Humans are still core to Digital India - Intermediaries

What is the issue?

- Even in 'Digital India', humans are significant in brokering trust between governments and citizens, and this was especially evident during the pandemic.
- It is time to accommodate intermediaries, who deliver last mile governance, into the design of e-governance programmes.

Who are the intermediaries?

- Intermediaries are crucial offline architectures that enable the state to do its work better.
- Offline intermediaries can be both political and apolitical, individuals and 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.

What role do intermediaries play?

- Intermediaries help citizens overcome barriers to awareness (of availability of digital services and rights from the state) and ability.
- This includes the ability to navigate these solutions with trust.
- The 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.
- From people's perspective, intermediaries help them see the government.

Are they being best utilised?

- During the pandemic, public came to rely on various individuals to address daily needs, even as more and more services went online.
    - During this time, eGovernments Foundation (eGov) and Aapti Institute came together to explore how digitally excluded communities engage

with governance.
    - It was 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.
- But the above reality was not considered in the design of most e-governance programmes.
- For instance, 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).

- 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.
- They worked for delivering government services at citizens’ doorstep.

What could the policy approach be?

- 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.
- 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 thus crucial to think about leveraging the strengths of intermediaries.
- Intermediaries are to be seen as crucial to the realisation of governance outcomes and as a natural extension of the governance model.
- At a broader level, increasing digitisation of governance across domains including healthcare, financial inclusion, justice and social services is inevitable.
- Meanwhile, during this transition, work has to be on with intermediaries to raise citizens’ awareness, build intermediaries’ skills and capabilities, and establish governance frameworks with suitable feedback loops.
- All these go in to supporting the process of responsible, responsive and data-driven governance across domains.

Source: The Hindu

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