

COMMENT

Humans are still core to Digital India

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DECEMBER 22, 2020 00:15 IST

UPDATED: DECEMBER 21, 2020 22:18 IST

Intermediaries who deliver last mile governance establish trust between governments and citizens

During the pandemic, we came to rely on various individuals to address our daily needs, even as more and more services went online. This transformation is underway in governance. During this time, eGovernments Foundation (eGov) and Aapti Institute came together to explore how digitally excluded communities engage with governance and learnt that even in 'Digital India', humans are significant in brokering trust between governments and citizens. These intermediaries often worked without any formal backing and role.

However, this reality was not considered in the design of most e-governance programmes. Only a few States have built a cadre of individuals for last mile governance. Andhra Pradesh, for instance, rolled out a ward secretariat programme with over 16,000 ward secretaries and volunteers for delivering government services at citizens' doorstep.

Overcoming barriers

Intermediaries help citizens overcome barriers to awareness (of availability of digital services and rights from the state) and ability, which includes the ability to navigate these solutions with trust. These barriers are worse for citizens who are marginalised, with the poor, women, the elderly, and caste and gender minorities being additionally disadvantaged. Intermediaries support individuals by placing complaints, directing them to the right authorities, and following up. In the words of one of the respondents, "these people help us see the government".

Intermediaries are crucial offline architectures that enable the state to do its work better. Offline intermediaries can be both political and apolitical, individuals or collectives with varying motivations to do this work. Apolitical social workers and community leaders do their work as service. Partisan political individuals see their work as constituency service to secure vote bases. Community-based organisations and NGOs see their work as allied to their core work.

Our research tells us that leaning on intermediaries can unlock the capacity of the state to serve citizens. Indeed, they are a reality of everyday life for the average Indian, and incorporating this reality in design can be impactful. For instance, the study found that intermediaries struggled with indicating that they were placing a complaint for someone else, and with communicating the impact (for example, the number of houses affected by the problem). This design approach arises from the assumption that technology is for the individual. The reality is at odds with that belief.

Extension of governance model

Various types and forms of intermediation emerge based on regional, social, cultural and economic contexts. A 'one size fits all' approach will not work. It is crucial to think about leveraging the strengths of intermediaries. Equally, it is essential to pay attention to the varying incentives of intermediaries and not romanticise the benefits. We need to see intermediaries as crucial to the realisation of governance outcomes. In this sense, they are as fundamental to governance as delivery agents and drivers are to Swiggy and Uber. Seeing them as a natural extension of the governance model forces us to ask questions of how we can support them to serve citizens better. India has formalised intermediation in traditional markets (such as mutual funds) from which we can learn. In these areas, formal governance mechanisms, structured capacity building, widespread awareness campaigns, and process re-engineering enabled growth and usage.

At a broader level, increasing digitisation of governance across domains including healthcare, financial inclusion, justice and social services is inevitable. We need to ensure that during this transition, we work with intermediaries to raise citizens' awareness, build intermediaries' skills and capabilities, and establish governance frameworks with suitable feedback loops. In doing so, we will be able to support the process of responsible, responsive and data-driven governance across domains.

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