teledensity of 76.18%, personal computer growth of 29% and mobile phone sector growth of 90%, it can be predicted that E-Governance will have a determining role in deciding the governance of future India. The Eleventh Five Year Plan provided an assistance of Rs 2900 crore to states under the head National E-Governance Plan. The approach paper on the 12<sup>th</sup> five year plan (2012-17) also identifies E-Governance as an effective tool in attaining inclusive growth and good Governance.

## **The Research Problem**

The deployment of Information and communication Technology in the governance process resulted in far reaching results. In the first place, it provided for a participant and vibrant democracy. The emergence of new social media strengthened the link between government and civil society. Many of the apolitical structures were politicized with the interaction of new technologies and media. The public sphere also gained advantage with the incessant flow of information and communication. Together with this, there is a change in the representative- constituency relation. With their online experience people expect quick decisions and fast answers and no more tolerate poor delivery in public services. This requires a fundamental change in the attitude and structures of service providers. The digital culture automatically retains its foot prints in the governance environment. Thus local governance is facing a necessary digital transformation.

The necessity of digital transformation being accredited, the imminent issue is the implementation and management of these transitions. In a democracy this function is to be performed by the public leaders. They are to motivate and gear-up the public administration innovations. This is possible only if the leaders are well familiarised with the operations and potentials of E-Governance. Their perception and acceptance of E-Governance are the foundations of overall transformation of society. This is particularly relevant to local governance in two aspects. Firstly, the introduction of E-Governance in local governance ensures smooth organizational management. The leaders can effectively monitor the officials and the officials and public can limit political excesses. Secondly, elected officials can become more self sufficient and independent with the digital personal aids and the resultant data sources. Their constituency relations remain vibrant and active as people establish online contacts with the representatives. This facilitates better democratic deliberations. With regards to delivery in policies, ICT can enhance decision making process by providing ample data and better resources. The decision making process is further enabled with better and quick feedback provisions of new technologies. Physical service delivery competencies were also enhanced.

The state of Kerala has always been a role model for all other states in the use of Information and Communication Technologies. With globally acclaimed human development indicators in the field of health and literacy, it is a place where innovations are easy and plenty. In connection with Information and Communication Technologies, Kerala has the advantage of high tele-density and better infrastructure support that extends even to the remotest villages. As on March 31, 2011, Kerala occupies the second position in urban telephone density. In rural telephone density kerala gained third position during the period. In the case of overall teledensity Kerala occupies the fifth position. In the case of mobile penetration Kerala has reached the 100% mark and this provides an ample environment for M-Governance initiatives in the state. Many of the E-Governance initiatives in the state gained global reputation and accreditations. Thus the state of Kerala is fast moving into an era of E-Governance.

The District of Kannur occupies an important position in the political map of Kerala. It was the venue of many agrarian and national movements. Starting from the medieval periods, the land is well known as a hub of famous centres of learning and culture. With respect to Local Self Government it has many successful credentials. The peoples planning programme got highest support from the district. In the case of E-

Governance, Kannur has many achievements. The Akshaya, E-Literacy programme was successfully completed in the district, thus making the district fully e-literate. It is the first district in the state, where Ente Gramam- an e-portal of village community was introduced. In a short span of time Ente Gramam gained national and global attention. In 2010, Kannur was declared as the first e-district in the state. This was supplemented with modernization of many government departments and functions in the district.

In the given context the response to these innovations are critical. In the first instance the grass root level leaders must be equipped to meet the challenges. It is the leaders who convey the message to the public in general. Grounding on the highly politicized nature of the people in the district, success of E-Governance initiatives highly depends on the attitudes and approaches of political leaders. With the growing demand for decentralization, local governance structures are to become the key players in future governance systems. Any governance innovations should address these grass root organizations. But there should be more subsequent physical and mental infrastructures to support the new format of governance. As far as the literature available with the researcher suggests, no study has been conducted in this line. The few available studies are general in nature and majority of the literature deals with e-literacy projects. There were also few attempts to map the IT industry and IT scenario in the state. It is in this context that the present study is undertaken.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

For theoretical support the study relies upon the network society concept of Manuel Castells. To Manuel Castells, there is a shift from a public sphere anchored around the national institutions of territorially bound societies to a public sphere constituted around the media system including the internet. The multi modal functionality of the new medium is expanding the horizons of public sphere. The fragmented hyperpluralism of the new media is encouraging interaction and exchange within social groups sharing similar beliefs and values. The resultant ideological homogeneity strengthens the network bonds and provide further impetus for demand articulation and social solidarity.

Castells argues that network is essentially the foundation of the new social organisation and its process. The network society concept establishes that new technologies contribute to enhance participation in local government. As societies are

becoming highly networked, it is essential to approach the representative- constituency communication through the net work approach. People are becoming more and more expectant of the outcome of policies and are having wider information avenues to monitor and control the policy regime. On the other hand, the emergence of new ICT made positive strides at the representative level. With the networked environment the decision support systems of representatives are considerably enlarged and constituency monitoring is becoming an easy job. The network logic also pressurises the delivery mechanisms to produce efficient and speedy results. Thus the process of local governance and the social settings of any given locality can be studied in the larger framework of network society.

### **Title of the Study**

The title of the study is ACCEPTANCE AND PERCEPTION OF E-GOVERNANCE AMONG ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES OF LOCAL BODIES IN KANNUR DISTRICT.

### **The major objectives of the study**

1. To examine the level of acceptance of E-Governance among the elected representatives of Local Bodies in Kannur District
2. To assess the perception of E-Governance among the elected representatives of Local Bodies in Kannur District.
3. To identify the socio-economic characteristics of respondents and to assess their acceptance and perception of E-Governance with respect to socio-economic factors.
4. To find out the barriers in the acceptance of E-Governance among the elected representatives of Local Bodies in Kannur District and to give suggestions for improvement.

## **Hypothesis**

1. The elected representatives of Local Bodies in Kannur District possess a high perception about the use of E-Governance.
2. The acceptance level of E-Governance among the elected representatives of Local Bodies in Kannur District is low.
3. There is significant change in the acceptance of E-Governance among respondents in relation to selected socio-demographic factors- sex, age, education, political affiliation, domicile status, religion, position held, tenure of office, profession and income.
4. There is significant change in the acceptance of E-Governance among respondents after getting elected.

## **Research Methodology in brief**

The study was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The universe of the study was the representatives of Local Bodies in the district of Kannur district. The study was conducted among the elected members of Municipalities and GramPanchayats in the district. In the case of municipalities samples were taken from all the six municipalities in the district. In the case of Gram Panchayats. They were divided on the basis of geography and samples were taken from all the parts of the district. In this effort 51% of the Panchayats were covered. For sampling purpose, initially, quota was assigned to municipalities and panchayats. From each category, further quota was designed on the basis of gender. This was done in tune with the reservation of seats. Thus the sample contains 159 elected representatives of Local Self Government in the district. The individual samples were drawn based on stratified random sampling procedure.

The study made use of questionnaires, field observation and interviews. The respondents were provided with a detailed questionnaire to gauge their perception and acceptance of E-Governance.

Acceptance of E-Governance is measured in connection with the possession of tools and usage patterns. It indicates the individual usage level in personal and public life. Questions were asked on usage patterns and individual technology skills. Perception is defined in terms of sensitivity and measured with psychological scales. For the present study perception is measured in terms of orientations and attitudes towards ICT and E-Governance.

Government officials and subject experts in the field of Information Technology and local governance were consulted. The workings of certain government initiatives that make use of E-Governance were also examined. The results were subjected to analysis using statistical techniques and tools including averages, dispersion, percentages, independent sample t-test, one way ANOVA and paired sample t-test.

## **Chapterisation**

The study is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the idea of E-Governance. It starts from the impact of technology on government and describes the shift from government to governance. The evolution of information society is also examined. Consequently the network theory of Castells is focused to explain the theoretical foundations of the study. The introduction part also deals with the relevance of the research questions. The methodology of the study is also explained.

The second chapter deals with the review of existing literature on the topic of E-Governance. The third chapter provides an overview of E-Governance. The historical development of ICT propelled governance is traced out. Current global usage pattern of E-Governance is also studied. The fourth chapter is devoted to the Indian scenario. The E-Governance initiatives by the states and other government and public entities are examined.

The Fifth chapter of the study attempts to bring out a sketch of E-Governance initiatives in Kerala. The evolution of E-Governance in Kerala is examined. E-Governance Initiatives by various government departments and other entities are critically evaluated. Special attention is given to the E-Governance initiatives in Local Self Government in the state. E-Governance initiatives in Kannur district is also examined in the chapter. The profile of the district is given together with the profile of Local bodies in the district. Data analysis and interpretation is the focus of the sixth chapter. The data is examined with the help of statistical tools and interpretations are made accordingly. The last chapter summarises the study with the findings. Based upon the findings certain suggestions are made for the improvement of E-Governance initiatives.

## **Major Findings of the study**

- 1, The Elected members of local bodies in kannur district possess high perception (reflected in orientations and attitudes towards ICT and E-Governance) towards E-Governance.
- 2, The Elected members of local bodies in kannur district has low acceptance (reflected in actual usage) of E-Governance.
- 3, There is significant change in acceptance (reflected in actual usage) of E-Governance among the elected members of local bodies in kannur district after being elected.
- 4, The E-readiness level of elected members of local bodies in kannur is very high.
- 5, The internet literacy levels of the respondents are very poor.
- 6, Computer usage among elected representatives of local bodies in kannur district is low.
- 7, The online activity level of elected members of local bodies in kannur is very low.
- 8, The usage of ICT tools by elected representatives for their election campaign is very low.
- 9, Majority of the representatives of local bodies in Kannur are well educated.
- 10, The Panchayats in Kannur district possess good ICT infrastructure.
- 11, Time constraints and training shortage are the major barriers in usage of ICT among the elected members of local bodies in kannur
- 12, Training is identified as the dominant demand for the enhancement of ICT capabilities of respondents.
- 13, The official support for enhancement of ICT capabilities of elected members of local bodies in kannur is very low.
- 14, The websites of Panchayats in Kannur district are poorly updated and the usage of independent web presence options like blogs are not satisfactory.

## **Major Recommendations**

1. It is suggested that ICT specific hands-on training should be introduced by agencies like KILA. With the success of IT@School project most of the schools are now having good ICT infrastructure and connectivity. After the working hours ICT facility of these schools can be also utilized for the training of representatives. Akshaya is another prospective partner in the implementation of specialized training for elected representatives in local government.
2. Government has issued an order to divert Panchayat funds for providing ICT facility in the schools. But the first priority is to be given to the representatives. As a positive step, the government of Kerala issued free mobile connectivity to all Panchayat presidents in Kerala. It is suggested that this move should be followed by free or subsidized laptops and internet connectivity. In this regard rural connectivity provisions in USO (Universal Service Obligation) Fund can be explored for cost effective connectivity.
3. Elected representatives of local bodies in Kannur district are well aware of the role of ICT in governance and express positive inclinations towards online services. However, they are not well familiarized with the potential of ICT tools in representative-constituency relations. In this regard political parties can play a significant role. They can promote the use of ICT tools in election campaigns and in further political activities. For example invitations to Gramasabha can be communicated through simple ICT tools like SMS. This idea was conceived in Sreekandapuram Panchayat of Kannur district. But political changes upset the implementation part of the idea. Such innovations should be helpful for political parties, representatives and citizens.
4. The Information Kerala Mission (IKM) interventions to promote E-Governance in local government need a re-orientation. The IKM approach is highly centralized and does not promote local innovations. In a typical example IKM designed websites for all Panchayats in the state. The site contents are updated by a centralized procedure whereby the concerned panchayats were to request any content change through the IKM channel. Evidently this results in poor web-site management. Further, all the Panchayat websites in the state offer similar contents. IKM developed a number of softwares for supporting service delivery and governance in local government. But

the deployment rate of these softwares is not satisfactory. Some of the softwares are still in the experimentation stage. This is mainly because of the lack of political support from local government representatives and leaders. It is suggested that IKM should shift its role from a centralized service provider to a supporting agency to promote E-Governance. Softwares and solutions should be developed in a participatory and decentralized manner, addressing local concerns and incorporating non-official initiatives. With the huge resources at hand IKM can well perform as a training and consultancy centre for E-Governance in local government.

5. The E-district project implemented in Kannur district provides efficient and economic channels of service delivery for the citizens. Many revenue services were offered through E-district. It is suggested that E-district project should also include local government services. Most of the present local government services and payments can be easily converted to online mode. It is found that the offline application verification and processing is becoming a heavy work for the already busy elected representatives as many applications are channelized through the representatives. Once the data and services are shifted to online mode, representatives can devote much of their time for developmental activities.
6. The study suggests that Akshaya project is having a crucial role to play in the digital transformation of Kerala society, particularly the rural sector. Akshaya is conceived as an e-literacy project to bridge the digital divide. But the target still remains distant. The major issue in this regard is the centralized nature of Akshaya organization. When Akshaya will be fully converted to E-Governance delivery shops the issue may become serious. At this stage it is suggested that Local bodies be invested with the power to control and monitor Akshaya centres. This will bring better involvement of representatives in ICT initiatives and consequently effective service delivery through Akshaya.
7. In connection with the online political participation, it is recommended that the present Panchayat websites should be completely revamped. There should be effective feedback provisions to elicit public response and comments. A link like 'Speak to the president' or 'contact your member/councilor' can ensure better representative-constituency relations. Citizens should be given chances to post their grievances and concerns on issues of local governance. At a later stage this pages

can be linked to the social network pages of representatives. The potentials of blogs and social networking can also be exploited by local bodies and representatives.

8. After the nineties the central government and most of the state governments in India provide special allocations in the budget for E-Governance and IT development. It is suggested that local government should also focus IT development in their budgets and policy documents. For this purpose local government institutions can create advisory bodies with experts in the field and avail their help. Public Private Partnership models can be also opted for establishing public interfaces like touch screens for service delivery in local government. It is also suggested that the ICT infrastructure and human resources in the schools can also be utilized for this purpose.
9. The study found that the usage level of Ente Gramam- village portal is very low. The portal is supposed to be an interactive platform and resource centre for the village. However the local government institutions are having minimum role in the operation of the portal. It is designed and updated at the district level. It is suggested that the portal can be merged to the panchayat portals and the local government institutions should be given freedom to control the content .The present district level organization can act as consultancy and support centre for operating the local government websites.
10. Service delivery in local government institutions is facing many problems. Goods are becoming political freebies and are delivered accordingly. At many places Grama Sabhas were found to be ‘beneficiary hot spots’, rather than policy forums. With lesser transparency and accountability, the issue is becoming a serious concern. Absence of informed planning and strong policies also results in high delivery costs and public sufferings. These issues can be well addressed with effective deployment of ICT in governance. Beneficiary lists can be made available online. Provisions can be made for online application and status verification of applications. Minutes of the committee meetings can be posted in website. With such E-Governance initiatives, transparency and accountability can be ensured and thus corruption possibilities can be minimized.

### **Limitations of the study**

The study is conducted within the framework of scientific norms pertaining to survey-based social science research. Possible cautions are adopted to control observational and interpretational limitations. However, the subjects of the study being human actors, the samples may not represent the complete group as such. Statistical tools have been used to reduce sampling errors. The concept of E-Governance is vibrant and dynamic. The nature and course of technology change at every instant. Every change in technology influences the pattern and methodology of E-Governance. In this case the study has taken possible care to incorporate the latest technologies of the day, available within the time frame.