



Impact of Digital Era of Governance on Service Delivery Mechanism in Punjab

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary times of Digital Era of Governance (DEG), the adoption of 'e-practices' in administrative service delivery is a trending practice of administrative reforms worldwide. This paper explores the impact of e-practices on the public service delivery mechanism in Punjab state of India, specifically SEWA Kendra (Service Center) Project. The present study is based upon both primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected by means of questionnaire from the users availing services from the SEWA Kendras in the Punjab. Views of administrative officials were also elicited regarding this. Relevant books, journals, documents, newspapers, websites, reports and so on formed the secondary data sources.

Digital era governance (DEG) is the latest emerging paradigm in the field of public administration. The concept was first introduced in post-NPM studies conducted by Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts and their colleagues during the period 2000–2005. In these studies, they identified three elements of DEG as 're-integration of services, needs-based integration and digitalization'. This paradigm not only promotes the digitization of government processes and public service delivery mechanisms, but also highlights the importance of the public sector by bringing some issues back into the realm of government control. The re-importance of the public sector was a unique aspect of these studies, which ran counter to the NPM agenda of 'roll-back of the state'. Post-NPM studies emphasized the new challenges of rapidly changing technologies and systems for the public sector. It was felt that the need of the hour is to move towards innovative approaches for the development of the public administration sector (Dunleavy et al, 2006).ⁱ

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NPM and DEG

Intellectually, the central focus element of the NPM movement was managerial reforms. It lays less significance on digitalization of managerial process. The NPM movement, which started during the 1990s, ran into crisis situations during the 2000s. Post-NPM studies developed DEG model, which emphasized the importance of digital transformation as well as organizational re-integration in governments and needs-based holism of government services. These studies established that Right-wing parties, whose ideological foundations were built against the market, tend to reject the narrative of NPM agenda when they come to power, but even in NPM mature countries also, private involvement in public service provision usually proves costly over time (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013).ⁱⁱ

Helen Margetts and Patrick Dunleavy in their study identified the growth of two waves of DEG after the decline of NPM movement. The first wave of DEG represents the modernization of government processes through information and communication technology between 2000 and 2010. It can also be understood as the development of e-Governance in government work. While its second wave is based upon the development of social media after 2010. According to Margetts and Dunleavy, public activism on social media has created a second wave of DEGs, which has forced new approaches to government operations globally.

Macro-themes of DEG

1. REINTEGRATION

It reintegrates public sector processes fragmented by the NPM movement and advocates 're-governmentalizing' of the management of activities that should be carried out by government itself. It also calls for devising new processes to perform the same task once instead of multiple times to break the duplicative organizational hierarchy of NPM.



2. NEEDS-BASED HOLISM

It involves the redesigning of structure of the government agencies to make them more flexible according to the needs of the client, i.e. citizens. It implements one-stop processes by end-to-end redesigning of the public service delivery mechanism.

3. DIGITALIZATION

Digitalization means the complete integration of the entire process of government work with ICTs. Through this, the entire interaction between the government and the citizens is done through e-practices during the delivery of public services. It uses automation technology to establishing exchange of services without any human intervention, elimination of unnecessary processes and procedures and hassle-free service delivery to citizens. To implement digitalization fully, it requires the change in formal rules and procedures, which means to make them more flexible, more simple.

DEG and e-Governance

The third macro-theme of DEG, i.e. Digitalisation, promotes and supports the use of ICT in government business, which is known as digital governance or e-governance. It seeks to facilitate administrative development for a better forum and greater transparency between the people and the government. It is essential to re-engineer the processes at all levels of the government systems towards the public service delivery. Almost all developed countries have completed the agenda of making public services and public sector information available online. Although India is still a laggard in the area of online service provision completely, it has also made significant progress in aspects of public service delivery. In the state of Punjab too, public service modernization program is continuously developing in e-governance.

Impact of DEG on Public Service Delivery in Punjab State of India

The concept of public service delivery in India is undergoing significant changes. Now the role of the state is changing from a mere regulator to a citizen-centric one. Major experiments are being done through the usage of ICT to bring accountability, transparency and efficiency in the



interface between citizens and government. Various campaigns like National e-Governance Plan (NEGP), Digital India, e-Kranti, Sevottam Model of Service Delivery, etc. are landmark developments of this trend. In view of these campaigns, the Punjab Government has also established platforms to provide timely and quality services to the citizens through integrated service centers, SEWA Kendras (earlier known as SUWIDHA Kendras), where single window service of government services is being provided to the citizens. The institutional framework for these centers is drawn up from the following documents:

- I. The Punjab Transparency & Accountability in Delivery of Public Services, 2018ⁱⁱⁱ
- II. Promoting e-Governance: The Smart Way Forward, 2008 (11th Report of ARC-II)^{iv}
- III. Citizen-Centric Administration, 2009 (12th Report of ARC-II)^v
- IV. Various Reports of Punjab Governance Reforms Commission^{vi}

The purpose of Sewa Kendras is to provide smooth, streamlined and timely delivery of public services by establishing coordination between various departments of the government through human and technical networking. The key objective of Sewa Kendras was aimed at the optimal utilization of manpower and resources engaged in public service delivery. They were aimed to provide cost-effective methods to the departments for efficient service delivery to the citizen. This project enables the departments to focus on their core functions and responsibilities by bringing uniformity and integration across State in public service delivery mechanisms. It covered the service delivery operations under Right to Service (RTS) with a stipulated time frame of delivery. The building of the Kendra is designed to provide good ambiance and amenities for citizens.

Need for Sewa Kendras^{vii}

- I. *The average coverage is 45,000 populations per center.*
- II. *Delay in delivery of services, long waiting time.*
- III. *Lack of monitoring mechanism.*
- IV. *Duplication of physical infrastructure, manpower wastage, overloading as well as under-utilization of resources.*

- V. *Multiple front end delivery channels like SUWIDHA, FARD Kendras, Saanjh Kendras, Transport etc., leads to confusion among citizens as to which service can be availed from where.*
- VI. *Monetary loss to the citizens in the form of wastage of time, loss of wages & productivity, transport cost etc.*

Background of SEWA Kendra Project

In the purview of the paradigm shift in governance structure, **SUWIDHA Kendra** was one of the early single window initiatives of e-Governance in Punjab. It was designed and developed by National Informatics Centre (NIC) and funded by the Department of Communication & Information Technology of Government of India. SUWIDHA was established with the sole purpose of providing the convenience to the citizens of single point receipt and delivery of various services related to various Departments, defining a specified delivery date depending upon the type of service and accepting cash at the counter itself. These Kendras were under the management of self-sustained district level Sukhmani Society under the chairmanship of Deputy Commissioner. The district level Sukhmani Society was kept under the framework and supervision of state level body. The project was also extended to establish State-Level Data Centre and later get replaced with SEWA Kendras across the state in August 2016.^{viii}

Sewa Kendra is designed as such a ‘one-stop-shop’, where the entire gamut of citizen services of all government departments is available under one roof. Designed by the Chief Architect of Punjab, they are categorized into three categories of Type I, II, and III as per the number of counters as seven, four, and two respectively. On the state level, the whole project is implemented into three geographic zones. Zone One includes all District of Majha and Doaba Region, such as Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Tarn Taran, Pathankot (all of Majha Region) Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Kapurthala and SBS Nagar (all of Doaba Region). As Malwa is the largest region of Punjab, geographically, so remaining two zones dividedly included the districts of Malwa. The Districts of Sangrur, Barnala, Patiala, Fatehgarh Sahib, Ludhiana, Rupnagar, and SAS Nagar are included in Zone Two. Zone Three included Bathinda, Faridkot, Fazilka, Ferozepur, Mansa, Moga, and Shri Muktsar Sahib Districts.



Current Status of SEWA Kendra Project

At present, as per the official website^{ix} of the Government of Punjab, there are 526 Sewa Kendras, out of constructed 2174 Kendras, are operational in the State and its implementing agency^x is providing over 249 services at 3000+ counters across the state. These centers are catering to the delivery of 77 main services and a total of 249 services^{xi} including sub-services related to arms license, issuance of birth/death certificate, caste certificate, domicile certificate, payment of electricity bills, etc. Currently, back-end for 51 citizen services has been computerized under the e-District project. District officials are using this backend infrastructure for the processing of these services. The remaining services are being processed and delivered manually.^{xii} These Kendras are using the portal developed by NIC and HP. On 11/11/2015, a Contract for a service operator to operate, maintain and manage Sewa Kendras of all three zones of the entire State of Punjab was awarded to M/s **BLS International Services Pvt. Ltd for 5 years**, with the condition of review after every one and half year, after taking approval from the PSeGS and the State Cabinet.^{xiii} An Internationally renowned firm, Hitachi Systems Micro Clinic was selected as a partner for technological supplies.^{xiv}

As per the details of the transactions available upto 26/03/2017, the average number of 20,000 service requests were receiving daily on these Sewa Kendras. Till 12/08/2016, a total number of 24 Lacs applications were received, which contributed Rs. 23.11 crore in treasury as Government fees and Rs. 17.61 crore as facilitation charges. An average Government fee collection was nearly Rs. 2.5 crores per month and average facilitation charges collection per month was nearly Rs. 3 Crores.^{xv}

SEWA Kendra project replaced the similar successfully working SUWIDHA Kendra Project. Realizing the danger to their job with this replacement, the SUWIDHA workers' union was also actively opposed this by claiming that there was a conspiracy behind the change. They said that this change was unnecessary as SUWIDHA was not a burden on the government and as the project was being implemented, the people were getting convenience. Even after the closure of the project, the issue was raised in their protests and speeches that the self-sustained SUWIDHA project was earning money for the government while deducting its expenses. On the contrary, as per the terms of the contract awarded to a private company for operating Sewa Kendras, if these Kendras are not able to meet the earnings of the company, the losses will also



be covered by the government. Their argument was vindicated when the contract was canceled in 2018 by the next government for the same reason. ‘Calling it one of the biggest scams of previous SAD-BJP government, the Congress (government) had canceled the contract of the service provider (BLS International Ltd.) in January (2018). Even the Finance Minister promised in Vidhan Sabha that an inquiry would be conducted into the Rs. 1400 crore deal with this firm. The Accountant General, too, had pointed out audit objections and called these Kendras a fiscal liability, claiming that contract was awarded at inflated rates by the previous government and “unnecessary funds were spent to construct these Kendras”, especially as the footfalls in many Kendras were as low as eight in a day. Thus, the government decided to “rationalize” the Kendras by operating only one-fourth of what was originally being operated.’^{xvi}

After reviewing Sewa Kendra in 2018, the Government announced the closure of 700 Sewa Kendras since May 26, 2018,^{xvii} and another 930 Sewa Kendras since July 18, 2018.^{xviii} But the perplexing thing about the whole issue was that after rearranging the Sewa Kendras into three fresh zones namely Zone One, Two, and Three, fresh bids were invited and contract of zone one and three (two-third of Sewa Kendras) was again awarded to the same BLS International Ltd. Remaining one third Sewa Kendras (zone two) were handed over to a firm named Dr. ITM Planet for operations. Government officials stated that with this new contract “the service provider, BLS International will be giving the state government 60 percent of its profit earned from running the Sewa Kendras. The other service provider, Dr. ITM Planet, will be giving 81 percent of its profits to the state government. The state government estimates that on an average Rs 250 crore will come in its kitty each year, with the new arrangement. As per the new terms of the contract, the service provider has been allowed to use the Sewa Kendras for providing private services (other than 100 government services) and charge for these services, after taking approval from the state government. The rates of public services will, however, be fixed by the government authorities.”^{xix} Surprisingly, the present Government of Punjab is considering to convert buildings of defunct SEWA Kendras into AAM AADMI CLINIC (on the lines of MOHALLA Clinic model in Delhi).^{xx} According to RTI filed by Mr. Manik Goyal, in first phase, 117 such centers have been get converted by spending Rs. 19 lakhs per building.^{xxi} It is a huge wastage of Public exchequer.



Objectives of SEWA Kendra Project^{xxii}

- I. Do away with current approach of departments working in silos and having their separate service delivery channels.*
- II. Optimization of manpower and resources engaged in service delivery mechanism.*
- III. Provide efficient and cost effective methods of service delivery to departments.*
- IV. Enable the government departments to focus on their core functions and responsibilities.*
- V. Bring uniformity across State in service delivery mechanism.*
- VI. Delivery of all services covered under RTS in time bound manner.*
- VII. Good ambience and amenities for citizens.*
- VIII. Integrated with individual department systems.*

How SEWA Kendra Works

To avail any type of service from the SEWA Kendra, the citizen approaches the queue counter and obtains the token number for the appointment. This token number can also be booked on m-SEWA app or e-SEWA portal of Punjab government. The currently running token number is continuously displayed on the digital screen at the service center. When the turn comes, the citizen submits his application at the respective counter. After submission, the citizen receives a receipt-cum-token number, on which the date of delivery of the service sought is clearly mentioned. Each type of service has a predefined delivery time as per Punjab Transparency and Accountability in Delivery of Public Services Act, 2018. Payments of service fees etc. can be made at the SEWA Kendra, which thereby eliminates the hassle of going to the bank or treasury office. The application submitted along with the documents at the service center is sent to the concerned department for further processing.

Provision has also been made for citizens to track their case through the Punjab Government portal^{xxiii} with the help of SEWA token number. Regular monitoring and supervision is carried out by the DC office DC to ensure timely delivery of services, so that citizens do not have to make unnecessary visits to the offices.



Rationale for the Study

As discussed above, administrative reforms acquired the center-stage in the paradigm shift of Digital Era of Governance (DEG) that put its emphasis on citizen-centric governance. The present study is focused upon the third macro theme of DEG, i.e. Digitalization, which stressed upon the change in formal rules and procedures. Following that, there have been a large number of changes in the institutional structure, work methods, and procedures of the administrative organizations. SEWA Kendra is also one of the latest procedural innovations in the administrative system and is going to become a new trend in our administrative culture. To keep pace with the changed situations, growing needs and demands of the government, it was an imperative to study its working and its impact on public service delivery.

Methodology

As this paper is based on exploratory research, so data was tapped mainly from primary sources, with due guidance from secondary sources (books, reports and websites) also. The primary data was collected by communicating directly with the respondents. To study the natural behavior of respondents and to obtain information, the researcher used participating observation technique while observing the SEWA Kendra. The verification of information was conducted by collecting the data with the help of schedule. The data was collected from the **sample** of 50 citizens, who are availing services from the SEWA KENDRA, Dhuri (Sangrur) during the time period of October, 2022. The selection of sample was performed by simple random sampling technique. Direct oral investigations of officials were also performed by using personal interview method and the unstructured interview was conducted with the help of interview guide. Official Data was also collected with the help of RTI Act. The collected data was analyzed manually by mixed method approach.

Findings

Client's View

- 58% of respondents, who already applied for the service, had to visit the SEWA Kendra twice for the service. 32% of them were visiting 3rd time and 10% had to visit more than three times for the same service.
- 52% of our respondents were satisfied with the reception/enquiry system of the SEWA Kendra.
- 96% of our respondents were unaware of provisions of Punjab Transparency and Accountability in Delivery of Public Services Act, 2018.
- 68% of our respondents were got the service delivery as per the prescribed time.
- 82% respondents expressed satisfaction with the sitting arrangements and other facilities in the waiting hall.
- 62% respondents considered the behavior of staff as satisfactory.
- 66% of our respondents termed this new system of service delivery better than the previous one.
- There was no organized training program for staff. They learnt about technicalities of their tasks by consulting senior colleagues.
- There was no arrangement to inform the client regarding the status of their application by calling.

Researcher's Observations

- The counters were inadequate as per the number of users. In official record, 10 counters are in operation, but in actual only 4 counters were visibly operational.
 - Electricity generator facility wasn't there.
 - Other infrastructure such as LCD display screen, fire extinguisher, token number display was being there, but operational partially.
 - A single reception desk was overloaded with multiple tasks such as enquiries form distribution, assisting users in filling forms and delivery of processed services.
 - There were no large flex boards consisting information regarding RTS, were present there.
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- The whole staff of SEWA Kendra, working at front-end for data entry operations, is recruited on contractual basis with meager salary. If any mistake occurred in data-entry, then the whole fees for that application is get charged from that official's pocket.
- Citizens are unable to track the status of their application due to lack of knowledge or the unavailability of the mechanism required for it.
- There is no system available for home delivery of the services, as suggested by PGRC in its 1st status report.
- Researcher found that there is no monitoring system to check the timelines for delivery of services.
- There is no dedicated 24*7 helpline for citizens.

Recommendations

- SEWA Kendra complex must expand enough to handle the pressure of crowd as soon as possible. The complex need to be extended enough to create more space and to provide sitting arrangements.
- The online tracking system for application status must be updated regularly, so that client has not to face the inconvenience by visiting again and again to SEWA Kendra. Also telephonic enquiry must be there to address the queries regarding application status. It will lessen the crowd in complex.
- The information regarding time-bound provisions of service delivery must be disseminating by flex boards in the complex and by Radio/TV advertisements, so that illiterate people can also be made aware of it.
- There must be a dedicated monitoring cell to ensure the timely delivery of services. This cell must have the responsibility of establishing coordination with concerned departments.
- The Staff should be given training regarding working of the computer hardware and software system so that they can handle operational problems themselves when the need arises.



- The resting periods must be there for the operators to save them from the occupational hazards.
- Researchers also like to recommend few changes at human behavior level and infrastructure level at SEWA Kendra. In the age of Information Technology, people should consider IT as a favorable tool to reduce work load and quicker delivery of service. Client must make himself ready for the change and work in a system. Client has to develop patience and have faith in the system.
- Regular upgradation of technical infrastructure must be done to tackle problems like slow speed, interconnectivity etc.

CONCLUSION

SEWA Kendra project is a visible outcome of the ‘paradigm shift’ of DEG, that brings about the idea of governance reforms as its key feature. For executing the agenda of citizen-centric governance, it inaugurates a new trend in our administrative culture by focusing the administration on delivery of service with due convenience to the client. Though it’s a revolutionary project which transforms the service-delivery mechanism of government; but the present study established that in Punjab, specifically in Dhuri, its infrastructure seems not as much capable of handling such huge number of applications. It must expand and enhance its capabilities on that front. Though its objectives are very much focused on changing the formal rules and procedures and make them more convenient to clients, but there are many obstacles in its way of successful implementation. The bureaucracy has another challenge of not only running this new system efficiently, but also to generate the trust of client into this new system. This can only be done by making the process of applying and delivery of the service need to be simpler and smarter. Also it requires an awareness campaign for positive orientation among public towards this new system.

Though, DEG heralds unparalleled reforms, through its macro themes of reintegration, needs based holism and digitalization, in the processes and structures of governance and offers scores of benefits to the government and its citizens; but still the state is lagging behind in achieving the successful implementation of e-initiatives. We hope that Government of Punjab



will soon resolve these teething problems, that are bound to be occur in transitional society like India. Both the citizenry and administration will have to go hand in hand for garnering the benefits of this digital era of Governance.

But the basic question is whether it was necessary to convert the SUWIDHA project into a Sewa Kendra project. If it was not necessary, then why was government money wasted by setting up thousands of Kendras at a cost of crores of rupees? If it was necessary, why was it done without any concrete planning? Why were nearly three-quarters of Kendras closed in just two years? To start or close a Sewa Kendra, which of the two decisions was correct? And who is responsible for squandering crores of rupees of public exchequer by taking wrong decisions?

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