'e' Anyway?: Critical Reflections on the e-Governance Roadmap in Andhra Pradesh

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Introduction

Since the dawn of the new millennium the generic concept of *governance* itself, and its more specific derivatives like *good governance, democratic governance* and *e-governance*, have become buzzwords in the media as well as in the precincts of policymaking, policy implementation and policy analysis. Thanks to the transnational organizations like the World Bank, the UNDP and the UNCTAD these buzzwords have gradually come to dominate the evaluative accounts of democracy in countries around the world. India, including its federated states, could not be an exception in this regard. However, these buzzwords are controversial, more by virtue of their association with these transnational organizations which seek to define and allegedly dictate the rules of governance. In this paper we, however, have a specific focus on e-governance. In being more inclined to explore democratic governance from the vantage point of e-governance(1) the submission that we are going to make is that like all buzzwords when it comes to e-governance there is a dearth of efforts to address its specificities. Nowhere perhaps it is more true than in the practice of e-governance being made synonymous with e-government. The main premise of the paper is that the initiatives on e-governance, in order to be effective and inclusive, need to have not just a citizen-centric focus but also a *citizen-driven* thrust by ensuring popular access, intervention, participation vis-à-vis the decision-making process on issues having impact on their life. In the subsequent discussion, we make a distinction between e-government and e-governance and reveal how a confused and blurred vision relating to their distinction come in the way of democratic governance. In the process of exploration of the 'design defect' or 'design deficiency' in the e-governance roadmap we go deeper than any superficial explanation and identify the *localization*(2) factor--- in the form of ground-level initiatives in democratic decision-making and the associated task of demand-driven, value-added, location-specific deployment of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT)(3)--- as the 'missing link'. However, at this juncture we need to make an important clarification: while for the purpose of the paper we would illustrate the point in the specific case of Andhra Pradesh (AP) it should be noted that there are cases of design-deficiency in the roadmaps of other Indian states(4) and in those of the developing countries(5) as well.

I

Distinguishing e-Governance from e-Government

An essential understanding of the distinction between e-governance and e-government, for obvious reasons, hinges on the notion and practice of democratic governance. Governance in general and democratic governance in particular have been at the centrestage of a prolific output of literature in recent times but a detailed survey of such literature is beyond the purview of the paper. But for the convenience of analysis we can, from the existing literature, briefly chart out some broad features of democratic governance. Apart from the cardinal feature of the right of the people to choose their representatives there are other prerequisites as well, such as, ensuring representation of all segments of people, enhancing the capacity of public institutions, capacity-building of citizens,

providing key role to civil society in the process of governance and establishing widest possible access to the service delivery system.

Let us at this point mention that the spectacular ascendance of the ICT has made it a sort of essential instrument of democratic governance. It is precisely for this reason that both e-government and e-governance have come to enjoy much prominence in the parlance of policymaking as well as in the arena of theory-building vis-a-vis democratic governance. However, the fact remains that both the concepts are somewhat fluidic in nature and being so they are subject to various, even conflicting, interpretations. Let us also assert here that even if e-government is a pre-condition to and an inalienable part of e-governance the two are not synonymous. The distinction between the two does exist, however slippery it might seem to be. The distinction, so to say, is created mainly in terms of their spread and depth, at the core of which lies the qualitative difference in popular participation--- its visualization and implementation. Both e-governance and e-government rest on the enablement and utilisation of the ICT as a major means to achieve their objectives(6). Yet there is an underlying distinction. E-government is generally defined in terms of the use of the ICT for online automation of workflow, repetitive tasks and upgradation of service delivery, with the primary purpose of making the government more efficiency-driven, productivity-driven and cost-effective. E-governance, on the other hand, has much broader parameters and implications of/for governance. Having an intensive normative dimension with the democratic exercise of power as its motive-force e-governance rests on accountability, openness, transparency and awareness and participation of the ordinary people. *Inclusiveness*, to be elaborated in the subsequent discussion, is a hallmark of e-governance. The main thrust of e-governance is on the *citizen-driven* decision-making process, which goes beyond the hitherto celebrated citizen-centric decision-making. This distinction lies at the root of the differentiation of e-governance and e-government. In more concrete terms, while e-government has greater organizational-managerial thrust with basic *service*-orientation, e-governance is supposed to have greater systemic-structural thrust with greater *political*-orientation. To explain, from the vantage-point of the citizens(7) e-government basically aims to provide citizen-centric orientation to government departments through efficient service-delivery by using the digitalized online mode while e-governance is supposed to have a much broader aim of using the same mode for ultimately enhancing citizens' participation in the decision-making process that concerns their life. In this sense e-government has an inherent trend towards codification while e-governance, by the very fact that it has *governance* as a foundation, is more of a learning process, exploratory in nature and based on trial and error method, with a goal to develop a shared experience and collective sense of purpose among the rulers and the ruled. For obvious reasons, the latter has much deeper implications for democratic governance in which people's pro-active participation in the governing process remains the core objective. There is, to reiterate, lot of confusion arising out of the lack of appropriate understanding and conceptualization of e-governance and e-government. The following observation, made in no uncertain terms, supports our contention:

   "The most compelling observation to be made is that there is substantial overload on the term 'e-governance' itself, making it some overarching metaphor for magical reform. Plenty of *e-administration* initiatives--- even long overdue citizen conveniences like public utility bill e-payments - are being passed off as e-governance, as if there is no difference between the two. It is important to remember that e-governance is *governance first and electronics next*.

Currently much government decision making is non-participatory and discourages citizen inputs, so passing off service delivery improvements alone as governance is misplaced."(8)

Accordingly, in the case of the e-government the primary thrust is on developing G2G (government to government) and then, G2B (government to business) interfaces. There is also the scheme for G2C (government to citizen) *services* (as distinct from interfaces) in the e-government initiatives. In the case of e-governance, in which devising and realization of the means citizen-intervention and participation in the decision-making process in/by governance remains the most significant objective, the overwhelming thrust goes beyond the realms of G2G, G2B and G2C to have the ultimate focus on G2C (government to citizen) and most importantly, on C2G (citizen to government) interfaces. On the basis of the simultaneous interdependence and divergence between e-governance and e-

government the paper relies on two basic premises. First, that governance in general and e-governance in particular have to be *inclusive* in character. The central idea is that amidst the increasingly evident Digital Divide which has much adverse effects on the developing countries, it is not just sufficient to stress on the enhancement of efficiency of governance by backing it with the power of the ICT. It is as much necessary to ensure *inclusiveness*, with a view to enhance the effectiveness of governance and that of the ICT, by inclusion of various strata of society--- the backward and weaker sections, women, youths, elderly, the displaced and so forth---- so that the ordinary people can enjoy the benefits, not just in terms of services but also in terms of having opportunities for intervention, arising out of the synergy of transparent, responsive and accountable governance and people-centric ICT. Second, India having a federal system, with the states having reasonably large space for policy formulation and implementation, there cannot be a rigid and uniform formula for establishing e-governance in India, that too without any effective deliberations at the policymaking stage.

Before we proceed to mention the e-government initiatives in AP in greater details it should be noted that the relevant documents of the state government in AP overwhelmingly mention "e-government" as its major goal but in terms of its desired effects and implications the distinction between e-governance and e-government remains considerably blurred. Thus, for instance, a website of the AP government has the following text as the introductory note:

"Andhra Pradesh has moved *faster and further on the road to e-governance* than any other state in India. The State has undertaken various *e-Government initiatives* to provide better, more efficient, transparent and responsive services to the citizens and to promote greater efficiency within the government." (9) [Italics mine].

Such conceptual confusion and ambiguity give rise to two possible criticisms. First, one can justifiably make a critique of it and attribute it to the lack of basic understanding of the task of governance. Second, even if one accepts, for arguments sake, that e-government, as distinct from e-governance, is the most important agenda of the rulers in the state the question that immediately comes to the fore is whether by limiting themselves to the promotion of e-government AP is privileging technological and technical efficiency and in the process is moving away, consciously or otherwise, from the broader goal of democratic governance. Then again, the whole issue becomes all the more complex. It is because, as the following two sections would make it evident, insofar as the initiatives undertaken are concerned they are apparently much more geared towards digitalization and automation of administration and administrative/ organizational efficiency in terms of cost-effectiveness. But at the same time, there are some provisions which are, in some instances quite evidently and in some other instances by implications, intertwined with e-governance. Let us refer to two major documents--- the highly-valued Vision 2020(10) and *Vision of e-Government in Andhra Pradesh*(11) [hereafter, Vision Paper], both considered to be 'landmarks', to substantiate the point. The following sections on SMARTGOV and TRPI are exclusively based on these documents.

II

SMARTGOV: The Foundation

The much-publicized SMARTGOV can be regarded both as a sort of infrastructure and as an end-product of e-government in AP. It stands for simple, moral, accountable, responsive and transparent government. The scheme is inscribed in the Vision 2020 itself which proclaims that measures are being taken to ensure that "people continue to have a strong voice and role in the governance of their state". This, to add, conforms to its goal of providing "clean, capable and transparent government which facilitates, and not controls, economic development". It should also be pointed out that SMART has been linked to the Governance Reform Programme of the Government of AP. The document, K*nowledge, Technology, People: Profile of Centre for Good Governance*(12), bears testimony to this fact. Let us see more elaborately what the SMART stands for:

- *Simplifying government* entails assistance to departments to improve the quality of service and value for money to customers by easing the delivery systems and reducing administrative and non-productive expenditure.
- *Moral government* entails the identification of key issues leading to ineffective and inefficient human resource management across the public service and to develop options to solve these problems. It also refers to the development of human resource management action plan and support to the government in implementing the plan and in embedding new structures and modern approaches to human resource management.
- *Accountable government* aims to improve the quality and timeliness of service delivery through the development of a flexible results-focused performance culture across the public service using systems effectively monitoring and measuring performance. It also seeks to promote local government reforms in accordance with the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Constitution of India in order to make the rural and urban local bodies more accountable to the people.
- *Responsive government* seeks to ensure that the people have a strong voice in governance of the state and local bodies through the development of participatory mechanisms for planning and monitoring service delivery, enhancing decentralization and delegation, promoting environmental conservation and ensuring inclusiveness of the poor and the disadvantaged.
- *Transparent government* visualizes improvement in planning, resource allocation, monitoring, management and accounting systems and access to information at state and local levels so that accountability is clear and public expenditure is transparent, prudent and effective.

In accordance with our observation that the e-government agenda of the government contains some notable provisions of e-governance we can refer to the key provisions of the SMARTGOV. It can be seen that while the first key provision, that is, *simplifying government* is basically oriented towards e-government the rest of the provisions in varying ways and degrees incorporate some of the major goals and objectives of e-governance. Thus, the key provision of *moral government* includes among others the task of "embedding new structures and modern approaches to human resource management". It hardly needs any elaboration to understand that such new structures and modern approaches require substantive popular participation that goes beyond technological upgradation. In another significant instance, the key provision of *accountable government* "seeks to promote local government reforms in accordance with the 73rd and 74th amendments" in order to "make the rural and urban local bodies more accountable to the people". The specific amendments being mentioned here were themselves justified on the ground that they would facilitate people's participation in governance at the local level. The extensive restructuring of the institutions of local governance was given constitutional legitimacy by these twin amendments. The key provision of *responsive government* more vehemently calls for making governance people-centric when it suggests various means of ensuring that "the people have a strong voice in governance" and calls for developing "participatory mechanisms" and "inclusiveness of the poor and the disadvantaged". Yet another key provision, that of the *transparent government*, at least by implication, promotes the cause of e-governance in its emphasis on "access to information". In the section on "Inconsistency Writ Large" we shall refer yet again to Vision 2020 along with the New ICT Policy 2005-2010(13); the latter is supposed to be the latest componential addition to the foundation of the SMARTGOV. It could be mentioned here that the New ICT policy makes no radical departure from Vision 2020 and the Vision Paper, despite being formulated under a different political regime.

TRPI: The Functional Framework

Yet when it comes to the functional framework it reflects a clear preference for technological and technocratic dimensions of e-government. If one makes a brief survey of the four key components of the framework of *e-government* the point becomes evident. They are:

- **Technology Framework** which has as its core the ICT architecture. It is supposed to present overall standards and policies for key technology components to enable re-usability and to ensure inter-operability and integration of the various e-government projects across the State.
- **Resource Framework** which relates to a variety of solutions in the generic name of Public Private Partnerships, which are being employed to bridge the gap between the

expected levels of speed, efficiency and spread of public projects. The idea is to arrive at the right combination of public sector accountability with private sector efficiencies and also to share the risk correspondingly.

- o **Prioritisation Framework** which relies on technological application in various governmental departments in terms of logical grouping, high level assessment of key and supportive processes, mapping of core processes, prioritization of services on a criticality and feasibility matrix, categorization of services as "targeted", "processed", "permitted" and "kept on hold".
- o **Implementation Framework**, with the 6C model at its core, tries to incorporate the essential features of a structured approach for successful implementation of IT projects. It is claimed to have been developed from the experience of implementing/coordinating a number of projects in the government departments in AP.

The objectives of e-government, enumerated in the Vision Paper, also reinstate the same. Thus in the section on "Benefits to Citizens and Business" the objectives being referred to are: streamlined and standardised electronic information gathering and access; electronic delivery of services to meet citizens expectations and requirements; convenient, anytime, anywhere citizen services; support for e-commerce initiatives; significant improvement in government to citizen (G2C) and government to business (G2B) interfaces. In the section on "Benefits to Government" the objectives include increased employee productivity; facilitation of information reuse within governmental departments; reduced system maintenance and training requirements; cost-effectiveness in the operation of government agencies; improvement in government to government (G2G) interfaces. Yet another source of contradiction is the declaration that the AP government would follow an Entrepreneurial Approach with the "state as the single entrepreneur", which would, by the constitutive logic, view the citizens as consumers. How far does it go with the vision, however segmented, of e-governance is yet another question that needs to be raised.

Even the three sectors in which the AP government claims to have achieved lot of success remain confined to the parameters of e-government. It is to be noted that even within the parameters of e-government the success stories are basically confined to the front-end agencies of various government departments. The three "most successful cases" are:

- ▪ **CARD -** Computer-Aided Administration of Registration Department, which in effect seeks to provide end-to-end solution for the automation of registration process. It has cut down the time for sales registration from 10 days to less than an hour.
- ▪ **e-Seva** - The one-stop-shop for citizen services. Publicized as "the first of its kind of service in the country", it is supposed to provide a wide spectrum of citizen-friendly services like utility bills/tax payments, issue of certificates, issue of licenses/permits, reservations and more on a one-stop basis. We shall deal with this sector subsequently.
- ▪ **FAST** - Fully Automated System for Transport, whereby offices of the Regional Transport Officers are being connected, and services like issue of learner's licenses, driving licenses and registration of vehicles have been computerised.

Inconsistency Writ Large

The greatest irony of AP is that while its policymakers take pride in making it a hi-tech hub, an alarming number of farmers committing suicides in the state, due to lack of necessary information about the market price of their products. The question that becomes relevant at this point of discussion is whether there is any inconsistency, if not outright contradiction, between the TRPI and the SMARTGOV? If one finds any incongruity between the two important segments it immediately brings in the question of design-defect in the specific roadmap being discussed here. Such design-defect is not just a technical issue; it has greater social and political implications as well. To elaborate, if the functional framework points to a great surge towards realizing G2G and G2B interfaces, they by themselves are a welcome trend for achieving efficient government. However, if their single-minded promotion comes in the way of C2G interface the whole process of policy formulation begins to suffer from 'democratic deficit', leaving little opportunity for "people's voice" that finds so much prominence in the vision itself.

As mentioned earlier, one can look for the roots of the ambiguities and contradictions being mentioned here in the Vision Paper itself. In its very introductory line the Vision Paper links the electronic technology to the "empowerment" of the people. It then moves on to enumerate, in a typical e-government mode, the utilization of the electronic technology for providing efficient service delivery to the people and to ensure feedback from them. At the same time, however, the vision proclaims the goal of transforming AP into a "knowledge society" by leading the way through the ICT. The ambiguity and the contradiction assumes glaring proportions in methodological terms here. It is because if the e-government seeks to "reduce personalized interface" between the government and the people it would continue to weaken one of the prime pre-conditions of knowledge society (and for that matter, of e-governance too)--- the extensive and intensive interaction between the government and the people for enhancing *capacity-building*. The foundation of the knowledge society, as clarified by its proponents, is democratization of knowledge, which again is a result of increasing interactions and deliberations among people themselves and between the rulers and the ruled.

It needs to be specifically mentioned at this juncture that insofar as the inconsistencies or contradictions are concerned the change of regime--- from the rule of Telugu Desham Party (TDP) to the Congress--- the methodology remains unaltered. One of the best instances of lack of fundamental change is the New ICT Policy 2005-2010. The author's interviews with a number of bureaucrats, political activists and academics repeatedly put forth the point that the Vision Paper, formulated during Naidu's days, remains as sacrosanct as ever to the policymakers, with the change in government and the assumption of power by an arch-rival party having little impact on the process. The New ICT Policy, titled *Path-breaking Initiatives to Promote eGovernance & ICT Industry in the State*, has e-governance as one of the two main sections. This might give rise to the impression that it would be based on a methodological and visionary departure from the Vision Paper and in the process would do away with the conceptual and functional ambiguities of e-government/e-governance. But a closer look at the Policy document reveals that it treads the same line. There are plenty of provisions which may facilitate the promotion of the ICT industry but remain thoroughly inadequate to promote e-governance. Some such provisions are "embedding" through deployment of technology within the governmental departments, introduction of the Geographical Information System (GIS), broadband connectivity at district/mandal and village levels and establishment of Rajiv Internet Village for promoting G2C and B2C (business to citizen) interfaces, with no mention of the C2G interface. The document also prioritizes the utilization of the ICT for poverty alleviation under the IT4AP scheme, with identified sectors like irrigation, agriculture, education, health, rural development and so forth. But the whole approach and the discourse remains extremely technocratic with little consideration to the fact that an organic deployment of such technology needs to emerge from a political process in the form of awareness generation and participation of the people for whom they are meant. Thus, the New ICT policy, at best, offers only cosmetic changes.

The Vision 2020, yet another significant instance with much implications for governance, describes people as "partners in progress" and calls for their "active participation" in development. This kind of provision intensifies the puzzle--- in which after a point of time e-government comes in the way of e-governance. There could be many reasons for such inconsistency. However, keeping in mind our focus on the *design-defect* we can trace it to a commonly propounded thesis in the discourse of ICT, which finds a very prominent place in Vision 2020. We are referring to the Leapfrogging Thesis. A quote from Vision 2020 would reveal the spirit and the letter of the thesis:

   "(With) (t)remendous advances in knowledge and information technology…governments can now make quantum leaps in productivity and efficiency, leapfrogging several stages of development their predecessors had to undergo." (14) [Brackets mine].

It is in this very idea that the ICT by itself is a 'magic wand' that is able to do away with the rigors and stages of development the root of the problem can be found. This kind of discourse also floats the much-absurd idea that in some way or other the *grassroots-level* constraints and obstacles can be overcome by the power of New Technology. It is also our contention that poorer a country or a region or an area is greater the intensity of such argument. In this context one has to remember that AP is much lower down the order in terms of intra-state scale of human development in India. The *National Human Development Report*(15) of the Planning Commission of India places AP in 19th

position vis-à-vis the Human Poverty Index and an even lowly 23rd vis-à-vis the Human Development Index**.** The gravest and most disastrous manifestation of it has been the continuing episodes of the farmers' suicides in rural AP but there are other areas of human development as well in which AP is faring badly(16). The implications of such misleading discourse is not just confined to the fact that the existential, real life and everyday problems of governance are sought to be overrun by the on-line, virtual 'click'. There are other implications as well. It even threatens to undermine some of the positive initiatives which, if expanded, could contribute to better governance. The e-Seva Centres can serve as an instance here. Our visits to such centres in different localities of Hyderabad, including Sanjiva Reddy Nagar, Nallakunta and Charminar areas, showed great enthusiasm of the common people of different social echelons in trying to take advantage of one of the e-government's major feature: single-window online services. In all these centres noticeable presence was found of the women, both as assistants in the centers and as users. The number of elderly citizens was also significant. Being situated in the locality itself the centres also attracted a number of physically challenged citizens. All these traits make the centres a sort of hub of *inclusiveness*. The people interviewed by us were near-unanimous in agreement at least on two points: first, that because of the centers, and with the consequent elimination of multiple organizations, the collection mechanism has improved to a great extent; second, that the centers have also resulted in the elimination of middlemen/intermediaries. It is also a positive indication that the people want more and more services to be brought under the purview of such centers. It is no less a positive trait that the centers are now run on public-private partnership with the management of the centres, initially under the control of the government, is now vested with private organizations.

However, the dominance of the "ICT as the magic wand" discourse seems to have eroded the little substantial efforts made to extend the people's positive impression, enthusiasm and participation on a broader scale and horizon--- in congruence with the parameters of e-governance. Even e-Seva Centres are not being extended in rural areas with due attention. In this context P.K. Mohanty(17), the former Municipal Commissioner of Hyderabad and the current Director-General and Executive Director of the Centre for Good Governance, argued that these centers were "bound to fail" in rural areas. His first explanation of the impending failure was basically technological in the sense that he argued that unlike the urban areas, the rural areas are marked by "lack of proper domain work". However, Mohanty would go as far as to make a significant comment that as "there was no well thought-out design" in the deployment of the ICT in the administrative circle the prospects of e-governance remain "centuries away".

Be it the issue of urban bias in e-Seva Centers or that in developing e-readiness it is only the tip of the iceberg. To reiterate, one has to go deeper into the broader question of deficiency in designing e-governance and still deeper, into the question of designing governance as such. One defence, as found in the arguments of the TDP activists and the general supporters of Naidu, is that the urban tilt was part of the "overall plan" which was seeking to establish e-government in urban areas and then to take advantage of the "trickle down" effect to spread it in rural areas. There is a general belief among Naidu's supporters that he had some nice schemes and he needed more time to implement them on a trickle-down mode basis, beyond the urban sector. But the counter-argument is that the vision--- as per Vision 2020, of a "golden" AP, characterized among other traits by "total eradication of poverty", "basic minimum needs", "happy fulfilling life" and "knowledge and learning society"--- was bound to fail because it only "privileged the already privileged segments"(18).

III

The Naidu Factor

The name and the initiatives of Chandrababu Naidu is so much intertwined to AP's march towards tech-savvy administration (governance, considering its essential attributes, would be too heavy a concept to be used here!) that he remains the central figure in every debate on the issue. This results in a tendency to attribute both the success and the failure, as the case may be with the respective analysts, to Naidu and Naidu only. Best-known around the world for his self-admitted obsession with the ICT and the corporatisation of governance, "Babu", as he is locally called, loved to describe himself as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of AP and not unexpectedly, he was the icon of

the mainstream media. The following excerpt is a typical instance of the hype that contributed to Naidu's unparalleled media image:

"Chandrababu Naidu is a dreamer--- the master of the grand statement, the painter of the grand vision. By 2020…his state…will be a land of thriving industry, flourishing agriculture and a vast service sector. Poverty will be a faint memory.

A spinner of yarns? Not really. The AP chief minister is only trying to get the people and the administration to think and act big, like himself.… The cyberdreamer has shown the impossible can be done. *Electronic governance, for instance.* The critics said that it was too farfetched, that it was elitist. Today…they have been proved wrong."(19) [Italics mine]

No question, Naidu indeed had provided a great incentive to bring changes in AP thorough the use of the ICT. In fact, the main inspiration behind Vision 2020 was none other than Naidu himself. Judging by the document itself, as we have noted earlier, it would be wrong to assume that Naidu's vision was strictly limited to the promotion of e-government only. The "golden AP" that he dreamt of was not certainly to be achieved only by one-window online services. But the fact remains that it is one thing to visualize a grand-order and another thing to transform the vision into an appropriate design. We would in this context contend that Naidu in terms of his rhetoric made the right kind of noise but he and his team of high-tech policymakers did not back it up by appropriate action. It is quite ironical that the man who would work so hard to vastly improve service delivery system and information access would fail to measure the pulse of the electorate and would be swept out of power. An important report(20) explains Naidu's fate quite succinctly:

"Had governance been only an exercise in management and the CM its CEO, e-governance could have facilitated all its functions being performed more efficiently.… But…there comes a stage when mere affectionate access or concern is not enough. Providing direct and quicker access cannot ensure full participation…

Governance is, however, not merely navigation. It is the exercise of power. Democracy is demand for a share in that power."

It is because Naidu's promotion of e-government at the cost of e-governance and more broadly, the governance itself, was based on a technocratic-managerial approach, and in epistemological terms, to technologism(21). In this kind of approach it is only natural that after a point of time his gameplan would be neutralized by the very force--- politics--- that he sought to do away with. "Development without politics" was not only Naidu's pet slogan; it was his ultimate goal. Then again, it is a contradiction in terms. Politics as a contestation, struggle over power has a built-in quality to raise its head with greater intensity, more so in a democratic order, when faced with 'suppression' by the powers that be. Naidu's obsession with the ICT, backed up by his premise that "technology is value-neutral", led him to undermine this attribute of politics despite he being an astute politician. He was regarding "cutting edge" technology as a sort of magic-wand which would help him with *top-down* development and in the process would do away with all existing constraints to "efficient governance". In Naidu's scheme of things the "SMART government" required customers and consumers in people, not pro-active political beings. It is precisely for this reason that democratic decentralization of governance was a blindspot in Naidu's agenda of development, despite the highly publicized Janmabhoomi Programme which was supposedly, though not effectively, adopted for "taking governance to the people". Despite the fact that policies are seldom products of a single individual the 'personality factor' here need not be underestimated, especially when it concerns a high profile and powerful figure like Naidu. Before we refer specifically to the Programme let us mention a very interesting description of Naidu---"He doesn't listen, he only commands" (22). The cryptic description itself indicates a behavioural trait towards centralization of power, which induces Malla Reddy to further comment that in a district like Ananthapur, with "zero-initiative" in ensuring access to and participation of people vis-à-vis the ICT, "e-governance remains totally elusive". One finds an echo of the same in yet another characterization(23) of Naidu's *modus operandi*: vertical flow of information to the *individual at the top*, that is, Naidu himself. In a way, it was a classic instance of G2G interface in which at one end Naidu was the government personified. Today, Naidu is

no longer in power and Rajasekhar Reddy is perceived to be less obsessed with himself as the 'ultimate terminal' of the ICT-guided vertical information flow. However, as stated earlier, there has been little change in the basic concept and structure of the deployment of the ICT. If one has to identify the *missing link* between e-government and e-governance here it is the political commitment to decentralization.

Democratic Decentralization: Bridge too Far

One must go beyond the 'Naidu factor' to avoid the pitfall of reducing the whole issue to an individual's confused perception. Significant policy issues, such as, e-governance, has its broader dimensions as well and it is because of this the notion of democratic decentralization comes into our discussion, though more for its absence, rather than its presence. In the following discussion we identify democratic decentralization as the 'missing link' in the e-governance scenario in AP.

Democratic Decentralization, both as a concept and as a process, is much more politically loaded(24) than the allied concepts like *delegation* and *deconcentration*. The latter two are more oriented towards administrative rearrangement and reorganization and have less enduring character than the former which calls for thorough restructuring. In India states like Kerala, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, at different points of time and in different ways, have embarked on democratic decentralization and have met with success in terms of local governance in varying degrees. The purview of the article does not permit a detailed discussion on the point, but at the same time it needs to be emphasized that this has facilitated in comparative terms greater participation of people both in terms of choosing their representatives in the institutions of local governance and in terms of articulating demands about the ways and means of local development, say, on the utilization of funds, the formation of the budget, the state of the schemes and so forth. Popular participation is so vital because it further facilitates awareness-generation about the ICT and in measuring and increasing demand for access to data and information. Such data and information have an exceedingly wide range--- relating to livelihood activities (like agriculture, industry and business), health, education, market, infrastructure, scientific-technological, policy-oriented, general and so forth. This way popular participation lays the foundation for governance in general and both e-government and e-governance in particular. There is no instance in the world of a successfully run of e-governance with weak local foundation. It is simply because any technology, including the high-potential ICT, has to cater to the local needs and in order to do so it has to have a 'give and take' relations with the local knowledge, skill and resources.

But in the absence of any determined endeavour to establish democratic decentralization the question of popular participation and empowerment of people through ICT remain only a rhetoric, attractive political slogans, which are constructed and circulated in effect to keep people at bay. AP has acquired a dubious distinction of being a stare which, despite the constitutional mandate to the contrary, manages to suppress democratic decentralization. Before we mention in the ensuing discussion how the subversion of institutions of local governance in AP is taking place let us mention that time and again it has been seen that popular participation, if sought to be controlled, programmed and minimized from above, gives rise to the counter-trends. We can, at some length, quote Jose Mooij who made the following comment(25) during the tenure of Naidu, to show that AP is also subject to this paradox:

"...the process... (of keeping) politics away from policy implementation...leads, in any case, to three related contradictions. First, the developmentalist discourse produces expectations....that even when the schemes fail and are criticised, there is still 'the fact that the people are willing to debate the development agenda', it means that the discourse will strike back....

Second is the contradiction between modern management and party building. The regime works on both – but at some point, of course, they are no longer compatible. Party building involves money and the diversion of funds....In the Food for Work programme...(t)he diversions were so many and it involved so much money that it attracted the attention, not only of the opposition, but also of the media.

Third, the contradiction between centralisation and participation. Policy-making is centralised, but policy implementation is supposed to be participatory. People are supposed to become 'partners in development'. But partnership requires ownership, and this requires some kind of say in processes of agenda setting and local policy design. This is not happening." [Brackets mine]

The rulers in AP, however, seems to be hardly aware of the contradictions. This is despite the fall of Naidu. It is widely known that the prospects of local governance in AP is marked by the paucity of all the four vital elements--- popularly knows as 4F Model--- funds, functions, functionaries and freedom. Ironical it may sound, even though AP had been one of the pioneering states of India in terms of providing legal legitimacy to local government by the way of passing a legislative act way back in 1959 it has lagged behind in the surge towards democratic decentralization. There is a definite measuring rod by which one can explain AP's "laggard" status in this respect. While the 11th Schedule of the Constitution provides the scope for the transfer of no less than 29 subjects to the local government in AP the number remains confined to only 17(26). Even in cases where transfers of subjects took place little attempt was made to transfer concerned functionaries and finances for the transferred subjects to take effect in the arena of local government. This apart, unlike Kerala and Madhya Pradesh AP has avoided the establishment of the District Planning Committees (DPCs), thereby subverting the scope for local level planning. No less important, the devolution of financial powers in the state has been negligible, with the Zilla Parishads and Mandal Parishads(27) remaining dependent on the state government. In AP, the Zilla Parishad has no control over the District Rural Development Authority (DRDA) which as a repository of the poverty alleviation programmes, has huge funds at its disposal.

If that is not all, the establishment of the Village Secretariat (*Gram Sachivalayam*) in January, 2002, and the Janmabhoomi Programme is said to be having adverse effects on the functioning of the local government in the state. The former has led to a sort of individualization of governance through the functions and role of the Village Secretary who has at the disposal as many as sixty functions relating to the departments of police, revenue, Panchayats and so forth. The latter has effected over-bureaucratisation and the *spoil system* (appointment of political activists)--- none of which are healthy developments in the context of democratic governance. Both the Village Secretariat and the state-sponsored Janmabhoomi Programme apparently sought to strengthen 'governance' at the local level but ended up in opposite direction because both were meant to enforce what I prefer to describe as *centralization through decentralization*. In the case of the Janmabhoomi Programme the organizations(28) that were introduced to enunciate development from different vantage points apparently, were basically subverting the representative institutions and concentrating power in the hands of government officials headed by the District Collector at the top and the Nodal Officer at the operational level. G. Krishna Reddy puts it graphically(29):

"Apparently Janmabhoomi denounces the bureaucracy for its failures, but relocates it in crucial position in the form of nodal agency. What it in reality hits are the local representative institutions, by introducing a whole range of unrepresentative bodies at the village level…. These committees have systematically usurped the functions constitutionally entrusted to (P)anchayats…. The local representative institutions have come under severe attack by the government of AP essentially in two manifested forms: a parallel set of institutions have been built around Janmabhoomi in the name of making people at the centre of development but ironically, without any representative character, and drying up financial resources of (P)anchayats and strengthening the hands of local bureaucratic machinery in disbursing the funds under Janmabhoomi". [Brackets mine]

AP is also losing yet another opportunity to link the self-help groups (SHGs), a number of which are constituted by rural women in the BPL (Below the Poverty Line) category, to the rejuvenation of rural local institutions. The much-publicised Velugu programme of the AP government has made some headway in creating and sustaining SHGs in terms of utilizing the power of micro-credit in social mobilization and in generating a bit of income but when it comes to the question of empowerment it is yet to strike at the roots. It is because the Velugu programme is yet to devise a strategy to link the energy of the members of the SHGs to political aspirations. If it could do so, AP would have a number of rural women in rural local governance. In that case, democratic decentralization would have become gender-sensitive. This limitation of the Velugu programme is acknowledged by

analysts, such as, Deshpande-Ranadive(30) who categorically states in the specific context of women empowerment that an increase in income, livelihood and assets does not necessarily lead to 'empowerment' in the true sense of the term. The analyst identifies(31) social inclusion and people's participation in generating action and voice as 'catalysts' that empower people through positive shifts in economic, physical, socio-cultural, political and mental spaces. The New ICT Policy provides that it would seek to associate the SHGs, especially those constituted by women, to set up and manage the Rajiv kiosks but it is, considering the agenda (or, lack of it) we are discussing here, is only a small cosmetic measure.

In the more specific context of e-governance such scant regard for democratic decentralization implies missing the opportunity of laying the local foundation of e-governance through local-level need-based assessment, information sharing, networking (both informational and social) and participatory appraisal and last but not the least, democratic access to the ICT. Krishna Reddy(32) in this context explains how the much-hyped schemes like APVAN (Andhra Pradesh Value Added Network) programme, under which some key functions like revenue, commercial taxes, transport, registration, employment exchanges, utilities and procurements were to be contracted out to a Singapore-based private company, would make information "totally inaccessible" to the ordinary people. One must in the same breath note that several civil society organizations, such as, Lok Satta(33), in AP have initiated a vigorous campaign for the "empowerment of local government", which, among other key objectives like implementation of the Right to Information, also visualises the formation of Federation for Empowerment of Local Governments not just in AP but also in other states of India. But the struggle seems to be a long-term one if one considers the fact that the task involves making a recalcitrant government, irrespective of the regime change, amenable to reason.

IV

Conclusion

To sum up, the AP case is a typical instance of the manifestations of putting 'e' before governance, of privileging the means over the ends. Our exploration of the AP scenario reveals that there is a sort of 'auto-closure' (in the sense of deliberate and self-imposed limitations) insofar as making the transition from e-government to e-governance is concerned. Such propensity, resulting in chronic disjointed 'flow' and lack of localisation, is a consequence of the failure to realize that the Digital Divide is both the cause and consequence of the social divide and the political divide, both marked by a yawning gap between the rulers and the ruled. But the problem lies not with the ICT but with the people who fail to extract the benefits of its potential.

We have at the outset described governance as a learning process with trial-and error method. E-governance, if it is to act as an instrument of 'reaching the unreached and voicing the voiceless', is not an exception to the rule. We have also elaborated why such process must involve a bottom-up approach, in consultation with the local people. With the advent of the ICT and its inevitable positioning in governance there are two possible routes to its utilization. First, one can take recourse to the technological upgradation of government services to ensure efficient service delivery. Second, one can seek to ensure people's access and pro-active participation in decision-making by, among other things, making the use of ICT for this purpose to embark on improved governance. Both can be pursued simultaneously as both put premium, though in different degree and different extent, on the change-initiative by respecting the public value of information, identifying the user needs, defining the information-seeking behaviour of the potential and actual beneficiaries and establishing various linkages from the local level upwards. But it requires high conceptual clarity backed up by appropriate policies. If for various constraints the latter, that is, e-governance, cannot be put immediately in the agenda of governance, the former, that is, e-government, can be taken up for the time being. But this very act, if adopted at the level of policymaking, should be clarified and made transparent without resorting to the rhetoric and illusory promise of e-governance. It is where the AP rulers falter. Till the day such state of affairs continue the question--- *democratic governance, which way now?*--- would continue to confront them along with the ordinary people of the state. As such, it is a formidable question; it is even more formidable for those who refuse to learn lessons from experience.

Acknowledgement

Notes and References

1. It should be mentioned at the outset that while both *democratic governance* and *e-governance* occupy the centrestage of the research on governance in general they at the same time remain, with few exceptions, separate points of reference and there is little research which intimately relates these two core concepts. This could perhaps be directly linked to the lack of intense theory-building efforts in the area keeping in mind the existing gap between theory and practice. For interesting elaboration, S. Sahay, S. and G. Walsham, "Information Technology in Developing Countries: A Need for Theory Building", *Information Technology for Development*, 6(3/4), 1995. pp. 111-124.

2. In this paper we use the term *localization* in a broader context--- by going beyond the more widely discussed issue of the local language content and locally relevant content of the ICT. See in this context, Kenneth Keniston, "Grassroots ICT Projects in India: Some Preliminary Hypothesis", *ASCI Journal of Management*,Vol.31,No.2,2002; also available at the website web.mit.edu/~kken/public/FILES/courses.htm In our case, the process of localization very much includes the ground-level 'spadework' for creating suitable ambience, in the form of establishing a democratic and participatory order in local level decision-making, which we regard as extremely important in ensuring access of the ordinary people to the ICT and its democratization. To repeat, this linkage is largely missing in the current output of research on the ICT.

3. I am deliberately using the term Information and Communication Technology, rather than the more familiar term Information Technology (IT), to stress on the vital element and role of communication--- not only in its structural and technological dimension but also in its significance as a social process.

4. In another segment of the same research project of the author the e-governance roadmap of the state of West Bengal has been critically analysed in the specific contexts of the democratization of media technology and the Geographical Information System (GIS) respectively. See Dipankar Sinha, "Emerging Media Technology in the Third World: A Reality Check in West Bengal", *Telemedium* (USA), Vol.51, No.2, Fall 2004, pp.39-44; Dipankar Sinha, "Information Technology and Citizen Participation: Macro-Lessons from a Micro-Study", *Global Media Journal* (Indian edition), Vol.1, No.1, November, 2005, pp. 1-16. Available at website: www.manipal.edu/gmj/issues/nov05/dipankar.php

5. For an understanding of the deficiencies and problems in the developing countries, Kenneth Keniston and Deepak Kumar, *IT Experience in India: Bridging the Digital Divide*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2004. This volume concentrates on India but the points discussed are relevant for other developing countries as well;

6. Richard Heeks, "E-government for Development: Basic Definitions", www.egov4.org/egovdefn.htm Accessed on 20 October, 2002; Richard Heeks, "Understanding e-Governance for Development", www.unige.ch/iued/wsis/DEVDOT/00341.HTM Yet another important website--- that of DigitalGovernance.orgInitiative---dealing with conceptualization of the theme is http:/216.197.119.113/artman/publish/concept.shtml.

7. The term 'citizen' is used here in a conventional sense to denote the members of the State, who are at least legally entitled to the service delivery.

8. S. Vincent and A. Mahesh, "E isn't Everything", 16 April, 2005, website indiatogether.org Retrieved on 20 April, 2005.

9. www.ap-it.com/index.html

10. Vision 2020, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, 1999.

11. Vision of e-Government in Andhra Pradesh, Department of Information Technology and Communications, Government of Andhra Pradesh, April, 2002.

12. *Knowledge, Technology, People: Profile of Centre for Good Governance*, Centre for Good Governance, Hyderabad, 2004, pp.1-2.

13. New ICT Policy 2005-2010, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, 2005.

14. Vision 2020, p.8.

15. *National Human Development Report 2001*, Planning Commission, Government of India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p.144 and p. 141. Both are the combined figures of the rural and urban sectors. Incidentally, there has been no new edition of the report till date.

16. AP is been in the news for the suicide cases of thousand of farmers. But there is more to its dismal record in human development. it has the largest number of child labourers in the country and close to ninety per cent of rural workers are either illiterate or educated only up to the primary level. Employment growth saw a drastic decline in the Naidu era. In rural Andhra Pradesh, it was 2.40 per cent per annum in the decade before him. It fell to 0.29 per cent during 1994-2000. The rate of growth of real wages in rural areas also declined sharply in the 1990s.

    What the media fondly called "one of the fastest-growing states" was really stumbling. The growth of GDP was just around 5 per cent for 1994-2001. Lowest among the southern states and lower than the national average. Lower than what the same state had posted during 1981-91. Only three states, Rajasthan, Haryana and Maharashtra had showed higher growth than A.P. in the 1980s. However, this rank sank from number four to eight in the next decade.

    AP also showed no improvement in its Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) between the first and second National Family Health Surveys. AP's IMR rate is 65 which is close to Bihar's 62.

    (Source: P. Sainath, "Chandrababu: Image and Reality", www.indiatogether.org/2004/jul/psa-cbabu.htm)

17. Personal conversation with the author on 26 March, 2005.

18. Interview of G. Krishna Reddy, taken on 25 March, 2005.

19. *Businessworld*, 7-21 March, 1999, p.23.

20. *Empowerment of Local Governments: A Lok Satta Report*, Lok Satta, Hyderabad, 2004, pp. 105-106.

21. I am thankful to Professor Amartya Mukhopadhyay for raising this point as part of his intervention after my presentation of the draft of this paper on 20 December, 2005. While a thorough discussion on technologism, tempting as it is, is beyond the scope of this paper it can be noted that technologism, in its twenty first century manifestation, is giving rise to the hyped concepts of e-democracy and e-society, concepts which have little to prescribe in terms of restructuring the local institutional configuration and process.

22. Malla Reddy of Rural Development Trust, Ananthapur. Interview taken on 26 March, 2005.

23. P. Sanjay, Advocacy Associate, Foundation for Democratic Reforms. Personal conversation with the author on 27 March, 2005.

24. It is in the sense that the visualisation and implementation of democratic decentralization requires establishment of relatively autonomous local institutions of governance, composed of the representatives of the people. This by itself requires an electoral process. In contrast, delegation or deconcentration are just based on mechanical transfer of some select functions, mainly for administrative convenience, from the 'higher' authorities to the 'lower' levels. For a relatively good theoretical exposure, D. Burns et al., *The*

Politics of Decentralization, McMillan, Hampshire, 1994. Especially the chapter on "Rethinking Local Democracy", pp. 30-51. For a provocative and informative literature on the Indian context, UNDP, *Decentralization in India: Challenges and Opportunities*, Discussion Paper 1, New Delhi, n.d..

25. Jose Mooij, *Smart Governance? Politics in the Policy Process in Andhra Pradesh, India*, Working Paper 228, October 2003, Overseas Development Institute, London, pp.22-23. Brackets by the author.
26. *Empowerment of Local Governments*, p.21.
27. Created, following the initiative of N.T. Rama Rao (the founder of the TDP and the former Chief Minister of AP), by splitting the Panchayat Samity into *Mandals*, sub-district level units in order to ensure the support of the Kama caste (to which Naidu himself belongs) and the backward castes for the party.
28. A couple of notable instances are the Varna Samrakshana Samity for social forestry, Chief Minister's Empowerment for Youth Groups (CMEY-youth groups).
29. G. Krishna Reddy, "New Populism and Liberalisation: Regime Shift under Chandrababu Naidu in AP", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXVII, No.9, March 2, 2002, pp.877-878.
30. Joy Deshmukh-Ranadive, *Women's Self-Help Group in Andhra Pradesh: Participatory Poverty Alleviation in Action*, paper presented in World Bank Conference on Scaling Up Poverty Reduction: A Global Learning Process, Sanghai, 2004.
31. Ibid, p.17.
32. Krishna Reddy, "New Populism and Liberalisation", op.cit., p. 881.
33. Jayaprakash Narayan, *Report on the Concluding Celebrations of the One Crore (10 Million) Signature Campaign for Local Government Empowerment and Workshop on Deepening Democracy*, Lok Satta, Hyderabad, n.d., pp.3-4.