

Perspective

Issues that matter



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Governance On The Go

Bringing governments
closer to citizens

IN CONVERSATION



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“We have used mobiles to end the need to queue up at government offices for basic services”

From a mobile app that enables instant transmission of inspection and survey data within the government to a well-oiled system of SMS alerts to citizens applying for certificates and services, the Government of Maharashtra has turned the mobile platform into an important facilitator of better governance. Rajesh Aggarwal, a Maharashtra-cadre IAS officer of the 1989 batch, is the man leading these initiatives. In an interview with *Perspective*, he shares details of the many steps taken by the state government to give the idea of mobile governance a positive thrust.

The Government of Maharashtra has been vigorously pursuing the goals of the National eGovernance Plan. How important is the mobile platform in your initiatives?

Our government is committed to using the massive reach of mobile phones to enable easy and round-the-clock access to public services, especially in the rural areas. We believe that the mobile platform can enable the state government to reduce paperwork significantly and communicate better with citizens. Led by this belief, we have developed a number of mobile applications (apps) and are using them in a number of ways.

What are some of the important directions that the state government has taken to use the mobile platform to cut through red tape and come closer to the citizens?

One of our most successful apps is for use by government officials for

inspections and surveys. Suppose an engineer goes to inspect a project site, or officials of the social justice department go to check out the condition of a hostel, they don't have to prepare lengthy reports on paper. They can file the data on the mobile app and their superiors have the option of getting a field report even while an inspection is on. The beauty of this app is that it is very easily customisable and we have already shared it with some other states.

We have also developed apps to streamline our communications with citizens and even provide them information that is relevant to their lives. One of our apps allows journalists to download government orders without having to travel to the Mantralaya in Mumbai to get a physical copy. Another informs differently able people about offices and public places that are easily accessible on wheelchair. We use crowdsourcing to collect and update data for this app. And while we are upgrading the online presence of the

Mumbai Police control room, we are introducing an app to guide women on their safety in the metropolis.

These are laudable examples of the mobile platform being used effectively to speed up communications within the state government for faster decision-making and for greater interactivity with citizens. What is your department doing to make life easier for government employees, pensioners and service providers?

The salaries/pensions of a majority of Government of Maharashtra employees and retirees now get transferred electronically to their bank accounts and SMS alerts are issued at once. This process has not only ensured complete transparency, but also reduced delays. Likewise, we have streamlined payments to service providers. They no longer have to make repeated visits to government offices to get what is rightfully due to them.

Their payments are moved, within a stipulated number of days, directly to their bank accounts through the RTGS route and SMS alerts are sent when these transfers are made. The system of electronic payments also allows senior officers to detect delays and remove the bottlenecks, and scotch any possibility of corruption. We are doing away with the need to queue up at government offices.

This combination of electronic transfers of funds followed up by SMS alerts has benefited students who receive scholarships from the state government. No matter how far they may be from Mumbai, all scholarship recipients get the amounts that is due to them at the same time.

Queues at government offices used to be a daily feature in the past. Could you share examples of how the mobile platform is being used to make queues history?

SMS alerts have made it possible for all citizens to track the status of their applications for certificates and requests for services. This eliminates the possibility of unnecessary delays and also does away with the need for people to crowd government offices for information about their applications.

People living in Maharashtra today can receive SMS updates on the progress of their applications for the various certificates (from birth and death to caste, proof of residence and income) issued by Citizen Service Centres. When they present these certificates for school or college admissions, or scholarships, or jobs, the authorities can instantly verify their authenticity merely by sending a text message to the SMS number given at the bottom of each certificate.

You have to go to the Government Printing Press on Charni Road in Mumbai to see the visible difference



SMS alerts have made it possible for all citizens to track the status of their applications for certificates and requests for services.

Rajesh Aggarwal
Principal Secretary (IT),
Government of Maharashtra

this integration of the online and mobile platforms can make to the lives of the citizens. In the old system, at least 600 people had to queue up daily outside the press to get their name changes notified in the official gazette. It took two months for each gazette notification to be issued. They can now file their applications online, use quick, paperless UID-linked eKYC at the counter, and on the same day in the evening, the electronic gazette notification will be on the website. The applicants instantly get an SMS. The time for the notification can come down from two months to two hours!

The Government of Maharashtra, we believe, has taken a number of steps to leverage Aadhar for improved delivery of services. Can you cite examples of the mobile platform being used for this purpose?

We have developed an app that allows people to book LPG cylinders via mobiles using their Aadhar data. This service works on the USSD platform. To ensure the confidentiality of the data, users are given a one-time password each time they use the service. Mobiles have also become important means for the financial inclusion of people living in the remotest parts of the state. Now that the majority of the people living in the state have Aadhar numbers, bank agents (or 'correspondents') armed with mobiles can go to under-served

villages and help their residents to open accounts.

Last year, your department teamed up with Microsoft to organise an 'app fest' to get young developers to work on mobile applications that can be used for the improved delivery of citizen services. What have been the gains of this initiative?

The app fest was a very useful exercise. It threw up a number of interesting ideas for apps, for instance, to connect people with blood banks and ambulance services. We are now more open than before to ideas from young developers. We have issued new and easier guidelines for websites and mobile apps whose development does not cost more than Rs 2 lakh. Now, it is not necessary for an app developer to be a registered company with a number of years of experience in the field. We are now ready to support even students with innovative, scalable ideas. ■

600

The number of people who can now get their name changes gazetted daily without having to queue up at the Government Press in Mumbai.