Decrypting E-Governance: Narratives, Power play and Participation in the Gyandoot Intranet

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I. Introduction

Construction of the notion of 'e-governance' along with such other 'epithetized phenomena' as e-learning, e-banking, e-marketing etc, played a major role in shaping the futuristic e-topias[1] of the global information society discourse. Woolgar (2002: 3) points out that 'epithetizing' various existing activities and social institutions with notions such as 'virtual', 'digital', 'electronic' (or simply 'e'), 'cyber', 'tele' etc "conjure up a future consequent upon the effects of electronic technologies". Given the backdrop of the increased involvement of new media technologies in delivering e-governance, it is important to understand the social and historical specificities of the emerging technological systems that facilitate the construction of the notion. It is also, perhaps, pertinent, to take a closer look at the relativity of technical design and absorption to the culture and strategies of actors (Feenberg, 1999) in order to discuss e-governance from a non-essentialist perspective. Social constructivism provides some provisional but meaningful theoretical foundations to look at e-governance in non-essentialist terms. One of the important conceptual endevour from the constructivist perspective to understand e-governance initiatives would be to disaggregate the question of technology from the differential perspective of the dominant and subordinate subject positions of the actors involved[2]. Arguably, e-governance projects are rationally planned and implemented by technocrats in an effort to exercise a far more effective control over resources and social organization. Nevertheless, common people encounter these technologies of systematization as part of their life world and appropriate, reject or force revisions in the designs as well as systems. As Feenberg (Ibid: xiii) argues:

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"(T)he invariant elements of the constitution of the technical subject and object are modified by socially specific contextualizing variables in the course of the realization of concrete technical actors, devices and systems. Thus technologies are not merely efficient devices or efficiency oriented practices, but include their contexts as these are embodied in design and social insertion".

In the case of ICT based networked governance, the possibility of the formation of a rural network society is imminent and its proto forms with deep crevices and conflicting layers of incorporation of different actors have appeared in the contexts of many e-governance projects where the person to State interface and to a limited extent, person to person relations are reaffirmed by the technology of the Intranet. In this paper an attempt is made to understand the social dynamics that underlie the practices of e-governance in India on the basis of an analysis of the Gyandoot Intranet, a massive e-governance project launched in India in the state of Madhya Pradesh. The relatively weak, but undeniable structuration of the rural network society is manifested in the narratives of networking facilitated by the design of the project with scattered nodes connected to a centralized service monitoring center. Nonetheless, the rural network society is a complex social domain of opposing interest groups and a space where some of the political and ideological conflicts in the larger society manifests in newer forms. The fact that the technology itself gets enmeshed in the relatively autonomous logic of the network society partly explains the inertia that stops the inevitable progress envisaged in the visions moulded by concepts informing paradigms of rapid social change consequent on the implementation of e-governance projects.

The notion of e-governance as it is practiced and promoted in third world contexts has close resemblances with scenarios of neoliberal discourses of new media technologies that Armitage (1999) powerfully criticized as a "pan-capitalist theory and practice of explicitly technologized, or "telematic", societies". He argued that this discourse is primarily "concerned with legitimating the political and cultural control of individuals, groups, and new social movements" through "production, promotion, distribution, and consumption of new media technologies" both at the material and ideological levels. Rhetoric of E-governance in the Indian context is also deeply enmeshed in a larger discourse of cyberlibertarian developmentalism that brings together the idea of economic

development and neoliberal discourse of technology arbitrarily to rationalize ICT based State and civil society interventions for social and economic transformation in the rural setting (Sreekumar, 2003, 2006). Following Armitage (1999) and basing the analysis on the Foucauldian notion of Governmentality, Navarria (2006: 126) argues that "the concept of e-Government does not only signify *efficiency gains* and *economical benefits* – for both the government and its subjects", but, in the long run, "the overall e-government project, broadly understood as a product of the neo-liberal discourse of technology and the contemporary development of pan-capitalism, could represent a greater and long lasting threat for citizens' life and freedom"[3]. The mapping of the social and political constraints that marginalized communities and individuals encounter in their interface with e-governance projects, perhaps, has implications for the optimistic political vision of new media technologies as a decolonizing force facilitating development of "cyborg skills" required for their survival under techno-human conditions theorized in the cyber-feminist approaches to new technologies (Haraway, 1991; Sandoval, 1995)[4]. Identifying the structural factors that envelop human technology interaction in the rural setting in South Asia is thus an inevitable step in understanding social innovations and its impacts either initiated by the State or by civil society or by State-civil society partnerships. This paper, organized as described below, is an attempt in that direction. Section II, following these introductory remarks, would provide an outline of the recent developments that constitutes a default history of e-governance in India. Section III discusses the technological organization of the Gyandoot project and section IV takes up the question of the social dynamics of the Gyandoot cyber kiosks which provides access to the Intranet. Section V would take a closer look at the meanings of the seemingly hyped anecdotes and narratives of success along with the exposition of realistic tale that explains the interplay of technology and power enmeshed in the local dynamics of absorption and appropriation of Gyandoot's Intranet technology. Section VI would outline the contours of the emerging model of e-governance and some concluding observations will be offered in the final section.

II. The advent of e-Governance in India

One of the few early responses to the possibilities of using ICTs in development administration in the developing world has been from the Indian State. It may be noted

that the Indian State began to design and execute rural development programmes with a relatively visible ICT content in the 1970s while international attention on the potential of harnessing ICTs for developmental activities is a relatively later phenomenon. The early experiments are however examples of attempts to use ICTs for improvising development planning, a key area of State action in the pre liberalization era. The Dharampur Sub-District Infrastructure Planning for Development (1977) is one such early example of attempts to use computer applications for cost optimization and decision-making. The Karwar Rural Development Information System (1984) was yet another initiative formulated with a focus on reducing delay and curbing corruption through a monitoring programme based on computer applications. (Kaul, M et al., quoted in Bhatnagar (1990:7).

'Electronic governance' became a key word in the Indian State's efforts to provide a facelift to its administrative machinery in late 1990s now geared for 'good governance' as part of the structural adjustment strategies dictated by the World Bank and other international agencies[5]. As noted by a scholar,

> "In the second phase, the implementation of the national IT Task Force and State Government IT policies symbolized a paradigm shift in e-governance policies towards using IT for a wider range of sectoral applications reaching out to a large number of people in rural as well as urban areas. Moreover, there has been a movement towards a greater input of NGOs and private sector organizations in providing services to the public. These projects have been influenced by the increasing focus of international agencies such as DFID, G-8, the UNDP and the World Bank under the banner of 'E-Governance for Development' (Madon, 2002:2).

The Ministry of Information Technology was constituted and the Central Government initiated some tentative projects aimed at testing the potential of e-governance. Besides the Central Government, many state governments also responded seeking the possibilities of improving administrative functions by introducing e-governance at different levels of the bureaucracy. Specialized agencies have also come up within government to initiate innovative experiments. In 1999, a national conference was organized in Bangalore attended by 75 senior bureaucrats including IT secretaries of 32 States and Union

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territories in India[6]. The conference affirmed a resolve to create "one-stop, non-stop, efficient, effective, responsive, transparent citizen governance through the use of information technology" (Katakam, 1999: 78). The conference came up with a declaration on the intent and content of e-governance programme in India, although it was criticized as bereft of specificity and the plans lacking time frames (Ibid). The declaration emphasized the need for shifting the focus of governance from government centric to citizen centric in the wake of the opportunities opened by information technology for large-scale delivery of quality services. The use of IT was expected to facilitate efficient delivery of government services to citizens and business, "to anyone, anytime, anywhere through a variety of channels at a reasonable cost" (quoted in Ibid: 79). The declaration recognized the need fro re-engineering the process of government to achieve synergy with technology. A critical factor identified was the centrality of upgrading skills of the existing workforce, while also underscoring the necessity of industry-community-State partnerships in e-delivery of services. A sound communication infrastructure for ubiquitous access, a conscious effort to harmonize IT with regional requirements and innovative use of IT to prevent possible social exclusion were considered essential components of the future e-governance strategy. The role of central government in supporting capacity building efforts of state governments was also underlined.

Many projects were announced at the conference although many of them were eventually shelved or totally abandoned due to various reasons[7]. However, since 1999, the proliferation of e-governance projects in India has been phenomenal. Surging numbers of what is identified as e-governance projects indicate that most of the state governments and Union Territories in India claim to have accepted the need for undertaking e-governance initiatives.

Although the initial efforts on the part of the Indian State to link ICTs with development projects have been limited to localized projects and district level planning, we can also observe that it soon advanced to centralized projects for connectivity and regulation. There are clear signs of a realization that the ICTs while providing a potential for

reassuring the State's commitments to the developmental agenda, opens a gateway for strengthening the arms of governance. Nevertheless, most of the E-Governance initiatives have focused on development of infrastructure, capacity building and policy changes as well as participation of the private sector while showing a growing reluctance towards integrating Civil Society into its fold (Sreekumar, 2002a; 2002b).

This is true of relatively successful initiatives such as Gyandoot. The Gyandoot Project has emerged as a benchmark for innovation in the e-governance and in the e-commerce according to commentators (Sood, 2001). The local bodies in collaboration with government officials have started ICT kiosks operated by unemployed youth who were selected and trained by the Gyandoot Samiti to run these kiosks. It aimed to cater to the everyday needs of a wide section of rural consumers. The project, which sets its objective as social engineering and development through ICTs, has marked a paradigm shift in the way Government functionaries relate themselves to the needs of the poor. This major ICT project was first launched in a region that is largely tribal and impoverished. Nevertheless, it remains an administered programme with little relationship with the civil society. No major social organization has been made partners in it implementation[8].

III. Gyandoot: Organization and Technology

Gyandoot, an Intranet based Government to Citizen (G2C) service delivery portal in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh was commissioned in January 2000 with an objective of creating cost-effective, replicable, economically sustainable and financially viable model for e-governance. Rajesh Rajora, one of the main architects of the project and District Collector of Dhar when the project was implemented, has claimed that it was envisaged to enhance participation by citizens/government in community affairs through creative uses of ICT and also ensure equal access to emerging technologies for the oppressed and exploited segments of the society (Rajora 2002:66-67). Gyandoot, managed by a society called 'Gyandoot Samiti' is registered under Madhya Pradesh Societies Registration Act with the District Collector as President. The CEO of District Panchayat function as Secretary and various departmental heads are members of the Samiti. The Gyandoot operates with a team consisting of a Project Manager, an Assistant Project Officer, a

Technical Head and a few computer operators. The promised services offered by Gyandoot encompass a wide range of government departments. These services can be accessed from any Gyandoot Information kiosk called S*oochanalaya*, on payment of a nominal fee. There are about 40 kiosks located in different parts of the district run by local managers called S*oochaks.*

These *Soochanalays* would be equipped with PC, Printer and UPS, with facilities to provide e-governance services, commercial Internet and voice connectivity in rural areas. A host of government information and application forms are loaded on the net, and villagers could access these to submit applications to the government departments on the net. Inter-village communication is possible and relevant software has been developed and ported. The Soochak is in a sense a rural entrepreneur and earn a living primarily from the income that the kiosk can generate. They are trained to run the kiosk by the Gyandoot Samiti. The Dhar Internet project is one of the largest rural Internet/Intranet projects in India. It was chosen for the Stockholm Challenge Award 2000[9].

Initially, the kiosks were provided intranet communication using the telephone lines provided by government owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL). At that point, communication on telephone lines being poor and unreliable and the dial-up connection charges relatively expensive, the project faced serious limitations of coverage. Later, corDECT WLL (Wireless in Local Loop) developed by IIT Chennai and Midas Communications which provides a wireless access solution for expanding telecommunication networks integrating of both voice and Internet services was adopted with a reasonable success. n-Logue Communications also offered a business model to enable rural connectivity using corDECT Wireless terminal, telephone instrument, 100 MHz Pentium PC (with color monitor, local language word processor, browsing and e-mail software) with a 16 hour power back-up for telephone and 4 hour back-up for PC[10]. Backbone Internet connectivity is supplied by Satyam Infoway. In the first phase, villages within 25 kilometers around Dhar town, the district head quarters are were covered. An Access Center is set up in the District Panchayat Computer Room in the Civil Station office premises.

The kiosks are offering a wide set of facilities and services such as gathering and disseminating agricultural prices, online registration of applications, online public grievance redressal, rural email, village auction sites, online matrimonial site, information regarding governmental programmes, career counseling for students and facility to ask inquisitive questions to experts, technical advice channel between experts and villagers, online application formats, village newspaper etc. It can be seen that if functioning properly, the centers can be of very high utility to the villagers[11].

Nevertheless, setting up a kiosk in a village does not necessarily mean that these services are provided or they are availed by people. More importantly, the question of who avails them and who are excluded either intentionally or voluntarily remains a significant poser in the social context within which the project is implemented. In order to understand this we may need to go deeper into the actual practices of these kiosks in the rural setting.

IV. Gyandoot Kiosks: The Social dynamics

In this sub section an attempt would be made to identify some of the key features of the Soochanalys and take a closer look at their everyday practices. The analysis is based on the information collected from the five Gyandoot centers that were visited during fieldwork as well as our visit to the Gyandoot Samiti headquarters housed in the Dhar Civil Station, Dhar.. The clumping of e-governance initiatives as inherently good from a macro perspective is a major assumption in the literature on e-governance. The basic problem with this rationale is not only the hype or even the "sweeping grandiloquence" of its rhetoric, as some writers would call it (Woolgar, 2001:5). But more importantly, our attention to macro level impacts often ignores what really happens on the ground. These technologies are actually used and experienced in everyday practice quite differently from the way their potential uses and benefits are configured for public consumption by their progenitors as well as commentators.

The locale specific dynamics of the operation of Gyandoot kiosks provide a key to the understanding of e-governance initiatives with a social content and significantly based on a G2C interface. In this section, we would attempt to discuss four major issues that

provide a reasonable assessment of the actual and potential abilities of the kiosks and the model of ICT diffusion it stands for. The issues we map out below are 1) Entrepreneurship and Employment 2) Locale infrastructure 3) User perceptions and 4) Sustainability. We would also look into the major tensions and contradictions that envelop the project from a micro-level perspective.

Entrepreneurship and Employment: The entrepreneurship model of launching Soochanalays is at the center of the strategy of Gyandoot Samiti, the QUANGO (Quasi Autonomous Non GovernmentalOrganizations) sponsored by the District administration of Dhar[12]. The Soochaks who run the kiosks are chosen from the educated youth of the village who are willing to explore the potential of self-employment by launching a Soochanalay in their own village. The minimum qualification requirement of Soochak suggested by Gyandoot Samiti is education up to the 12th standard. They should also be capable of self-financing the basic infrastructure for running the kiosk either through a Bank loan or using own resources.

The user fees from the G2C services offered by Gyandoot and additional services using the same infrastructure that the Soochak can provide will form the basis of the earning portfolios of the entrepreneurs. The actual earnings however depend on a variety of factors. This include the relative prosperity of the village which will determine the demand for both the Gyandoot and non-Gyandoot services that the Kiosk can offer, the demand for computer training from students and the number of such students willing to undertake the training for a payment of monthly fee.

The employment potential of the Kiosks is in fact very limited. The income from the Kiosk cannot in most cases provide for the subsistence wages of more than one manager. The services either belonging to the g2c categories or G2B categories cannot be identified as providing employment opportunities in the villages. The Soochaks supplement the services from Gyandoot Samiti with other activities an effort also encouraged by the Samiti. Various other activities such as data entry operations, small DTP jobs, Screen Printing, photocopying, computer training and horoscopes and match

making etc. are some of the most prominent supplementary activities that the Soochaks undertake using the facilities available in the Kiosk.[13]

One interesting aspect that deserves mention is the social meaning of being a Soochak. The advantages of a being a Soochak are obviously much more than being a small entrepreneur in a village. This stems from the nature of the services offered by the kiosks, which requires the Soochaks to be constantly in touch with the government officials. Many Soochaks understand that this has an empowering element ingrained in it. As one Soochak would put it:

> "I am happy that I can mediate between people and government officers. The close contact that I can enjoy with senior officers is really very important. Similarly, fellow villagers also understand the fact that I have contacts with officers. This is definitely some kind of recognition."[14]

However, the complex layers of social power that characterize the village society limit the empowerment of the Soochaks. Political parties and caste elites have a major role to play in the everyday life of the communities. The caste and social status of the Soochaks become enormously important in defining their domain of influence. The untold story of the three Gyandoot centers of Badnaver is an illustration of this important aspect of village life in rural India[15].

Majority of the Soochaks belong to the educated unemployment category of the village population. Although they have been given reasonably advanced technical training in running the kiosks, they have never been exposed to any useful training on entrepreneurship or management of small enterprises. It is surprising that this aspect has been largely ignored when the model was conceived and eventually implemented. It is certainly the fact that some of the Soochaks do show innate talents as successful entrepreneurs by trying to supplement the earnings from Gyandoot services with numerous other small-scale activities that earn them a moderate additional income, although the market for such services in the vicinity of the center determines the potential of such efforts. But in many cases a shrinking stream of earnings from the Gyandoot services remains the major component of the gross earnings of the Soochaks.

Moreover, the possibility for increasing the number of kiosks and there by enhancing the chances of educated youth becoming small entrepreneurs in places where Gyandoot kiosks do not exist is limited by both social as well as technical and infrastructure related problems. Apart from the uncertainties of adequate demand for these services, unstable supply of electricity in rural India poses a major challenge for the operation of the Kiosks. The Soochaks invariably reported that the availability of electricity to the Kiosks averages only to 4 to 5 hours in a day that strictly curtails the running time. As one Soochak puts it:

> "How can I run the Kiosk with power supply limited to 4 to 5 hours only in a day? Even this is not steady. I don't think the problem will be solved soon. We have to live with this. Working with low voltage is also a serious problem. The villagers understand these problems but when I can't deliver, the credibility is affected[16]."

Tapping non-conventional sources of energy appears to be a remote alternative to the power supply problem encountered by the entrepreneurs. There has been an attempt to deploy solar panels harnessing solar energy for running the kiosks. It has been set up on an experimental basis in one of the three Gyandoot kiosks in Badnaver. The Soochak of the kiosk was not able to comment on its utility, as it was yet to become operational[17].

Local infrastructure: We do not find a huge disparity in terms of the kiosk wise infrastructure facilities. Most kiosks have a minimum set of facilities that help them to connect with the intranet services that Gyandoot offers and also supplementary equipments such as photocopier printer and UPS. While some kiosks have procured scanners with own resources, it is unaffordable for many smaller operators unless they take loans form the bank. This is not considered as a viable option by entrepreneurs in the rural kiosks who are doubtful whether the demand for the scanner services would be sufficient to cover the repayment costs. Solar panel is set up in one of the kiosks in Badnaver as we noted in the previous section after paying a safety deposit of INR 9000. It is surprising that the pool of equipments in some of the kiosks does not include a printer as is seen in the case of the Amjera Kiosk. Of the five centers we visited, only one

(Nagda) did not have a phone connection and Internet facility. Nonetheless, the intranet of Gyandoot is operational at the Nagda kiosk through WLL.

User Perceptions: Each Soochanalaya is presumably catering to 20-30 villages once it is set up, although in practice the visits from people beyond a five-kilometer radius to the kiosk is rather rare according to some soochaks and local informants[18]. These villages vary drastically in terms of population ranging from tiny hamlets with less than 500 inhabitants to large villages with nearly 8000 inhabitants. The actual coverage of each center is very limited. The experience of many kiosk managers is that the services of the Kiosk are mainly availed by a small group of people residing in the villages surrounding the kiosk[19].

Not surprisingly people belonging to different social groups have different perceptions about Gyandoot although the villagers as a rule try to see positive elements of the project as outweighing the failures. However, many of the regular customers are dissatisfied with the range of services offered by Gyandoot and believe that it can do much better even though many of them would attempt to articulate in clear terms how it could be improved.

The common complaints about the operation of kiosks can be classified into five groups: 1) Connectivity related problems 2) Failure to adhere to the stipulated timeframes for redress of grievances as well delivery of routine services 3) the huge disparity between the range of promised and actual services available with the Kiosks 4) Failures in delivering G2B services and 5) attitudinal factors as well as poor performance of the Soochaks. The connectivity problem, as we pointed out in the previous section has been crucial in creating an environment of apathy among villagers to the project.

Although many centers have been connected with optical fiber cables in order to overcome this problem, the instability in connectivity remains a major cause of user dissatisfaction with the kiosks. It is also widely felt that the Departments responsible for delivering the services do not adhere to timeframes set by Gyandoot Samiti although the

officials at the Gyandoot headquarters informs that these timelines have been fixed after discussions with the concerned Departments[20].

Table 1: Infrastructure, ownership, earnings and expenses: A Comparative picture of selected Gyandoot Centers

Center/ Facilities	Tirla	Amjera	Nagda	Badnaver1	Badnaver2
Number of PCs	2	1	2	2	1
PC purchase	Own resources	Own resources (Loan from Bank of India)	Own resources + Panchayat	Own resources (PMRY)	Own Resources
Phone	Yes	Yes	WLL	Yes	Yes
Internet	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Printer	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ownership of the center	Community	Self	Panchayat	Self	Self
Photocopier	1 (Through PMRY)	No	No	No	No
Education of Soochak UPS	BA (Political Sciences) & DTP	12th	12th, DCOA, DTP	12th, DTP, MS Office & AutoCAD	BE (Electronics)
Solar Panel	No	No	No	Yes	No
UPS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (Nos.2)	Yes
Scanner	No	No	No	Yes	
Generator				Yes (Hire)	Yes
Average No. of visitors/day	10-15	5-10	5- 10	2-5	2-5
Computer Training for students	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Gross earnings (INR)	6500-7000[1]	2800-3200	3000-3500	2500-3000[2]	8000-10000[3]
Earnings from Gyandoot services (INR)	1200- 1500	1500-2000	1500-2000	500-700	1500-2000
Center wise Expenses (INR.)					
Rent	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Phone	300	300	Nil	300	400
Electricity	300	400	300	300	500
Loan Repayment	2500	1400	Nil	1550	Nil
Stationary & Other expenses	200	200	300	300	400
Total	3300	2300	600	2750	1300
Net Earnings (INR, App.)	3200-3700	500-900	2400-2900	≥300	6700-8700

Notes:

1 The Soochak reports that he could earn INR 3000 or more every month from photocopying. He explains that since it is a Block headquarters there is high demand for copying[21].
2 Hs income from screen-printing an activity predates his Gyandoot Franchise is not included. He maintained that he would not probably renew his Gyandoot Franchise.
3 The high income is from the education programmes conducted in the center. The soochak in this center is an engineering graduate and his brother is a franchisee of AISECE with 25-30 students enrolled[22].

Source: Based on fieldwork

The media reports on the delays in delivering services have also pointed to the lethargy and unresponsiveness of government employees as a major reason for declining credibility of the Gyandoot project[23]. While some farmers complain that timely updating of market rates are exceptions rather than the rule, concerned officials point out the slow process of computerization of government departments as a possible reason for the delays[24]. Several case studies have pointed to the complaints from users that the kiosks remain closed during office hours. Soochaks invariably tried to deny this and said that such occasions are rare and probably during times of prolonged failures in power supply[25].

An exploratory study conducted by Center for Electronic Governance (CEG), Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India (IIMA) came to the conclusion that centers closer to the district headquarters attract more visitors but the visitors are generally the elite of middle level farmers:

> "Generally, awareness of Gyandoot exists among the literate and middle-income group families. The poor laborer or landless farmer is not aware or even interested, as he sees no value addition, in it, for him. All the 16 daily wage laborers interviewed felt this way about G2C services" (CEG-IIMA, 2002: 10)

The report further notes that:

> "There seems to be varied understanding, among the people, of what services is available through Gyandoot. At the remote soochanalays (and away from the central hub of Dhar), confusion is more widespread and awareness levels are very low or nil. Even where a board enumerating the services exists, people are unsure of the nature of services and how to avail of them from the soochanalay" (ibid).

It is also widely felt that the big farms and merchants mostly use the services. Poorer farmers and landless agricultural labourers fail to see any benefit for them through the Kiosks. Children from richer families are also able to avail the facilities in the kiosks at a subsidized rate compared to market rates for similar services. There has not been antipathy to the new technology from the rural elites. On the other hand they have welcomed it in a certain sense exercise control over its diffusion.

Sustainability: The question of sustainability has to be addressed on two counts: at the macro as well as micro levels. The macro question is related to the issue of sustaining the Gyandoot Samiti as a QUANGO with the revenue from the kiosks. The entrepreneurs have to pay a lump sum of INR 5000 every year as license fee to the Gyandoot Samiti to renew their franchise. However, this is a paltry amount given the fact there are only 30-35 kiosks operational at a time and that the proliferation of new kiosks in Dhar appears to have halted. The District Council, an elected local body at the district level, which funded the initial investments for launching Gyandoot Samiti, would have to continue channeling resources for the everyday operation of the Gyandoot infrastructure[26].

The sustainability of the Soochanalays depends on the net earnings. We can see from table 1 that of the five cases we have examined, three are break even where as the other two seem to be earning much less than a respectable monthly income for an initial investment of about INR 75000[27]. The Gyandoot Samiti had a modest expectation of a net income of INR 36000 per annum for each kiosk manager[28]. It can be seen from Table 1 that three out of the five centers do not fulfill this expectation. In the case of the Nagda center, the kiosk is owned by the panchayat and it pays the electricity bill.

In the case of those kiosks which appear to be financially viable, the major source of income is from non-Gyandoot services. Many of the Soochaks believe that the income from Gyandoot services is shrinking and in order to survive they need to expand their operations. The prospects of introducing additional services depend on the local demand for such services. In Dhar District which has 60 per cent of its population below poverty line, the chances of an immediate surge in demand for information related services to the scale of bridging the income gap for the kiosks seems to be doubtful.

One of the most important questions regarding the operational dynamics of the kiosks is about the linkages it has with the local economy. In many cases the Panchayat is financing the infrastructure of the kiosks and this involves channeling local resources towards the establishment costs on a monthly basis. Since the resources of the Panchayat is drawn from the tax pool as well as fund allotted to them by state government, the

opportunity costs of financing the everyday working of the Kiosks without palpable and effective benefits for the community could be very high.

V. E-governance and the network society: Deciphering the Narratives of success

The most interesting aspect of the ICT based development initiatives is the accent on stories from the field that finds their way into the media and public at large to highlight the achievements of the projects in a way which differs drastically from the narratives of successes of other developmental programmes which depend primarily on statistical data (whether engineered or real) the on their performance and achievements. These stories about the multitude of ways in which absorption and use of ICT by the rural people are facilitated by the initiatives are instructive in constructing the idea of a rural network society as it is emerging in developing regions. But in this section, based on stories told and untold, we argue that the contested nature of the emerging network society and its limitations can be fully understood only when these success stories are deconstructed in their own locale contexts and further, by telling the suppressed stories of conflicts and tension that mar the implementation and evolution of these initiatives. This, in effect, would also open a new pathway to understand the social and political structure of the nascent rural network society. In this section we make a provisional attempt to demystify the discourse on individual achievements that seek to glorify the relevance and role of the initiative. Further, we also examine the entrenched social factors that over-determine the delivery mechanisms institutionalized by Gyandoot. The stories that are already showcased and a story we gathered during our own fieldwork narrated by a local political activist of Shivasena, (the Hindu fundamentalist outfit) are exemplary examples of the way in which technology society interaction could be interpreted in a deterministic paradigm while the social shaping aspect is relegated to the background or completely ignored. The case summaries reported in Table 2 invariably point to the emergence of a rural network society. Nevertheless, the problematic nature of the network society is also brought to light with the aid of hindsight and locale specific information on social factors that should underlie any interpretation of these narratives generally considered as examples of the project's success and good performance. The anecdotes analyzed in Table 2 have some common threads. They invariably point to layers of hyped narratives

that envelope the descriptions of the achievements of the project. As the first five cases in Table 2 indicate, the strategy in discourses on projects benefits have been to identify isolated cases of successful use of the project instead of using standard indices of success and achievements in terms of the overall changes it had brought to area covered under the project. But a close look at the anecdotes would reveal that these narratives fail to account for any meaningful qualitative change in the life of the people concerned attempt a superficial glorification of the project's benefits in particular and of ICTs in general. These hyped narratives fail to impress when they are juxtaposed against the hidden social and economic backdrop of rural realities in India. In Table 2 we have made an attempt to show that most of the inferences drawn from the anecdotes with regard to the benefits of the projects are either misplaced or over hyped.

In case 1 for example, an email is presented as a superior medium of communication than direct or voice contact. It glorifies the fact that a bureaucrat responded to an email complaint the expense of other channels of communication which are in fact more effective such as explaining over a phone which even cheaper than sending the email spending INR 10. The anecdote, the way it is narrated amounts to admitting that technology involved in communication is more important than the content of the communication for eliciting responses. In the second anecdote, the whole set of issues relating to the economic realities and market inter-linkages that characterize rural transactions are squarely ignored in order to glorify an isolated incidents of a profitable transaction facilitated by the technology with out explaining if the same "knowledge" could have come only through the internet. In the case of anecdotes 3 and 4 also we could see callous assumptions such as internet has emerged the only medium of information for facilitating rural transactions. The narratives lack credibility if the points that they try to drive home are placed in the contexts of the socio-economic realities of the rural areas in India. The case of the email-led vaccination of the milch animals that the anecdote described in Bhatnagar and Vyas (2001) is also not dissimilar. We have ourselves asked people for such stories during field work and rarely did people have any important incidents relating to their use of the Internet to narrate. One of such cases of using the Intranet for a social purpose is given as case 6 in the table. Here the anonymity of the

sender played a crucial role. The cases point to the social embedment of technology which is neglected while glorifying them as "success" stories. The value of information that the new technology could generate depend heavily on contexts and it does not flow from any inherent virtues of the technology itself. A detailed case study which helps examine these issues is provided in the following subsection highlighting the entrenched social factors that determine trajectories of technological innovations in Indian rural setting challenging the futuristic e-topia of the narratives of success.

A tale of three kiosks:

A visitor to Badnaver will be surprised to see three Gyandoot kiosks functioning just within 3-kilometer radius of the bock headquarters if s/he knows that the stated position of Gyandoot Samiti is to encourage not more than one kiosk in one locality since the number of villages not covered by Gyandoot is very high in the District[29]. Nevertheless, it could be too early to conclude that Gyandoot's popularity and utilization could be high enough in Badnaver to warrant the operation of three kiosks.

Table 2: Narratives in contexts: Understanding tales from Gyandoot villages

The story	Source	Thrust	Remarks/Questions
1. An email complaint for INR 10 brought drinking water to a tribal hamlet of 39 households. The villagers' previous complaint to local authorities had not yielded results for six months. The complaint filed through the kiosk brought a hand pump mechanic to the hamlet within two days, and he repaired the hand pump within three hours.	Bhatnagar and Vyas (2001); Jafri et. al (2002)	Efficiency and reliability	Is technology capable of changing mindsets of government employees? Why did the mechanic fail to respond when the complaint was registered through conventional channels? Is there a production of a fear or reverence for technology in the use of ICTs as a medium of communication that prompts people to act differently?
2. Farmers in Bagadi village were quoted a rate of INR 300 per quintal from local traders for their potato crop. The kiosk was used to get the prevailing market rate in a town 100 miles away, which paid INR 100 more. Consequently, their potato produce was sold in the distant town. The prices paid to farmers have increased approximately 3-5%, keeping about INR 200 million from the pockets of middlemen and traders*	Ibid	E-business, Liberation from middlemen	Why do middlemen get an upper hand in their dealings with farmers? In most cases it is not because of the lack of awareness of the farmer regarding the market price. On the other hand, there exist deep inter-linkages between the credit and product market in rural India that forces the farmer to sell his produce to the middlemen and traders from whom they have taken credit for cultivation. Moreover, the perishable nature of some of the agricultural products and lack of warehousing facilities compel framers to sell at a price lower than the market rates. Only the big farmers actually benefit from the information in this particular case.

3. "I asked for the price of apples at the Dhar wholesale market. The coordinator pressed some buttons, and there it was on the screen. I cannot read, but he told me it was 50 rupees cheaper per crate than the rate in the village market. Next morning, I traveled to Dhar to buy fruits."	Chatterjee (2000)	Consumer freedom	It would be a surprise if a locale retailer or consumer does not know that the wholesale prices are lower in urban areas than in rural areas where incremental transportation costs might lead to a certain percentage of mark up. If everyone travels to Dhar from this village to buy apples, or any other commodity they require since the price would be invariably lower there, the retail business in the village would come to a standstill!
4. Kalsingh, a milk farmer wanted to sell his cow. He registered with the auction facility of Gyandoot (which enables trading of commodities like milch animals, cultivable land, tractors, agricultural tools etc.). He received four trade enquiries and finally sold his cow to the highest bidder for INR 3000	Bhatnagar and Vyas (2001); Jaffri et. al (2002)	Rural e-business	Farmers will not hesitate to use Intranet services of Gyandoot for selling agricultural implements and livestock if the coverage and usage of kiosks for this purpose is high. But the limitations far more outweigh the potential in this respect.
5. 256 milch animals vaccinated in one day: Upon receiving an e-mail from a kiosk that an epidemic had broken out amongst the milch cattle of the village Kot Bhidota, a veterinary rescue team was dispatched the same day. The disease *hemorrhage septicemia* was detected; the team promptly started curative treatment and vaccinated the rest of the animals against the disease. They also conducted a search in neighboring villages for signs of the disease and carried out preventive vaccinations. No deaths were reported.	Bhatnagar and Vyas (2001)	Efficiency and reliability	The superiority of emailing technology in speeding up the government machinery is not clear in this example also. The alternative of dialing the office would also have worked more perfectly than the e-mail.
6. Closing illicit liquor shop: In Nagda, some miscreants ran an illicit liquor shop near the Panchayat office. The devotees of a temple and children attending the Girls School in its vicinity faced bullying by visitors to the liquor shop. Since everyone feared a nexus between the police and the mafia running the shop no one dared to complain. An activist of the local unit of Sivsena, a Hindu fundamentalist outfit used the email facility of the Gyandoot center to send an anonymous petition to the District Collector. 3 days later the shop was raided and the perpetrators arrested.	Interview with Mohan Jat, Nagda on 14 August 2002	Anonymity, efficiency	Anonymity was important in reporting the matter and a self-styled local custodian of value (Shivsena is an organization that protests celebration of Valentines day and similar icons "western culture" in India) could make use of the facility and avoid direct confrontation with the mafia. Shivsena, incidentally, had 186 volunteers in the village and they mainly work to stop selling of cows and oxen for slaughtering. Mohan Jat is the manger of a Goshaala (place to keep cows rescued from being slaughtered). The person who sent the anonymous mail keeps the Soochak in good humor because if he fiddles it out to the mafia, his life will be in danger.

Source: Various sources including fieldwork

* There are different versions of this story, see for example
http://www.sustainableicts.org/Gyandoot%20F.pdf

The first kiosk is operating within the premises of the Block office. It was not open when our visit was made. A villager volunteered to find the Soochak but after nearly one hour he returned to announce that the Soochak was unfortunately not traceable. Some villagers complained that it is not unusual that the Kiosk remaining closed during office hours. When asked if they had any business with the kiosks, they said they had none. They have just come to see staff of the Block Development Office. Randomly quizzing a few villagers around, it was found that none of them had used the Soochanalay for any of their requirements. An employee of one of the government offices housed in that campus tipped that the other two Soochanalys are quite nearby. We could perhaps walk down.

He was right and it was only five minutes walk from the first Soochanalaya to the next (Badnaver1 [B1] in Table 1). The Soochak of B1 which started at a relatively recent period sounded extremely resentful about Gyandoot Samiti. He said that the income from Gyandoot services was practically inconsequential and that he was running the kiosk on loss.

> "I cannot even recover my license fee of INR 5000 that I have already deposited with the Gyandoot Samiti. I survive because I earn moderately from this computer center which I started before Gyandoot franchise was taken and from a parallel screen printing service[30]".

One of the major complaints he had was regarding the unstable connectivity of the Gyandoot Intranet that he experiences. However, his problem was different from the usual troubled connectivity that Soochaks in other Kiosks were also pointing out. He said that he fails to connect when once the results of the 8th, 10th, and 12th, standard public examination results and Mark lists are made available through the Gyandoot Intranet for INR 10 per copy. This is regarded as the most lucrative of the services demanded by the public. When the Board publishes the results, Gyandoot would immediately access it and send it to kiosks. Students visit the center with their respective roll numbers and get the result.

> "I don't even have a problem during load shedding. I hire a generator. But I can't connect when the results are published. I complained to the Collector. He said 'I

will take care'. But nothing happened. I still cannot access the results. On the other hand, another Soochanalaya here has no problem with the connectivity. I have a problem and the one housed in the Panchayat office campus also has problems. I suspect corruption. The project Manager is a very honest man. But I can't say the same about operators at the Gyandoot office".

He said that people in fact demand no other Gyandoot service. "The Mandi is in Badnaver itself. So why should they visit the kiosk for price list? All offices are housed here. What service can we offer?[31]" This was getting nowhere. So I asked him a pertinent question: When there were two Soochanalys in Badnaver why did he apply for a third one?

> "The Blockwala never opens. The other one is little interior (sic-just two furlongs from his kiosk). When I first approached Collector he refused. He wanted me open the Kiosk in another village where no Soochanalaya has been opened. But I was not interested. I wanted to take the franchise since I had already had the computer center here. In another village I would have had to rent in a new room. But when the CEO of the District Council visited the block I met him and later he recommended that as youngster I deserve encouragement and the kiosk was allotted to me[32]".

We could see the familiar stories of corruption, favoritism and arbitrariness in decision-making emerging as the rural network society was taking shape. Is the technology that promised transparency and responsiveness itself getting entangled in the labyrinths of corruption and nepotism? The narratives and counter narratives pointed to the social tensions created by the high profile technology driven project in rural Dhar. It was with these allegations of manipulation at the back of my mind that I visited the third Soochanalaya in Badnaver (Badnaver2) in Table 1 [B2].

B2 was run by an upper caste, engineering graduate from a relatively wealthy family. Before taking the Gyandoot franchise the family had already launched an Internet center under the Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL-the government owned telecommunication company) scheme of 1 Internet dabha (shop) per Block along with an e-education programme under the AISEC license. The BSNL scheme envisages giving 25 percent commission to the licensee with a free telephone in which only Internet could be

accessed. Further, he had also acquired contracts for computerizing land records in the in a few village Patwaris, the lowest level offices of the Revenue Administration. His response was cautious when asked about his motivation to take the Gyandoot franchise when there was another Soochanalys operating within waking distance from his center:

> "Gyandoot Soochanalaya was opened in 2000 in the block office premises. But the Soochak was not a trained computer operator. He got the franchise due to political connections. I met the collector and the CEO of the District council when they visited the Block during the inauguration of the Soochanalaya. I personally felicitated the Collector presented him a memento and invited him for dinner. During dinner, he asked me to oversee the working of the kiosks since the operator was not properly trained. Removing him was not possible due to his political connection. Further it could have led to some bad publicity. We were advised to send in a proposal to the Janpath Panchayat requesting them to remove him. But I thought it was unfair. I said: 'I get my Dhal Roti (Food). Why should I prevent him from getting his'. The Collector was impressed by my answer. So he himself took the initiative to give me Gyandoot franchise. Thus this is the first private Gyandoot center in Dhar".

He was soon nominated to the Gyandoot Samiti as one of the two representatives of the Soochaks in the QUANGO. He said computers are being installed everywhere-in schools, offices and the hospital in Badnaver and he has played a major role in the installation of the machines in all these places. I asked him if he experienced any problems in connectivity. I told him that in B1 the Soochak had complained about connectivity problems when public examination results are published. His response was quite characteristic:

> "I have no connectivity problem. Others have problems because they don't know how to operate. They are not skilled enough. They have no proper training. When private people are given Gyandoot franchise it should be ensured that they have adequate experience in handling the machine. [B1] was started after I took Gyandoot franchise. It came up because the CEO of the Janpath Panchayat who was the tenant of the Soochak recommended. In fact I was consulted before it was given. I tried to stop it. But the project manager told me that whoever gives INR 5000 can start a Gyandoot kiosks and anybody who is efficient can make money for it".

The narratives differ. But the story is a familiar one of bureaucratic muddle, political interference and mutual distrust. The local elite have been effectively controlling the new technology facilitated by the interplay of cross linked forces such as political power, influence in bureaucratic circles and caste structure. The narratives of poor farmers and agricultural labourers benefiting form the technology are often exaggerated from the contexts in which such exceptions are made possible.

VI. QUANGOs, Civil society and Private Sector

This leads us to the larger question of Civil Society participation in e-governance projects initiated by the state governments. As indicated in the beginning, civil society organizations appear to be kept out of the institutional structures of e-governance. Even in cases where such participation is sought, the linkages are either week or notional. While the State-led projects in E-Governance show a relative reluctance to work with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), it has attempted to follow the QUANGO Model wherever relevant and possible. QUANGOs like Gyandoot Samiti form the backbone of the projects launched by several state governments. QUANGOs are defined as organizations, which, essentially undertake the responsibility of implementing State sponsored programmes or public policies, funded by the State but operating at arms length of the executive without an immediate hierarchical relation with it (Van Thiel, 2001:5). The formation of QUANGOs is part of the general strategy adopted by the States, informed by the logic of Civil Society mediation. As pointed out in the Pliatzky Report (quoted in Flinders, 1999: 29) QUANGOs are created since

> "the work is more effectively carried out by a single purpose organization rather than by a government department with a wide range of functions; in order to involve people from outside of government in the direction of the organization; in order to place the performance of a function outside the party political arena".

Nevertheless, QUANGOs are not real substitutes for CSOs and most often degenerate into behemoth bureaucratic entities. Further, this leads to the incorporation of individuals and organizations, not accountable to any constituency even notionally, into the governing structures of developmental and e-governance programmes. Figure 1 tries to

provide a conceptual model of the emerging e-Governance programmes being carried out in India. This is a complex institutional model[33] where sustainability issues are embedded in the policy prerogatives that mould the State's interest in the programme.

Figure- 1: Emerging model of E-Governance Projects
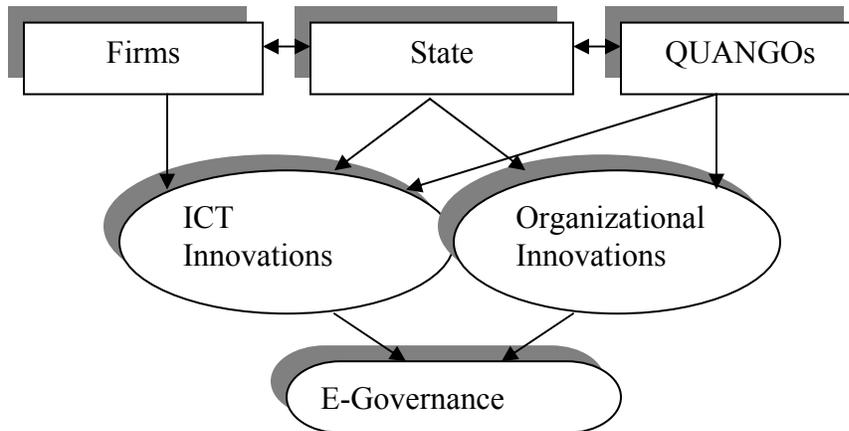
While the civil society involvement in e-governance projects is either notional or limited private sector participation is seen as essential to the successful implementation as well as sustainability of the project. Our visit to Gyandoot kiosks also led to a chance meeting with a representative of Hindustan Lever Limited (HLL), the Indian subsidiary of Unilever who was interested in learning more about Gyandoot kiosks[34]. A presentation by Naveen Prakash, Project Manager was aimed at exploring possibilities of future partnership with HLL. The District Collector was hoping that the private sector involvement would help overcome financial crunch and make the project viable in the long run[35]. Gyandoot's offers to HLL can be listed as follows[36]:

1. HLL can test the success of its new products in rural areas through Gyandoot
2. Gyandoot kiosks can be used for collecting feedback from HLL customers.
3. HLL can profile rural consumers using information available at the kiosks. Moreover, the Soochaks could be used as surveyors for HLL for a fixed remuneration.

4. HLL could also use the Gyandoot portal for marketing and advertising its products.

5. Soochaks could display HLL posters, banners etc in the Soochanalayas.

6. Since many of the Soochanalyas are located at bus stands, haat bazaars and Block headquarters etc, HLL can use the kiosks for selling its products. The brand identity of Gyandoot as a provider of quality services would be useful for HLL in selling their products. The kiosks managers need to be paid the normal commission HLL pays to its retailers.

Although private sector participation in paid technical services is visible in the case of most projects, strategic partnerships as envisaged by Gyandoot are not forthcoming due to a variety of reasons. Private companies are more interested in exploring the possibility of setting up their own kiosks instead of using the Gyandoot Soochanalays. HLL, for example was looking for avenues to establish information kiosks of their own with the involvement of Women Self Help Groups (SHGs- like *Kudumbasree* in Kerala) to "sell the products at the consumer's door steps"[37]. The e-Choupals set up by the ITC has been considered a massive success in kiosk centered rural marketing and business initiatives[38].

VII. Conclusions and Discussion

The central themes addressed in this paper relate to the critique of the notion of e-governance as an essentially administrative innovation facilitated by ICTs and recognition of e-governance as social process which involves not only attitudinal change and transformation of traditional forms of governmentality but also as a contested arena of social forces shaping the trajectory of the evolution of this technocratic innovation. E-governance delivered simply as an improvement in the pragmatics of governance exemplified in the efforts to make service delivery quicker or more accessible, it would probably end up in reproducing technological practices which hinges for its existence on the crucial technology component rather its social dimensions and would help the consolidation of and centralization of power in the hands of those who directly or by proxy own, control or manipulate the technology. We find that the relationship between

technology and governance is an area that needs closer scrutiny that is often made possible by perspectives of governmentality and developmentalism. One of the central issues that emerge in the context of exploring the interrelationship between technology and governance is the questioning of the assumption of the neutrality of technological processes enmeshed in the notion of e-governance. Technical processes defining the contours of e-governance are embedded in the structures of power that reinforces the power relations that e-governance, according to the developmental perspective is expected to eliminate. This is particularly obvious when we closely scrutinize the consequences of the introduction of ICT based administrative projects in villages where the local magnets play key role in its implementation and admittedly benefit from this public good. We have seen that the projects are often implemented with the active support and participation of the village elites and their collaboration is major aspect of the survival of the project.

We have seen that automation on the one hand and projects with a social content on the other form the key strategy of defining the pace of development of e-governance as identified by the State. The Indian state had shown an early inters in automation during 1970s and 1980s and took a leading role in the implementation of innovative e-governance projects in the late 1990s. Our focus in this paper had been to understand the projects in the social contexts in which they are introduced taking exception to an implied essentialism of both these perspectives. The computerization of government departments and the launching of projects with a social content emerged as a near universal pattern for e-governance processes in India at the state level as well as national level. Even states with relatively poor performance in terms of social and economic indicators surged ahead with innovative projects in e-governance. Nevertheless, many of these projects are floundering and have been unable to break the initial inertia. Even when the programmes are able to make modest successes in terms of expansion and sustainability, the conflicts generated in the domain of technology society interaction in these projects are enormous and deserve closer attention than developmental perspective can offer.

One of the crucial aspects of networked governance is its potential for creating a network society in rural areas. Gyandoot's Intranet is an example of an emerging rural network society with its scattered nodes and decentralized delivery system. However, the sociological aspects such as power relations and technological aspects such as connectivity are important in defining its contours of effectiveness and success. Rural network society developed as an offshoot of networked governance could at best be considered as akin to a techno social network with a potential to increase both citizen to government and person-to-person communication in a specific geographical unit. However, if we consider the contemporary history of projects such as Gyandoot as evolving techno-social networks, their potential for reproducing traditional lines of social inequalities and reinforcing rural power hierarchies rather than eliminating them cannot be overlooked. The idea that ICT is inherently a liberating technology and hence e-governance is a new way of transcending inept and inefficient bureaucratic systems which empowers 'end users' appears to be completely inaccurate in the rural societal setting. Moreover, despite the claims of active networking of people in rural Dhar made on behalf of Gyandoot, its ability to connect to multiple social and economic domains fostering crosscutting is found to be extremely limited and ostensibly mediated by the social power equations that envelop its institutional setting.

Notes

[1] For a discussion of the term e-topia, see Mitchell, 2000.

[2] For a discussion see Feenberg (1999).

[3] See Baddeley (1997) for a discussion of Foucault's concept of Governmentality in the context of ICTs.

[4] A host of commentators have provided uncritical evaluation of the ICT based rural social innovations as providing liberating opportunities that members of the marginalized communities and groups can use successfully for 'empowering' themselves. See for example, Bhatnagar and Sechware, (2000); Hafkin and Taggart, (2001); Rajora, (2002); Hafkin, (2002); Gajjala, (2002); Sharma, (2003); Pringle and Subramaniam, (2004); Peizer, (2005); Ng and Mitter, (2005).

[5] For a critique of the technocratic dimensions of the good governance programmes of the Indian State, see Joseph, S (2001).

[6] Also see www.ciol.com/content/services/egov. The conference was one of the highlights of the Bangalore IT.com 1999 event.

[7] One such example is the project announced by IT secretary, Kerala for computerizing and networking relevant applications for 1214 local bodies which claimed development of software for the payment of welfare pensions and a database which can be used for procuring building licenses, license fees and taxes. The secretary was confident that the system would help people living in rural areas to "find out what quotas they are entitled to, what schemes are applicable to them, or in the case of land records, where they are located and whom to contact" (Katakam, 999: 79). Five years after the announcement, the project has not yet taken shape!

[8] The Warna wired project in Maharashtra is perhaps a significant counter example. It covers 70 contiguous villages, providing information and knowledge to increase efficiency and productivity of the Sugar Cooperatives. It aims to support the Cooperatives with agricultural and medical information besides setting up a constellation of facilitating centers for continued enskilling and education. The national informatics center (NIC) of Government of India and state's education department collaborated with the Cooperatives to launch a strong network of fiber-optic cables, V-SATs, PCs, and other ICT equipments.

[9]Gyandoot was a joint winner of Stockholm Challenge Award in the category "Public Services & Democracy" along with the Australian initiative "Technology for Social Justice."

[10] Discussion with Sanjay Inamdar, Regional Manager-Sales (Western Region) of n-Logue Communications Pvt. Ltd., Chennai on 13 August 2004 at the headquarters of the Gyandoot Samiti. He considers the collaboration as being mutually beneficial. See also chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the corDECT WLL technology.

[11] For discussion of the uses of the services often offered by these types of village kiosks see Seith (2000). The author attempts an outsider evaluation of the utility of the services to farmers in the case of MSSRF based on the list of services they have given in their website. He wonders how some of these could be relevant and resulting in any material gains for the poor people.

[12] For a discussion of the popularity of QUANGOs among bureaucrats see Flinders (1999). In India it is preferred because of a variety of reasons. First it gives the façade of NGO for an otherwise bureaucratic set up run by civil servants deputed by Government. Second it provides certain leeway with budgeting since their accounting falls outside the annual governmental budgets. Third, it provides a suitable channel to receive foreign funding which can be routed only through NGOs. See Section VI for further observations on the theme.

[13] In many Kiosks, additional software for preparing astral birth chart and horoscope based on the Indian system of Astrology is available. The standard rate per copy of the birth chart is INR 50.

Akhil Jain, Soochak in the Nagda center reported that he has purchased the software programme called 'Kundli 2000' from Indore and rates the demand for this service which is essential for match making as relatively high. Interview with Akhil Jain 14 August 2002.

[14] Interview with Akhil Jain 14 August 2002.

[15] We would be discussing this case subsequently in this section.

[16] Interview with Devendra Chauhan, Soochak at the Amjera Kiosk on 12 August 2004.

[17] Interview with Manish Sharma, Soochak at the Badnaver (1) kiosk.

[18] Naveen Prakash, Project Manager admits that the distance between 2 kiosks vary between 8 to 40 kilometers. Catchments area of 12 to 15 villages in the case of each kiosk is seen as unviable. He believes that catering to a population of 5000 would be ideal. This would mean increased proliferation of Gyandoot centers in rural Dhar the prospects of which does not seem to bright. Interview on 12 August 2002.

36 Authors often equate the total population in the villages with people who avail the services of the kiosks. For example many case studies on Gyandoot labour the point that Gyandoot kiosks in a locality may be serving thousands of people in the near by villagers. The statement from an earlier case study on Gyandoot is typical in this regard: "20 kiosks ("soochanalays") were initially set up in various rural centers, with each kiosk typically serving a population of 20,000-30,000 villagers" (Sanjay and Gupta, undated). A similar uncritical observation can be seen in Prahalad and Hammond (c.2002:11): "Aggregating demand makes the system highly cost-effective: each kiosk serves 25-30 surrounding villages, while the network as a whole covers over 600 villages and more than half a million people".

[20] Interview with Naveen Prakash, Project Manager on 12 August 2004.

[21] The CEO of the Tribal Block Development Office, S C Sharma verifies the statement by the Soochak and added that the Block takes services form the Kiosk and pays for it. Interview on 12 August 2002.

[22] One of the students at the kiosk however said he does not know about AISECE and that they award the degree. Interview with Rithu Raj Sing on 14 August 2002.

[23] Hindustan Times, for example, reported that: "the entire plan can get stuck if the downslide in its back-end operation continues. Largely attributed to the lethargic and ignorant government employees, the project has been witnessing snags of late. 'Against the promised reply within a week of a complaint being lodged through Gyandoot, delay has become the order of the day,' says an official of the District Rural Development Authority (DRDA), the Government agency handling the nitty-gritty of its operations. (Retrieved from http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/gyandootarticle.pdf). Another report puts the scenario as follows: "The operator at the information center in Nalcha Block in Dhar has no clients. He has no electricity for hours and His information kiosks are deserted…It would appear as though Gyandoot has not been able to provide all the 44 services it was set up to deliver". NDTV January 27, 2003. [Archived at http://www.apnic.net/mailing-lists/s-asia-it/archive/2003/02/msg00013.html]

[24] Media has been critical of Gyandoot on this front as well: "The mandi-rates, supposed to be updated daily, are not changed for two-three days on end. As the rates change many times in a day, the facility is more or less useless. Moreover, a farmer has a cheaper option of a telephone call at 80 paisa (INR 0.80) to Dhar mandi to ask for rates instead of paying INR 5 user charge at the cyber center. Land records of only three out of seven tehsils in the district are available on the network. There has also been duplication of work. The Land Records Bureau was doing the job for the last many years while it was undertaken simultaneously by the district administration, only to abandon it later" Ibid.

[25] During our visits, one of the three centers in Badnaver was closed during office hours. Incidentally this one was housed in Block headquarters itself!

[26] The initial investment for the Government was INR 2500000, which was collected from the Local Bodies (Interview with Sanjay Dubey, District Collector, Dhar District on 12 August 2002). The District Council established the Server with a cost of INR 5 lakhs spending INR 1.5 lakhs on the machine and another INR 1.5 lakhs for software. The District Council also financed the training of the Soochaks who were selected to run the kiosks. Moreover, the subsidy of INR 16,000 for each entrepreneur is also born by the District Council.

[27] The Soochaks have to pay INR 60000 for procuring the machine and setting up the center in addition to a license fee of INR 5000 payable to the Gyandoot Samiti. It is likely that they incur an amount of INR 8000-10000 as other expenses including purchase of stationary to set the kiosk operational. (Interview with Naveen Prakash (Project manager) and Deepak Sharma (Soochak, Tirla Center) on 12 August 2002).

[28] Interview with Naveen Prakash, 12 August 2002.

[29] Interview with Naveen Prakash, Project Manger, 12 August 2002.

[30] Interview with Manish Sharma on 14 August 2002

[31] Ibid

[32] Ibid

[33] This model originally identified in Sreekumar (2002a) and Sreekumar (2002b) based on the Indian experience has been found to be relevant in the contexts of understanding e-governance initiatives elsewhere (see Sokolova , 2006).

[34] The potential of using the Gyandoot kiosks for market expansion has been explored by corporate organizations like, HLL , Tata Trust, Mahindra Tractors, Jain Irrigation, and S.Kumars.
[35] Interview with Sanjay Dubey, District Collector Dhar on 12 August 2003.

[36] Based on Naveen Prakash's presentation "Gyandoot and HLL: Looking for Strategic Partnership" at the Gyandoot headquarters on 12 August 2003.

[37] Discussion with Sarath Dhall, (Marketing Manager, Rural-New Ventures, Hindustan Lever, Mumbai) on 12 August 2002.

[38] Ghatak (2002:10) describes the ITC strategy as follows: "ITC, which exports Rs. 700 crore worth of agricultural commodities (and hopes to increase this to Rs. 2, 000 crore by 2005), has discovered a way to bypass the age-old mandi system and buy directly from farmers. Launched in June 2000, 'e-Choupal', has already become the largest initiative among all Internet-based interventions in rural India. 'E-Choupal' services today reach out to more than a million farmers growing a range of crops - soybean, coffee, wheat, rice, pulses, shrimp - in over 11,000 villages through 1900 kiosks across four states (Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh)".

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