

Control, De-politicization and the eState

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Abstract. Using an extensive case analysis of the Bhoomi system of India, this paper examines the role and nature of the state with regards to the rationale for and deployment of e-government systems. Issues such as the nature of control in governance, the discourse of de-politicization in justifying e-government and the reinvention of the state via electronic means are examined. Analysis of data collected over several years shows that e-government systems are primarily used to centralize control in the hands of the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, a strong discourse of technology and 'high modernism' permeates the justification for deploying e-government and this effectively de-politicizes the intent and purpose of the project. The paper concludes that through e-government the state reinvents itself, as the e-State, as a powerful, centralized force that disrupts historical practices and relations.

1 Introduction

E-government literature, both popular and academic, broadly views e-government systems as being beneficial for bringing about transparency and efficiency in governance [1]. The extensive literature on this subject does not dwell, though, on the nature of control, the discourse of de-politicization surrounding e-government interventions, and the processes by which the State¹ re-invents itself through e-government. This paper examines these issues at some depth.

Developing countries, in particular, have adopted e-government extensively and have sought developmental benefits, along with improved governance. Development in this context is understood as the process of advancing the neo-liberal, market reforms-driven agenda that many developing countries have adopted [2]. E-government, implicitly and explicitly, supports the role of enhancing markets and customer participation in them, and reduces the role of the state in markets by improving processes of market access and government regulatory interventions. The attempt by various governments is to hasten the process of development by 'leap-frogging' the tedious tribulations of transitioning that developed countries have undergone.

¹ The capitalized "State" is the political idea of the nation-state, henceforth referred to simply as the 'state.' Regional states, political sub-divisions, are referred to by name, where possible.

In this context, this paper asks the following questions: Do e-government systems serve to increase or reduce control of the state in governance processes? Is there a discourse of de-politicization that the government resorts to in justifying and implementing e-government? How does the state re-invent itself through e-government?

This paper proceeds by first explaining the relevance of the above questions and their theoretical basis. This is followed by a discussion of a particular e-government project in India, which forms the basis for a case study that is used for a detailed analysis. The concluding section summarizes and inter-relates the findings from the analysis.

2 Background Theory and Methodology

In theorizing about the state it is important to acknowledge that in the modern nation-state the government is embodied by two sets of stakeholders, the politicians and the bureaucrats. These stakeholders inhabit institutions that constitute the state. In the body of literature that deals with e-government, the state is usually, implicitly, represented by the bureaucrats. (Where political institutions or persons are involved, the research is often termed 'e-democracy.')

It is important to note this distinction as bureaucrats and politicians, as stakeholders, often have differing visions for the agenda for the state, some of which could be conflicting. Even within the bureaucracy the goals and agendas of different players, at various levels of the hierarchy are different.

The implicit view of the state in most e-government research is that it is liberal in its intent [2], in the Lockean sense, to protect citizens and their property, and enforce laws. This intent is then assumed for the representatives of the state, the politicians and bureaucrats. E-government is seen as a natural extension of this intent, and its role appears to be obvious, at times implicitly assumed. Conflicts and differences in the role of the state, and consequently of e-government systems, arise then from the differing views on how the liberal state can be exercised, not in its intent.

A widely different view of the state, an anarchic one, is also propounded by some [3]. [There is a vast literature on the theory of the state, starting with Plato and Aristotle, and built up by philosophers such as Hobbes, Rousseau, Ricardo, Hegel, Marx and others; however, to conserve space, we restrict our review.] Here the state is seen to extract material wealth from the natural resources available, extract labor from its citizens and force them to become soldiers to fight its wars. The state then exists only to exploit materials, labor and soldiers, and enforces laws to protect its continued supply of these. This view of the state originates from studies of monarchies and feudal states (and modern-day dictators), as well as colonial powers. The modern liberal states have inherited the structures and institutions that were built with this purpose in mind, and have continued to persist with them.

It is useful to keep these differing, and widely contrasting, perspectives on the nature of the state in mind while we examine the role of the bureaucracy. For this paper we restrict our attention to the bureaucratic structure in India.

2.1 The Bureaucracy

In India, the bureaucracy as a whole is represented by a strong hierarchy that peaks at the center, and has a base at the village level. The current Indian bureaucratic structure was evolved by the British for their colonial administration. After India's independence, in 1947, the elected government retained the old structure, while changing the name of the apex organization from the Indian Civil Service to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). In the early years of Indian democracy a single party, the Congress party, was dominant in both the center and the various states and held the reins of the executive tightly. The bureaucracy retained its image of professionalism and of being a non-partisan entity. The central government dominated planning and development issues and the bureaucracy participated in the broad consensus on national goals. But after this era, a single party was unable to retain its strong hold on the national polity. The powerful parties that emerged began to rely on the bureaucracy for their executive and partisan agendas. Using destabilizing and demoralizing means, such as "favoritism in promotions, penalizing transfers, vitiation of normal procedures and operations through corruption" ([4]; also see [5], page 92), the legislatures in the states as well as the center eroded the non-partisan nature of the bureaucracy.

With an elected leadership that was increasingly incompetent at delivering the executive function, politicians began to rely more and more on bureaucrats who were sympathetic to their party ideology. These willing accomplices soon became the most powerful elite within the country.

Despite the erosion of professional values and the deep internalization of corruption, the service still managed to attract some of the best talent in the country and the bureaucracy "remains a reasonably effective instrument" [4], particularly, when compared to other South Asian nations.

The situation with officials hired within the states is somewhat different. There is a cadre that is selected on the basis of a merit policy, and this forms the higher bureaucracy in the state. The lower ranking and field level officials are recruited on the basis of verifiable qualifications and family affiliations. In the latter case, as is true for many village accountants, father-to-son transfer of positions is acceptable. Appointments can be made on 'sympathetic' grounds too, where senior bureaucrats and elected representatives hire officials who belong to under-privileged or under-represented groups.

Within the states, the power held by the centrally appointed bureaucrats exceeds those appointed by the state. The cadres of the central services also enjoy relatively better privileges as compared to their regional counterparts.

A characteristic of the central bureaucracy, as noted by some researchers [6], is that there isn't much cooperation between the various departments of the central government. The departments tend to operate in 'silos' and take their own decisions on projects. This pattern is changed only when there is a directive from the highest political authorities.

2.2 De-politicization

The idea of de-politicization explains the attempt by the state to portray certain development projects as being of a technical or economic nature, and not of a political nature. The state attempts to isolate the discourse, the discussions justifying or contesting the idea, around technical or economic matters in order to avoid the difficulties that may be inherent in political choices. Development theory has explored the idea of de-politicization extensively.

De-politicization does not imply that the state has reduced its role or that it has given up its political agenda. De-politicization has to be seen as a discourse that the state propounds, in part to hide its political agenda. While discussing a development project in Lesotho, Ferguson states: “For while we have seen that “development” projects in Lesotho may end up working to expand the power of the state, and while they claim to address the problems of poverty and deprivation, in neither guise does the “development” industry allow its role to be formulated as a political one” [7].

The ‘development industry’ referred to by Ferguson comprises of the government, the bureaucracy and multi-lateral funding agencies that eschew any political terms or intentions in their discourse in implementing development projects, but rely on technical and economic terms to justify and explain their actions. Although the agenda of the political party in power, in Lesotho at that time, was to explicitly impress itself upon the region, as became evident later, it hid this objective in the language of technical development. The project had no impact on reducing poverty or changing the agricultural practices of the targets of the Thaba-Tseka project, and it was considered to be a failure by the planners, but the ‘instrument-effects’ or unplanned consequences were such as to allow the reigning political party to establish a strong political and military presence in the region.

Scott uses the phrase ‘high modernism’ to refer to the beliefs of scientific and technical progress that inform the state. The state is then motivated to transform social order and redeploy economic resources based on a linear, technical rationale. The high modernist state prescribes an ordering of all human activity along principles of science and technology (Scott, 1998; pages 89-90). Further, this ideology is accepted and operationalized by the bureaucracy and intelligentsia, including planners, engineers and technicians. Scott shows that this discourse informs town and city planning, where geometrically intricate plans for cities are drawn up without regard for the multiple, organic, and negotiated ways in which cities evolve. High modernism thus de-politicizes; it removes from the realm of discourse the diverse and complex ways in which actual public projects evolve. It uses the post hoc *description* of the evolution of public spaces and projects, and then uses them as prescriptions.

The history of development, as planned interventions in poor and third-world nations, is rife with technical and economic projects that failed. Following the massive capital inflows into European countries after the second world war, the idea and discourse of development assumed currency in academic and policy circles of wealthy nations such as the United States of America [8]. Massive

investments were made, via the multilateral funding agencies, into various third-world projects targeting problems of poverty, low agricultural yields, destruction of the environment, and empowerment of women. Each of these initiatives directly avoided any consideration of political issues. Even when it was evident that the underlying causes of failure were a lack of political motivation and participation by the targeted populations, the funding and policy agencies continued with their flawed models and repeated the failures, shifting their targets in each iteration.

De-politicization acts to downplay political action, organizing and struggle of any sort. Effects of such practices, when they have an impact, are explained away as ‘social capital’ and civil participation rather than as direct and confrontational politics [9].

In the Indian context de-politicization is traced back to the actions of the British colonial powers who, during the peasant participation in civil disobedience campaigns in the 1930s, kept ‘a close watch on the rural areas’ and ‘prompt action was taken whenever there was any danger of peasant unrest being linked with civil disobedience,’ [10] (as quoted in [11]). The real threat to the British was not civil disobedience or peasant rebellion per se, but an articulation by the nationalists of the economic injustices to the peasants with the political movement of seeking independence. The British made similar moves in urban areas also, ensuring the economic grievances by workers was in no way linked with governance or political practices (where the British could then argue that governance was fine and well, and the problems were simply economic issues).

In a similar vein, when in independent India many groups started political action to demand land reform and address the concerns of the poor, the government in many cases responded by setting up an administrative framework for ‘development’ via credit relief, free schooling, mid-day meals etc. The attempt was to dissociate political and economic discourses.

2.3 Methodology

The data for this research is based on an extensive case study of the Bhoomi project in India (and relies on the case study method of analysis [12]). The data was collected via structured and unstructured interviews over two phases. The data used for the first phase of the study included interviews of the Project Champion, survey of users, interviews of Bhoomi kiosk operators, of administration officers, of high-level district officers who had helped with the implementation of Bhoomi, and data from Bhoomi internal reports, published media reports, and reports from development and funding agencies. The survey of users was conducted with a structured questionnaire while the other interviews were conducted with the help of semi-structured questionnaires. In the first phase about 120 respondents were interviewed, in the period 2003-05.

The second phase of the study was conducted in the period 2006-07 and included interviews of farmers, village and district officials, NGOs, and officials of related agencies. The second phase involved more in-depth interviews that

were conducted in two specific districts of Karnataka, the state in which Bhoomi is implemented.

3 Bhoomi

Bhoomi is a land records management system implemented in 177 sub-districts of the state of Karnataka in India. As such it consists of a distributed database that holds data on the Record of Rights, Tenancy and Crop (RTC) certificate that is associated with each plot of farming land. The system holds about 20 million RTCs that correspond to the same number of land parcels in the state. Farmers can obtain an RTC, an official document needed for various purposes, by going to a Bhoomi kiosk in the sub-district headquarter where they are located. Kiosk operators charge them Rs 15 (about USD 0.33) for each RTC and farmers can obtain these reasonably quickly at the kiosk (however, sometimes the kiosk may be located far away from where they stay).

The Bhoomi system also enables farmers to file a mutation request in the system, where a mutation is a change in the details on the RTC, which may be required, for example, upon sale or inheritance of property. The system logs the request and also generates a ticket for the farmer to see his/her place in the queue for processing the request.

There are many complexities that are related to the design and implementation of Bhoomi. These details are omitted here to conserve space and also because they have been written about and published extensively elsewhere[13].

4 Data and Analysis

This section presents a detailed analysis of the Bhoomi project through the theoretical lenses developed above. Many details about Bhoomi are discussed here, in context, and explanations are provided where needed.

4.1 Withdrawal of the Lower Bureaucracy

One of the significant historical events that bear on the implementation of a system like Bhoomi, a system designed to assist e-governance related to land, is the withdrawal of the lower bureaucracy. The quote below is from an interview of a local official in the Mandya district of Karnataka.

In 1947, there were 12 village officials/servants: *Shanbagh*, *Gowda*, *Kamhara* (blacksmith), *Badagi* (carpenter), All of these posts were (generally) hereditary and there was no salary attached to them. Some land were given as *inam* (gift) to these functionaries for their livelihood; they were however, free to charge for their services. . . . Under the Village Officers Abolition Act of 1961, all the aforesaid 12 posts were abolished. The inam lands were confirmed in the name of the incumbents, there was no other form of compensation.

The respondent shows how the extensive network of village officials was removed by an Act. The rationale for this Act was that the officials presented an excessive ‘burden’ on villagers (in terms of extracting rents for services). The state however did not entirely withdraw from the village. A bulk of the work that the state retained within its control passed on to the lowest remaining level village official, the village accountant (VA). Another respondent from the same district explained the VA’s role thus: “Along with collection of tax (land, water supply and channel maintenance etc.), the VA’s main responsibility is maintaining of records - *khata*, RTCs etc. He is also expected to help the villagers in agricultural activities by providing relevant information on government schemes and programmes. He is responsible for providing to the taluk office, information about the actual ground situation in the villages and for preparation of reports required for issue of birth/death certificates, income certificate, BPL and small farmer certificate etc. by the Tehsildar. He also prepares reports for all activities in the village for which government assistance is provided - old age pensions, widow pensions, handicapped assistance etc.; if there is a declared compensation even for snake bite, the report is prepared by the VA. The subsidy that the Agriculture Dept. provides on seeds and other agricultural inputs is also based on the VA’s report. These reports are a recent addition in the VA’s responsibilities; it did not exist initially in 1969 when the Shanbaghs gave way to the present day VAs.” [A *khata* is a register of land records, a taluk is a sub-district, and a Tehsildar is a district official. A BPL certificate is a below-poverty-line certification.]

Bhoomi was introduced to replace one important function that the VA performed, that of preparing RTCs. Two aspects of this technology introduction are salient: one, the numerous other functions that the VA performed did not have any representation in the computerized system, and, two, only the issuing of the RTC was computerized and moved to the sub-district level. The detailed tasks of updating the RTC records with crop and other details still remained with the VA. The VA fulfills these updating functions thrice a year for crops and on an ad hoc basis for other details.

4.2 Centralization of Authority

The design of Bhoomi, its implementation and the training for it were entirely controlled and managed by the central bureaucratic structure. The Project Champion (PC) for Bhoomi was an IAS officer who planned, executed and maintained the project for a period lasting around 8 years (it is usual for senior officers to be rotated every three years). Successive governments at the state level in Karnataka have retained the same person to head the Bhoomi project, reflecting the political patronage the PC has received.

The responses of interviewees in the first phase of the survey showed clearly the lack of awareness of the Bhoomi system by many of the stakeholders who were finally involved with the system in a direct or indirect manner. All farmers, bank officials, court officials, agriculture marketing officials who were interviewed said that they had not heard of Bhoomi until after it was implemented. All the

district officials interviewed had heard of Bhoomi before its implementation but had not participated in its design. With backing from and personal involvement of the the Chief Minister, the entire system was conceived and designed by the PC and the participating private companies.

To run the operations of the kiosks across the state, a 1000 new VAs were hired (many on sympathetic grounds) and were trained over several months. All high school graduates with a working knowledge of computers, they were “hand picked” and motivated to perform the tasks with energy and diligence. All the trainees were closely watched by the central administration and were given direct access to officers (via mobile phones). (The evidence for these observations was obtained from interviews of new VAs, as well as of the PC).

Control was centralized for the RTC delivery process by first replacing the old VAs with a new, young set with direct loyalty to the central administrators, as opposed to their senior officers at the sub-district, and by removing the maintenance and upgrading of RTCs from the VAs in the villages to the sub-district headquarters.

The design of Bhoomi is such that data on RTCs is collected, updated and stored at the sub-district level, and the records are then uploaded periodically to a central database maintained at Bangalore. At the state headquarters, MIS reports can be generated and used to monitor activities at the district levels. However, the same is not possible at the district and sub-district. Lower officials cannot generate MIS reports comparing their data with other districts, and mostly cannot even see aggregate data on their own. During interviews, VAs reported that access control procedures enable them to upload and modify data but they cannot produce reports. Even district officers such as Tehsildars and Shirestedars have limited access to the data and reports based on the data.

One of the main uses of the RTCs provided by Bhoomi is for obtaining bank loans. Over the years central government schemes and programs have promoted bank loans for rural development. Many banks have perforce set up rural branches to extend loans to farmers. Yet, owing to the tedious processes required to obtain bank loans, some farmers prefer going to traditional moneylenders (who charge much higher interest rates), as they have a better chance of obtaining the loan at a time and under conditions suitable for them.

Village officials of the past had immense power over the farmers. They collected taxes (sometimes upto 50% of the crop) and had high discretionary powers. These officials also allowed farmers some flexibility in payments and an ability to negotiate - as illustrated in a quote from a village official, collected in the second phase of the study: “The cultivators never paid the tax in time or in 1 installment. Hence, various practical arrangements were worked out like accepting the tax in kind and collecting it in various installments spread over multiple years.” Village officials were aware of local needs and the conditions under which cultivators lived. They could be more “responsive to local concerns as [power] was decentralized and [they] were aware of individual ownerships etc. which the present day VA, who does not even live in the village, is not aware of.”

4.3 The Discourse of De-politicization

The Problems of Land Governance. Land administration in modern India is traced back to the British period when revenues from land were an important source of wealth for the Empire. Land records identified the tenants and cultivators of land and essentially identified the amounts that land holders had to pay in taxes. One aspect of post-independence land revenues is that they constitute a small fraction of the total revenues that the state earns [14]. For example, in Karnataka, the land revenue share was only 0.8% of the total state revenues in 1989-90, down from 23% in 1957-58. A consequence of this drop in revenue is that states have reduced their resources given to land administration, staff have been assigned many other activities and the function of maintaining land records has suffered.

Surveying land and enacting land reforms is a daunting political task in almost all states in India. Owing to deteriorating governance, it is widely believed that a land survey is an occasion for government officials to loot village property [14]. Although surveys are badly needed to address the gross inequities in land records, they are resisted by village residents as well as by the political leadership (as it is a sure way to lose an election).

Land governance and administration is a complicated and politically charged matter. This is due to its historical legacy and the pulls and pressures of multiple legislations enacted by the state and by the central government over the years. Interview responses and secondary data pointed to the following complexities of land governance: there are multiple conflicting and competing claims on the usage of land by different parties (such as departments, defence, private players); rights of tenure can be vested in different bodies, such as a village, a community, etc; marginal populations have special rights; rights are recorded on at least six different types of books and registers, including maps; and land records are outdated. Commentators claim that the real problem with land administration in India that has to be addressed is that of updating and revising land records [15,14].

Framing of the Problem. The framing of the problems of land governance was reduced to a technical one of access: access to RTCs by farmers was impeded by VAs and this formed the basis for corruption, delays and lack of transparency. “Land owners find it difficult to access the Village Accountant, as his duties entail traveling. The time taken by Village Accountants to provide RTCs has ranged from 3 to 30 days depending upon the importance of the record for the farmer and the size of the bribe. A typical bribe for a certificate could range from Rs.100 to Rs.2000. If some details were to be written in an ambiguous fashion, out of selfish motives, the bribe could go up to Rs.10,000. Land records in the custody of Village Accountant were not open for public scrutiny” [16].

The objectives of Bhoomi were also similarly phrased (quoted from [17]).

1. Improving the quality of service to the citizens: (a) Allowing farmers / citizens easy access to their records; (b) Infuse transparency in providing the services to citizens.
2. Ease of administration: (a) Facilitating easy maintenance;

(b) Prompt updation of land records; (c) Making land records tamper proof. 3. Generating meaningful MIS out of the system relating to land records. 4. Ensuring self-sustainability of the project: (a) Robust revenue model; (b) Public-Private partnership, where possible.

The complex problems of land governance are stated in a technical, reductionist language that scopes the problem in narrow terms. It is also interesting to note that the VA is cast as the villain from whom the farmers have to be protected. The function of the VA is reduced to that of simply providing RTCs, for which the system eases access to farmers, ignoring the myriad other aspects of village life for which the VA has to be accessed by the farmer.

At a seminar, the PC responded to a question about the various limitations of the way the Bhoomi system was designed by stating: "Bhoomi is nothing but a database application." The PC then clarified that if the system had to be judged, it should be on parameters that are reserved for technical systems, such as those of efficiency, uptime, security, redundancy, cost effectiveness, economic sustainability etc. That Bhoomi affected the lives of about 30 million people and thus raised a number of social issues, was something the PC was reluctant to address. The de-politicization of Bhoomi was evident, it had to be seen in the high modernist terms of technical functionality, rather than on the terms of the political concerns of farmers.

5 Conclusions

The modern Indian state faces two, almost conflicting, demands on its functions. The first is an urgency to withdraw from many administrative functions owing to pressures of market liberalization that have resulted from the Structural Adjustment package that India adopted in the early 90s at the behest of multi-lateral funding agencies. The second demand that the Indian state faces is that of improved governance. This follows also from the realization that withdrawal of the state can not lead to proper implementation of the programs that structural adjustment had envisaged [18].

Another salient aspect of the reforms in the governance structure of the state is that of the rise of the local elected officials, who have strong regional affiliations, often based on caste and ethnic voter bases. With successive coalition governments at the center, the old order of a strong central party has crumbled, and at the local level there have emerged representatives who demand a different, and provincial, loyalty from the bureaucracy [19].

From Karnataka's example we see that, in post-Independence India, it first withdrew the heavy presence of the lower bureaucracy in villages. This constituted a move away from a perceived feudal system and also a move to establish a more important presence of the Revenue Department of Karnataka. The lower bureaucracy were removed and new governance roles were largely embodied in a single functionary, the VA.

As the demands of the state grew, in terms of governance responsibilities, the VA was called upon to perform a large number of functions, involving almost

all aspects of life in villages. He/she was the main point of contact with the state, for most village residents. The VAs were embedded in complex relations of power, negotiations and transactions that had historic provenance in caste relations, professions, and economic and family relations.

With the introduction of large and powerful e-government systems, such as Bhoomi, the state re-invents itself as, what we call, the *e-State*. This resort to coining new terms is not frivolous; a new term is needed to characterize the manner in which the state re-invents itself with the help of information technology. Some salient characteristics of this nascent state, as different from its older form, are worth noting: 1) The e-State is realized through limited, but powerful, e-government systems that are present at regional locations, with a clear intention to draw away data (resources) from the local and move this over to a center. 2) The e-State is formed by deliberate avoidance of knowledge and priorities of the regional and local officials and citizens. The design of the e-government systems are based on the priorities and design requirements of the center. 3) The functions and processes built into the e-government systems are accessible mainly by the bureaucracy at the center. Local officials enjoy very little access and certainly cannot see information beyond their geographic domain. 4) The e-State functions through a loyal, local bureaucracy, whose interests are aligned with those of the central bureaucracy. These local bureaucrats are especially recruited for their new roles, and are encouraged to break from the entrenched traditions, as the ‘modernists.’

The e-State is present in the regional/rural space in a controlled, limited-access, mediated manner. Its presence is of value to farmers, however the new terms under which citizens have to deal with the state undermine traditional, negotiated practices and impose rigid non-negotiable procedures. It is true that the centralized control removes discretionary powers of local officials, and helps to control corruption, but it also encourages farmers to seek alternatives, as in the case of obtaining loans from local money-lenders, that are occasionally worse than the choice provided by the state.

The e-State, finally, is premised on a high modernist discourse and on de-politicization. The language of information technology, economic efficiency, and modernization dominates its description, its justification, its rationale for deployment and also the evaluation of its functionality. Although the e-State maintains a deeply political agenda, its rationalization remains de-politicized, as ‘simply a database system.’ Further, the e-State denies and limits the complex negotiations that were possible in the ‘manual’ mode of the state. Interactions amongst officials and citizens, with regard to functions appropriated by the e-government system, have to fall under pre-defined categories and are shaped by the processes already built into the system. Thus, the e-State curbs the political agenda of local officials, while introducing its own centralized controls.

(Although we restrict our analysis in this paper to the case of the Bhoomi system of Karnataka, our observations of other states and other systems in India lead to similar conclusions.)

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