

How technology can help reduce systemic graft and improve efficiency

No discussion in the technology world today is complete without artificial intelligence (AI), data economy and blockchain, among others. Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led India is on course to lead the Fourth Industrial Revolution and provide innovative solutions for a better quality of life. Modi recently spoke at the World Government Summit in Dubai, launched an AI centre in Mumbai and addressed the global information technology (IT) industry at the NASSCOM-WCIT (World Congress on Information Technology), where his central theme was around digital technology emerging as a great enabler to pave the way for efficient service delivery, governance, and improved access to financial inclusion, education, justice, and healthcare.

Efficient, resilient, and accountable governance systems are essential to successfully manage resources, provide public services, and foster competence. Corruption and secrecy are often at odds with such goals. Unaccounted financial flows undermine development and governance while secrecy in the functioning of government systems weakens the national trust. The “technological revolution” serves as a prerequisite for democracy, while access to information and transparency are key tools in the fight against corruption. The emergence of government platforms has the potential to push forward the anti-corruption agenda through disintermediation, rule-based implementation, citizen empowerment and engagement.

In most countries, digital disruption by government has not kept pace with digital disruption in business. India is an exception. Of the 11 technical systems that have ever broken the one-billion-user mark, everyone of those is privately owned—Facebook and Google being prominent examples. The one exception is Aadhaar and the stack of cloud storage and payment technologies built on top of the same.

Impact on citizens

Taking a people-centric approach to policy, and using technology for mass impact, the government of India launched the biggest financial inclusion programme of all times—the Jan-Dhan Yojana—through which 311.4 million zero-balance accounts have been created. With a biometric verifiable identity and a linked bank account, millions of people eligible for receipt of government services now have a way to access those services digitally, by using the digital infrastructure nicknamed JAM, which refers to the innovative interlinking of Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, and mobile numbers. The government has both created the visionary JAM revolution and employed it as the backbone for social and economic growth. Cutting out middlemen, and gradually putting over 410 schemes from 56 different ministries into the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) programme, the government has transferred over Rs2.89 trillion, impacted over 630 million beneficiaries and overall has saved Rs57,000 crore. This saving is being used to reach people who were devoid of benefits.

Over 10.5 million senior citizens now give their proof-of-life from an Aadhaar-enabled system rather than travelling to a pension office. Over 52.7 million Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) mark sheets and certificates are now available on the DigiLocker cloud—every Indian’s own digital storage. Data analytics-driven tax systems are powering the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT)’s new “management by exception” engine where tax returns are processed systemically and only exceptions handled by officers. The new regime that includes voluntary e-communication and e-assessments—being rolled out gradually on a national level—will bring in more efficiency, create an environment that instils confidence among honest taxpayers, and uproot corruption.

Impact on government

The benefit of using technology for bringing transparency into government procurement of goods and services is being achieved by GeMs (Government e-Marketplaces). GeMs implement a business-to-business marketplace model to transform corruption-ridden government procurement process. It also creates a transparent and level-playing field for qualified sellers, irrespective of size and “connections”. E-auction platforms have already conducted noiseless auctions for coal mining and telecom spectrum—something that was always in the news for manual gaming of the system.

Traditionally, projects had a habit of getting delayed and going over budget due to lack of coordinated decision-making. The PM’s PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance And Timely Implementation) platform is a digital dashboard that abates delays and helps in timely decisions and monitoring of key projects and programmes. Several mobile applications—Meri Sadak, for instance—have also been using crowd-sourced citizen feedback to get real-time project status and provide a realistic implementation time frame. The MyGov initiative of the Prime Minister emboldens participative governance by providing a citizen connect to policies and decisions. With public access to dashboards providing updated data on various programmes and schemes such as GARV, Swachh Bharat and UJJWALA, the aim of MyGov is to improve accountability and transparency within the government system.

GovTech 2.0

Budget 2018 very rightly and timely recognized the transformative power of blockchain and AI to foster inclusive development. These technologies are being leveraged for government disruption and the Prime Minister wants India to lead the world with these technologies to address societal challenges while engaging more people in the formulation of governmental policies. India has chosen to embrace digital-led disruption to address its inequitable and inconsistent growth. The country still has a long way to go to reach its full potential. The societal challenges created by digital disruption, both expected and unintended, are real. They will only be addressed with a combination of administrative humility and entrepreneurial determination. But the long-term benefits are real as well. The reality is that India is moving into the future at an unprecedented rate. And the path it is taking to get there is digital.

Arvind Gupta is an Eisenhower Innovation Fellow, member of the World Economic Forum’s Council for The Future of Digital Economy and Society and the CEO of MyGov. The views expressed are personal.

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