

Digital Insecurity and Inaccessibility Impact Governance

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Digitalization of public services was one of the key factors identified to improve governance and service delivery. Gradually and in the recent past in a mission mode, digitalization of public services was noticed in India. Advocates of e-governance to a large extent considered digitalization of the service delivery as an important tool for minimizing corruption in public services by two means, one, bringing in more transparency in service delivery and two, ensuring lesser interaction between service provider and service seeker. In fact, digitalized service delivery aims to empower people by giving them access to information and services, with no middlemen to depend upon. However, numerous challenges, particularly in Indian context, in particular due to its size and volume along with poor educational and economic indicators, were often cited as a hindrance in the acceptance of digital mode for availing service benefits.

Digitalization of several public services, especially the crucial ones in areas like health, education, and financial transactions, among others, proved to be very beneficial for the general public as well as for other stakeholders like service providers, policymakers, and the government as a whole, both at the national and state levels, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, the utilisation of digital and online platforms not only increased quickly over a short period of time but

also significantly forced customers to use them to access a variety of services during the COVID-19 pandemic's lockdown on visiting service delivery points. More significantly, the utilisation of digital platforms has increased across all socioeconomic sections of society, in both urban and rural areas of India.



Challenges to overcome

It is now clear that digitalization of both basic and vital services will continue in the country, but it also brings with it a host of difficulties and hazards, both known and unknown, that affect both service providers and service seekers alike.

Hacking of digital platforms: In recent past, we have come across various incidences of the digital hacking of websites, servers and database of important institutions and persons. Some of the much in news and recent ones as shown in the Table 1

With the increased usage of online and digital mediums, hacking of services is a major challenge to address, particularly for service providers, as well as the hacking of personal confidential information, which is a major concern for most of the online service users along with

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Table 1

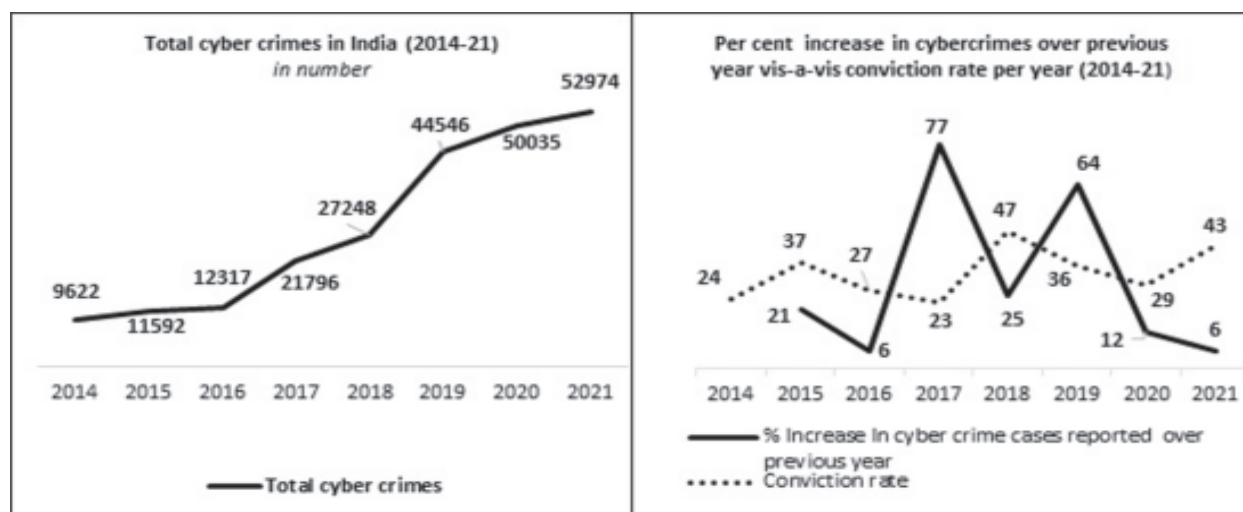
| Institution/organization | Cyber-attack | Impact |
|---|--------------|--|
| All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) server | Nov-22 | Data of around 30-40 million patients could have been compromised |
| Prime Minister of India's social media account | Dec-21 | Social networking platform, Twitter account of the Prime Minister of India was hacked |
| Air India | May-21 | personal data of 4.5 million passengers worldwide |
| Common Admission Test (CAT) for admission in Management Education Institutes of India | May-21 | 190,000 applicants' details leaked to dark web |
| Domino's India | Apr-21 | 1 million credit card records and 180 million pizza preferences |
| Upstox, a trading platform | Apr-21 | breach of know-your-customer (KYC) data of its customers |
| Police recruitment examination | Feb-21 | Personally identifiable information of 500,000 Indian police personnel put up for sale |
| COVID-19 test results of Indian patients | Jan-21 | At least 1500 Indian citizens |
| Justpay | Jan-21 | Details of around 35 million customer accounts taken from a server |
| BigBasket, an e-service delivery | Oct-20 | 20 million user accounts ,data for sale online |
| Unacademy, an edutech startup | May-20 | 22 million users' account |
| Health care website | Aug-19 | 68 lakh patient and doctor records |
| JustDial, a local search provider | Apr-19 | Personal data of 100 million users exposed |
| State Bank of India | Jan-19 | 3 million text messages to customers revealed |

Source: multiple online reports, as on April 10, 2023

the frauds related to financial transactions.

Data on cyber crimes was first published in the year 2002. The latest available report in the public domain is for the year 2021. Clearly, the data on cybercrime shows a significant increase every year. The annual data from the previous many years show, there has been an exponential rise in cybercrimes.

According to NCRB reports of different years, the percentage increase in cybercrimes over the previous years ranged between 6% and as high as 77%. In absolute numbers, the increase between 2014 and 2021 is 43,352 cases, which in percentage terms is an astonishing 450%. As per the report, the major crimes under cybercrime include, computer related offences such as,



Source NCRB reports

cheating by personation using computer resources, dishonestly receiving stolen computer resources or communication devices, identity theft, violation of privacy, publication/ transmission of obscene/ sexually explicit acts in electronic forms etc. under IT Act 2000. While crimes under Indian Penal Code (IPC) involving communication devices as a medium or target, include, abetment of suicide (Online), cyber stalking/ bullying of women/ children, data theft, fraud related to online banking, credit card/debit card, at ATMs, OTP related, among others.

Conviction rate is worrisome: The quick redressal and strong anti-hacking measures on a war footing to dissuade the fear among users as much as possible and thereby increase the usage of online and digital services, in near future, is much needed. However, as per NCRB reports, the conviction rate is not at all encouraging with less than 50%; only 47% in 2018 and 43% in 2021, but on average around 33% only.

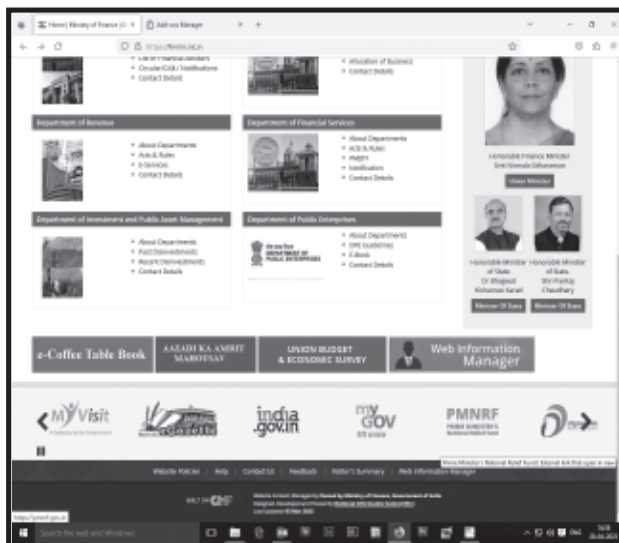
Therefore, discouraging citizens from utilising digital media too cautiously, a low conviction rate is also a bad indicator of the effectiveness of the political system as a whole. Poor conviction rates paint a very different picture from the one that is most frequently associated with digital

media, which is speed and pace of service utilisation.

Poor online service delivery: There are multiple factors, which need attention for smooth access and usage of digital platforms. For instance, many online platforms are not user friendly, which adds to the frustration of the users. Poor connectivity or many users accessing a particular web portal simultaneously slows down the website or other technical glitches. For instance, when the Central Board of School Examination announced the results or during Delhi University's online examination, the websites crashed or went off the service for some hours, which added to the anxiety and stress of the students. If one must attempt to obtain desired services repeatedly, it is not only frustrating but also places the user in a situation where they must continually visit a service delivery location for the same purposes. This is definitely not user-friendly. With the increase in usage, comes the responsibility on the part of the service providers to make digital access and usage glitch-free.

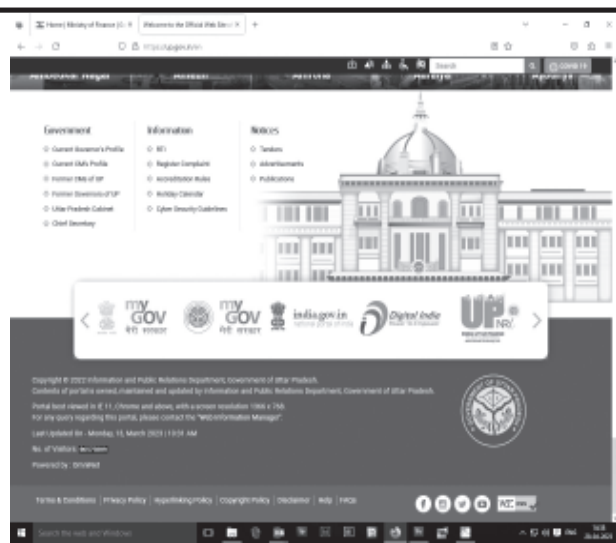
Besides the slowing down of web-based services, the updating of information at regular intervals is equally important in digitalized public service delivery system. For instance, as on April 12, 2023, while

Ministry of Finance, GoI website homepage



last updated on March 3, 2023 [accessed on April 12, 2023]

Govt. of Uttar Pradesh website homepage



last updated on March 13, 2023 [accessed on April 12, 2023]

On a regular basis and as a norm, grievance redressal in minimum time is desirable. Efforts in this direction may take some time but are not at all unfeasible.

most of the national government's ministries' websites as well as that of the state government's website were updated, a few exceptional cases were also observed. The Government of India's Ministry of Finance website was showing the last updated date as March 3, 2023 or website of the Government of Uttar Pradesh was last updated on March 13, 2023 (screenshot below). Regular update keeps citizens abreast with new policies, programmes, interventions, and achievements.

Solutions in hand

The above-discussed scenarios and challenges must undoubtedly be addressed and overcome by service providers, both public and private, in order for e-governance initiatives to be successful. This will help not only preserve the public's trust in digital platforms but also ease their access to these platforms. It is crucial that the general people choose digital access to public services, especially the poor and vulnerable population, in order to expand the reach and utilisation of digital platforms. Digital platforms and services must be secure and impenetrable in addition to being user-friendly to prevent unauthorised access to private data and information.

Expedited delivery of services on digital platforms: For marginalized and vulnerable population, which often look for compassionate consideration for their access to any public service, it is often felt that online services lack the human touch, which is otherwise available in manually managed service centres.

Online services have a fixed time for delivery of services. All services do not have the emergency option and therefore it delays delivery of required service, which otherwise might have been availed in a lesser time if one directly approaches the service providers. It is often noticed that to avail public services on digital platforms, one has to upload a scanned copy of several documents. This could be avoided by linking a central repository of all documents with various service providers, to access supporting documents, as and when required.

Digital applications like 'DigiLocker' of the Government of India are one such initiative. It is claimed as a secure cloud-based platform for the storage, sharing and verification of documents & certificates. In fact, it should be made mandatory for all public service providers at national and state levels to integrate with DigiLocker. As of now, around 2300+ issuers/service providers are making documents available through DigiLocker.

Prompt action on grievances at a faster speed: On a regular basis and as a norm, grievance redressal in minimum time is desirable. Efforts in this direction may take some time but are not at all unfeasible. In fact, the e-governance measures is expected to be a user-friendly interface with multi-linguistic web portals and easy to use for a person with even with a basic knowledge of computer operations. With the growing usage of digitalized public services including legal aid and stakeholders promoting the same, for common citizens, public services which are fully secured from cyber threat, at both front (user-end) and back-ends (provider-end) is a must.

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