Discussion Comment on "Development and E-Governance: Reflections on India's Democratic Experience" written by Dipankar Sinha

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The author's draft

Summary of the paper

The theme: Development, Democracy and Governance – Lessons and Policy Implications

The title: Development and E-Governance: Reflections on India's Democratic Experience.

The attention: the Indian democratic experience in the context of development-E-Governance interface; towards that development of a conceptual-methodological framework.

The premise: E-Governance is a potential tool for inclusive development and participatory democracy, when there is no exclusive reliance on 'technological and technocratic agency.' [Author's foundational hypothesis 1]

The central observations on India: Suffering from 'dual deficiency: [1] (wrongly) equates e-government with e-governance; [2] visualizes 'the ICT as the prime instrument of development democracy in which … a specific genre of development with material reorganization, technical efficiency, highly rationalized procedures and processes are sought to be promoted, that too often at the cost of the welfarist considerations and popular mobilization.' →establishment of 'a narrow focus on e-government as distinct from the broader perspective of e-governance in which the construction of the Information Society is prioritized beyond the overwhelming stress on access to bring up the question of entitlement…'

The promise: More on the data generated by on-going fieldwork to secure his understanding.

The lay out of the paper: Part 1: 'conceptual-theoretical themes'; 'issues that shape and disseminate a specific perception of E-Governance. Part 2: 'the specifics of the Indian policy scenario.'

The intentions:

- Interrogating the 'mainstream development discourse' in India which claims E-Governance as "the "most viable instrument" for simultaneously democratizing development." → 'a 'reality-check' of the official E-Governance scenario in India.'
- "Closer scrutiny of the existing order of things especially in the days of mounting publicity of the developmental state in which performance-based, efficient,

rationalized, technology-aided managerially efficient delivery system being privileged over the hitherto existing notion of welfare".

- Highlighting "the tensions and contradictions between the participatory and the developmental modes of organization of the Indian polity with the exploration of the status of 'people's voice' in this scenario". [pp. 1-2]

My observations on the draft

On the author's 'foundational hypotheses':

[1] Should these be called 'hypotheses'? Because they appear to be his convictions, to which however he has a natural claim. In fact, the author is categorical that his paper has no 'veil of neutrality', and 'it overtly opts for foregrounding governance in the interest of the ordinary people.' [p.2] His justification for taking a political position is that 'both the policy discourse and the language we use to talk about (ICT) policies and problems are not neutral because in both cases setting the terms involves intense struggle for power which results in differential meanings of technology to the ruler and the ruled and even among the different segments of the latter.' [p.2]

A few clarifications would be welcome:

- *Whose 'the policy discourse' does he have in mind? He probably has in mind the policy discourse of the Indian state, an important mouthpiece of what he calls 'the mainstream development discourse.'*
- *If this is the case, it is worthwhile to mention the alternative discourse he advocates. A mere hint that such an alternative discourse should have 'governance in the interest of the ordinary people' keeps his non-neutral position undefined. Nuanced notions like 'the ordinary people' are not very illuminating. And it is not a sufficiently firm political counter-position, either.*

[2] The author believes 'that massive and extensive 'injection' of technology into unequal, non-participatory structural relationship is only a cosmetic and self-defeating endeavour.' He thereby engages the official position that E-Governance will contribute to inclusionary development.

- At the same time the author believes that E-Governance has an 'immense potential for ensuring effectiveness of both inclusionary development and participatory democracy'.
- The potential, according to him, will materialize only under conditions of 'sustained popular participation', 'the key to the symbolic and substantive acceptance of E-Governance on the way to ensure inclusionary development.'
- The above-mentioned positions appear to be historically grounded. *But the author leaves us guessing how popular participation can be both an outcome of E-Governance and a vital precondition of popular participation.*
- *Further, there is not much clue as to what are the forms and the levels of popular participation that will ensure inclusive growth.*

On the author's Part 1:

'Whose E-Governance?: Transnational Root of Information Society'

- A good brief review of scholarly [Bell, Touraine, Castells] work and of policies of 'west-controlled transnational agencies [OECD, UNDP, UNCTAD, ILO, ITU, the World Bank].
- A well-founded skepticism about designs of Information Society [making it an inclusive society; user-friendly, barrier-free technologies, formation of the transnational Digital Opportunity Task Force, re-orienting the Information Society to 'cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content']
- The critique the author shares:
  - Fetishizing ICT.
  - Promoting technological determinism.
  - Fosters the role of the market forces.
  - Public-Private Partnership combining the protective role of the state with pro-active role of the market.
  - Hegemonising the creation of Information Society in the developing countries to ensure the dominance of the neo-liberal model everywhere.
  - Autonomises technology and making it apolitical.

On the basis of this critique the author locates what is inevitable in India: [a] ""new technology-induced development and governance" would be at best stunted and at worst be a failure" [b] 'making ordinary people disillusioned and/or cynical of the concerned endeavours' [p.5]

Reasons:

- Underestimation of 'local factors and conditions'
- Partial implementation of Information Society and E-Governance, revealing a 'failure to understand the complex dynamics of information itself.'

But the author does not specify:

- *the 'local factors and conditions'.*
- *what would be a correct understanding of 'the complex dynamics of information itself.'*

The author's over-all reasoning structure consists of deducing from the western experience/theoretical reflections what is destined to happen in India also. This is obviously agreeable. But we would be eager to find out how the author based on the data collected by him, draws on the Indian experience to justify his apprehension of failures [new technology-induced development and governance" would be at best stunted and at worst be a failure; it will make ordinary people disillusioned and/or cynical of the concerned endeavours].

On the author's Part 1:

'E-Governance is more than E-Government'

- A well-argued distinction between E-Governance and E-Government.
- A reasonable justification of E-Governance being more appropriate for democratic governance.
- In the choice between 'efficient service-delivery by using the digitalized online mode' [E-Government] and 'enhancing citizen's participation in decision-making process that concerns their life' [E-Governance], the author firmly inclines towards the latter.

The author apparently takes for granted that 'the ordinary people' are un-stratified and have a uniform expectation from the state; that all of them value democracy more than development.

'Access as Base Problem'

The author's position, which is partly based on a critique by global bodies:

- An emphasis on technocratic factors like 'deployment deficiency' and 'integration failure' on the part of those who assess the impact of ICT explains, for the author, why 'the felt needs of the people remain out of sight and the main factors responsible for failures and deficiencies, usually the severe underestimation of the users' demands…As a result, the ordinary people are not accorded any participatory role to contribute to the shaping of E-Governance.' [p.9]
- That technology should serve the interests of the ordinary people is a good moral position which represents the democratic spirit.
- That for radically transforming E-Governance [linking capabilities, entitlement and functioning of ICT towards its democratization] we need to draw on Amartya Sen's capability approach is a very worthy suggestion.
- The author's grand project is to link 'variables – of general type like gender, age, income, skill, location and infrastructure, and India-specific ones like caste and tribe which intervene to cause the differential outcome of both capabilities (both potential and real) and functionings (as actual use or utilization).'

But
- *The author could be little for specific/illustrative of 'the felt needs of the people', and of 'the main factors responsible for failures and deficiencies'.*
- *He should help us locate how the ordinary people could be accorded 'participatory role to contribute to the shaping of E-Governance.' That has to be in case of the state-sponsored E-Governance only because the private sector would always decide for itself and it can not be expected to be charitable.*
- *Isn't the process of according the ordinary people 'participatory role to contribute to the shaping of E-Governance', a part of a larger political project of transforming the nature of the state and economy?*

- *Is it an exclusive problem of capitalist society? Do ethnic unrest and return of destitution in China point to something?*
- *The author's grand project, stated above, of linking universal and Indian variables is theoretically exciting but I'm sure that he realizes that it is methodologically challenging particularly because his prime reference is to what he calls 'the felt needs of the people'. This is not easily quantified. Because multiple variables are to be set within a frame, the uneasy question of giving weights has to be answered. That might be solved when one is trying to construct a frame for comprehension. But the author would not want to stop there. He has in his agenda the transformation of E-Governance as it is practiced.*
- *How come the author has missed 'class' as an important variable?*

The author's basic position:

Blind transplantation of the western scheme on Information Society will not do for India.

But:

Is he suggesting that India is not ready? Is that the only objection to shift to E-Governance? What changes either in the nature of polity and society in India would make India qualify for E-Governance as a tool for both inclusive development and participatory development?

Has not E-Governance emerged in the west as a device for control over people ['the ordinary people', 'the ruled', in the author's words] in the late-modern society? If, for argument's sake, E-Governance emerged in the west to facilitate a shift of the democratic polity to the participatory mode, can one argue that people's participation by itself should not excite any body because popular participation by itself ensures nothing of deep democratic significance; it can even be quietly manipulated participation. Has E-Governance ensured inclusive growth in the capitalist west?

Why do we posit to E-Governance, as the author has done, the power to ensure both participation [democracy] and inclusive growth?

I have a feeling, which can be wrong, that E-Governance in the west was kind of an organic growth which technological development made possible and which suite the imperatives of capital in late modern society. If the perception is right, then the sponsorers of E-Governance did not have to propagate the 'virtues' [conducive to popular participation and to inclusive growth] to make people accept it. The developing polities or economies in peripheral capitalism have had to do this to secure the legitimacy of a transplanted contrivance. How often and how much of state projection of the urgency of E-Governance [keeping in mind the imagined two gains of participation and inclusive growth] we – and the common people -- come across in India?

On the author's Part 2:

Experimenting 'e': Indian Context

The author's critical observations on the National E-Governance Plan, 2007:

- Wrong equation between E-Government and E-Governance.
- The thrust on 'service delivery'.
- Not really 'holistic' despite the promise.
- 'Capacity building confined to the government departments.
- Lip service to the use of 'e' for the needs of the common man.
- No scope for civil society organizations to provide the people's perspective.

The author's positive assessment of the corporate initiative: e-Choupal

- Deft use of information by the sponsor making ventures profitable.
- ITC as a facilitator for face-to-face communication.
- Doing away with the negative features of the *mandi* system but coopting its vital feature, i.e., 'acquiring and processing information through human interaction.'
- Methodological precision and operational and transactional efficiency.
- ITC, a role model for corporate social responsibility.
- Over-all: "This interplay and the 'role reversal' [between the local farmers and the ITC]… provides important clue as to how e-Governance can be made effective in everyday life and at the grassroots level, especially in treating information as a primary resource and information technology as an aiding tool."

My observations:

Is it not ironical that a corporate enterprise succeeds when the state fails in E-Governance when a corporate has no interest in fostering democracy?

Since the state is the key institution to ensure democracy, participatory development and inclusive growth, doesn't the relative success of ITC leave us with only a cynical view of the state and the prospect of democracy under its agency even when it opts for E-Governance?

Conceding the centrality of information in Information Society and in E-Governance, is the short-fall in assuring the two way flow of information in the Common Service Centers only?

Is being located in a flow of information only vindication of the ordinary men?

A few undefined expressions which undermine the rigour of the analysis:

- *'Conceptual growth of E-Governance' [p.2].*
- *'free-floating discussions with the ordinary people' [p.2]*

Writing style:

[1] establishment of 'a narrow focus on e-government as distinct from the broader perspective of e-governance in which the construction of the Information Society is

prioritized beyond the overwhelming stress on access to bring up the question of entitlement…' [p.6]

Does he mean that 'the construction of the Information Society is prioritized' in the narrow focus? And, does he imply that 'the overwhelming stress on access to bring up the question of entitlement' distinguishes 'the broader perspective of e-governance'?

[2] The author inserts reference to the Indian scenario when he is engaged in developing 'conceptual-theoretical themes'/'issues that shape and disseminate a specific perception of E-Governance, while he has a separate Part 2 to analyse India.