Good Governance in India: Interplay Of Politics, Culture and Technology in E-Governance Projects

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Abstract: The post cold war period has witnessed an increasing awareness of the significance of the concept of good governance, especially in the context of developing countries. International organizations, such as World Bank have acted as a catalyst for the formulation and implementation of standards of good governance in many African and Asian countries. The proposed paper strives to explore the applicability of "universal" good governance principles in the Indian context, with a special focus on the e-governance projects in rural India. It critically examines the process of change and continuity as contained within the complex interplay of the normative structure of governance and the agency of emerging resistance. The overall attempt of this paper is to locate how culture, context, technology and politics have become intertwined in relations of power and asymmetry.

Key words: agency, development, e-governance, good governance, transculturality

The Global Scene

The face of international politics changed drastically as the Cold War came to an end in 1990. The bipolarity of international politics made its way towards multipolar world politics. Consequently, the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed renewed interest in democracy, participation, transparency and efficiency.[1] This wider context of political transition coincided with the massive failure of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in most of the developing countries. Henceforth, international development community especially World Bank woke up to a new realisation that governance reform is the key to all developmental problems in underdeveloped and developing nations. Unlike SAPs which emphasised the role of market as opposed to the state, this new approach towards reform brought the role and capacity of the state and institutions under serious consideration. [2] Interestingly enough the governance reform agenda became quietly complementary with two related themes of democracy and economic development. Together they formed a triad of a magical solution to all the anguish and

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[1] Ngaire Woods. Good Governance in International Organizations .*Global Governance*. 1999, Vol.5, No.1 (Jan-March)

[2] Sarah Joseph. Democratic Good Governance: New Agenda for Change. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2001, Vol.36, No.12 (March 24-30)

distress associated with underdevelopment. This triad focussed together on political system, institutional structures and governance processes with an eye on the public-private partnership.[3]

In last two decades good governance has become the buzzword in the international development community. The term is packaged in such codes of morality that it seems to be devoid of any politics at all. However, this paper claims quite the contrary. In marrying the free market with a strong civil society good governance promises to provide new standards of rule which protect the citizens from the political societies and undemocratic governments.[4] It is widely assumed that in most of the developing countries political societies are corrupt and hegemonic and governments are unrepresentative. While not denying the problems of corruption and perils of status quo, this paper focuses on the politics of the good governance agenda itself and also the hiatus it creates between the governed and those who govern.

What is Good Governance?

There is as such no definition of good governance. It is rather an ideal-typical construct (somewhat in a Weberian sense) which delineates the parameters of governance through certain indicators. The qualifier "good" clearly denotes the better standards of such a formulation and hence the imperative to achieve them.

The World Bank has identified three discrete aspects of governance which needs to be emphasized for reform: "i) the form of political regime; ii) the process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development; and iii)the capacity of government to design, formulate and implement policies and discharge functions."[5] This again establishes the close link between democracy, economic development and good governance. As far as the criteria of good governance are concerned, UNESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) sets out eight major characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective & efficient, equitable & inclusive and follows the rule of law.[6]

Now the question arises what this actually means in pragmatic terms, what is the shift from mere governance to "good" governance? This new agenda of good governance, though based on the premise of early liberal theories puts emphasis on a market concept of equality which strives for empowerment of citizens by making them economically self-sustaining and enabling them to enter into market transactions. The cooperation of private agencies and NGOs are crucial for this purpose. Under this new found concept of equality and active participation of different actors citizens are often viewed as end users or customers whereas the government acts as the service providers. Improving the quality of

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[3] Carlos Santiso. International Co-operation For Democracy and Good Governance: Moving Toward A Second Generation? *European Journal of Development Research*.2001, Vol.13, No.1 (June)

[4] Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, René Véron and Manoj Srivastava.Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India. Cambridge University Press (2005)

[5] D. Bandyopadhyay. Administration, Decentralisation and Good Governance. *Economic and Political Weekly.*1996, Vol.31, No.48 (Nov)

[6] What is Good Governance in http://www.unescap.org/pdd/prs/ProjectActivities/Ongoing/gg/governance.asp Retreived on

these services and reaching out to a wider base of customers with the help of the private and non-governmental stakeholders are the central objectives of the governance reform projects and calls for complete overhaul of public administration.[7] Therefore, as an issue of public policy good governance has moved not only into the agenda of World Bank but has also become a common parlance of national governments and local political actors. In short good governance provides a universal recipe with a gradually growing mix of deregulation, privatisation, civil service reform and decentralisation[8] which are deemed to produce better governability across societies.

Global to Local: A Case of India

As has been already mentioned good governance principles are believed to be applicable regardless of the culture and context. In this paper, however, this view would be critically scrutinised and contradicted. What becomes important in such an endeavour is the nuanced understanding of the state-society relationship, particularly in everyday practices as governance lies in the complex overlap of state and society interactions.[9] This is not an easy task when we talk about a vast and diverse entity called India. The attempt here is not to draw a gross generalisation of Indian context, but to bring forward the significance of particular contexts in analysing the state-society relationship.

Keeping this challenge in mind, we turn to specific initiatives of the Indian government which fits into the overall paradigm of good governance. E-governance initiatives provide an interesting example in this regard as it reclines at the intricate intersection of technology, culture and politics. Moreover, a NASSCOM (2003) study shows that e-governance is the fastest growing sector of the IT market in India which grew above 18 per cent in 2001-02.[10]

E-governance in India: Change and Continuity

E-governance deploys information technology (ICT) for improving information and service delivery to citizens (consumers) by enabling them to participate in the decision making process through a wider network of private and civil society organisations. Therefore the government becomes more transparent, accountable and efficient[11] and hence fits perfectly into the agenda of good governance. Not surprisingly, 'E-governance for Development' has been a prominent slogan in India which has been heavily influenced by international agencies such as DFID, UNDP, G-8 and World Bank. Ministry of

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[8] Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, René Véron and Manoj Srivastava.Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India. Cambridge University Press. 2005
[9] Subrata K.Mitra. The Puzzle of India's Governance-Culture, Context and Comparative Theory. Routledge, 2006
[10] Santosh Panda. Globalisation, Culture and Information Communication Technology in India in Kameshwar Choudhary (ed.) Globalisation, Governance Reform and Development in India. Sage, 2007.
[11] C.S.R. Prabhu. E-governance: Concepts and Case Studies. Prentice-Hall of India, 2005.

Information and Technology was found, National IT task force was implemented and National E-governance Plan was adopted as part of such development initiatives.[12]

There are many core projects both at the national level and regional level such as smart card, national ID card, computerisation of revenue departments, generic office management system. Some of the well-known state initiatives have been *Gyandoot* of Madhya Pradesh government, *Friends* of Kerala government and *Bhoomi* of the Karnataka government. However, most of these national and state government projects fail to remain sustainable even after a successful pilot phase. For example, one of the secondary sources pointed out that *Gyandoot* which started with much hype has already died down. The level of awareness about services available under such projects is very low among the villagers and in addition infrastructure appears to be the strongest barrier. There could be multiple reasons for such failures which might differ from one project to the other. However, on a generic level it is believed that citizens and officials both are equally habituated to the hierarchic, non-transparent system of governance which has been operating for many decades now. Furthermore, there is a considerable gap between citizen's expectations and government's visions which renders these schemes not so attractive for the villagers. Adding to these systemic drawbacks, are often strong resistance from local politicians. Many instances from Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh show that villagers have to depend on the middlemen to access information from computers installed in Panchayat offices.[13] Even contracts for VLEs (village level entrepreneurs who run the IT kiosks) are fraught with corruption embedded in local political society and bureaucracy.

Therefore, e-governance cannot be seen essentially as an administrative innovation facilitated by ICT but should also be recognized as a social process which involves not only change in the mental scape and the ways of governmentality but also contested area of social forces shaping the evolution of this technocratic innovation. Technical processes defining the contours of e-governance are embedded in the structures of power which might also become reactionary. This is particularly evident in villages where local elites play key roles in the implementation of the ICT-based projects and enjoy the greater benefits from this public good. "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."[14]

This brings us to the issue of change and continuity involved in any social process and interaction. New technology can hold novel promises for improving the system and structure of governance and hence the quality of life. Nevertheless, it also leads to many open-ended questions; what is main agenda of ICT led development initiatives? Does it help bridging the digital divide or boost the divide? How far does it contribute in the development of our communities and everyday life? It might be too early draw any

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[12] T.T. Sreekumar. Decrypting E-Governance. In: Ashwani Saith, M.Vijaybaskar and V.Gayathri (eds.) ICTs and Indian Social Change: Diffusion, Poverty, Governance. Sage, 2008.

[13] Santosh Panda. Globalisation, Culture and Information Communication Technology in India in Kameshwar Choudhary (ed.) Globalisation, Governance Reform and Development in India. Sage, 2007.

[14] T.T. Sreekumar. Decrypting E-Governance. In: Ashwani Saith, M.Vijaybaskar and V.Gayathri (eds.) ICTs and Indian Social Change: Diffusion, Poverty, Governance. Sage, 2008.

conclusive answers to these questions. However, it becomes quite evident from the experiences of already implemented projects that technology is not ethically and socially neutral. For that reason, instead of focusing on an irreversible impact of technology on a community, it would be much more effective to see the reciprocal cycle of influences binding together technology, individual choices and consequently social shaping of such technologies.

Politics, Context and Agency

Talking about individual choices brings us to the notion of agency. It is the agency of individual actors operating within a particular cultural context that defines the contours of state-society relationships. As it has already been mentioned governance lies in overlapping zone of interaction between state and society or in another term in the intersection between political and the social. Hence, it is the dynamism of these interactions that would bring a shift in the structure of governance.

Given this frame of understanding, it can be easily construed that even in case of technological interventions, individual actors, their cultural context laden with shared norm and values and ensuing choices will finally determine the state-society relationship and therefore also the standards of governance. This paper does not intend to deny the macro perspective which thrives on the power of the state institutions. In fact, it tries to combine both macro and micro frameworks by emphasizing the reciprocal relations between the two.

Conclusion

Good governance presents us with a normative frame loaded with liberal values which clearly neglects the context of changing societies and local cultures. As coded in strong moralistic language it hardly addresses the real issues of governance experiences by actors who are part of the context. It lacks legitimacy in the same way modernisation theories did once. Moreover, good governance agenda persuaded by international agencies reflects a particular ideology commensurate with the Western neo-liberal philosophy and hence used as an instrument to leverage aid policies. As Bondyapadhyay puts it, "the term 'good governance' as it is being used today by the North has become the symbol of recolonisation and new Imperialism."[15] Similarly, according to Mitra, " In its most typical form, this usage makes it possible for those with the money and the vision to instil their objectives in the qualifier 'good' that precedes governance. Even when the definers of good governance act out of the best of intentions, the pre-qualification lowers the legitimacy of the concept for those affected by it in direct proportion to the hiatus between what they perceive as their interests and those of their minders."[16]

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[15] D. Bandyopadhyay. Administration, Decentralisation and Good Governance. *Economic and Political Weekly.*1996, Vol.31, No.48 (Nov)

[16] Subrata K.Mitra. The Puzzle of India's Governance-Culture, Context and Comparative Theory. Routledge, 2006

In taking a critical view towards good governance paradigm, this paper attempts to challenge the Universalistic approach which is mostly dominated by Western schools of thought and relegates any deviations as anomalies awaiting corrective measures. Rather, it draws attention to continuous flows of knowledge and institutions from both above and below, from both outside and within. A deeper understanding of this complex mechanism can be enriched by emerging paradigms of transculturality which probe directly into questions of asymmetries involved in every social and cultural processes rather than avoiding them in a transcendental quest.

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