



Access to government information in India in the digital environment

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ABSTRACT

India is known for its rich and diverse cultural heritage. Government of India produces vital socio-economic and statistical information and this information is essential to the public for understanding the national issues. Some of the government produced information is issued mainly for administrative and operational purposes, but the vast majority has potential value for diverse segments of the Indian population. Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilitates efficient and speedy process to make this information accessible to the public. Government produces large amount of information at various levels and by various ministries, departments and divisions. At present these government agencies are creating information in electronic form and disseminating it through their websites. This paper describes the relevance and types of the electronic resources being offered by the Government of India on its web pages, such as reports, legal documents, parliament publications, budget proceedings, statistical documents etc. It also highlights the initiatives taken up by Government of India in converting government information from print medium to digital form. Trends and issues in this area are also being discussed.

Keywords: Government Documents; Online Government Information; Digital Government Documents; Government of India Publications

1 Introduction

Today, government activities have increased tremendously and so too have the volume and diversity of information generated by it. Government information has been recognized as a vital resource and its need in decision making, extension of knowledge, and research is indispensable. Though this information is gathered, produced and disseminated by the government at various levels in support of legislative, administrative, judicial and operational purposes, but the vast majority has

potential value for diverse segments of the society. With the greater complexity of modern society and the role that government now plays in almost all areas of human activity, wide dissemination of large blocks of government information has become essential. Almost from the beginning of the civilization, governments in some form or another have existed as an organized means of survival. Their acts which were originally transmitted in good part by oral means of communications and then for preservation engraved on stone, written on baked clay tablets, on papyrus or on skins, or etched on tablets or on blocks from which copies would be drawn and with the invention of printing from movable type, may well be designated as government publications and most are connected in some way with the purpose of their publishing agencies (Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science 1972, p. 40). No one had imagined few decades back that government publications would become available in digital form. Access to government publications or information in electronic form can be considered as one of the biggest revolutionary achievement of human civilization and culture of the 21st century. It is as surprising as the invention of printed information which ultimately resulted in the creation of libraries similarly government information is now freely available online to every one through the web. It reduces the need for the physical space required for building, conserving and maintaining government publications' collection in the libraries. Government digital information resources by breaking the barriers of time, space, language and culture, can play a significant role in reducing the digital divide, which is one of the biggest issues facing the world today as pointed out by Shimmon (Shimmon, 2001).

2 Government Publications

Any publication originating in or issued with the imprint of, or at the expense and by the authority of any office of a legally organized government or international organization is often called government document or public document (*ALA glossary of Library and Information Science* 1983, p.106). Though this definition appropriately defines government publication but does not adequately reflect the impact of new technology upon government publishing, i.e. the various formats in which information appears. However the Harrods Librarian's Glossary (1971, p.292) defines it as "Publication issued at government expenses or published by authority of a governmental body. As used in America, any publication in book, serial or non book form bearing an imprint of a government whether federal, state, local, foreign and of inter- government organizations such as UNESCO etc.." Various terms which have been used for government publications are official documents, government documents and official publications. Two terms used synonymously in this paper are government publications and government documents.

2.1 Levels of Government Publications

Government publications are brought out at various levels (Hernon, 1971) such as:

- Central/ Federal Government publications (National level)
- State Government publications (State level)
- Local Government publications (Local Level)
- Foreign Governments' publications (Foreign Government level)
- International/ Inter-Government Organizations' publications (International level)

3. Government of India Documents

India, a Union of 28 states and 7 Union Territories, with a parliamentary system of government is governed in terms of the Constitution of India which came into force on 26th January 1950. The Indian Government, i.e. the Central Government consists of various organs and agencies. Three main bodies of the government are Legislative, Executive and Judiciary. In addition to these organs, there are statutory authorities directly responsible to the President. These are: Attorney General of India, Controller and Auditor General of India, Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities, Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Election Commission and Union Public Service Commission. There are a number of other important authorities set up by the Government of India for time to time such as Planning Commission. (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2009)

3.1 Major Types of Government of India Documents

Government of India and its various agencies generate large amount of information at various levels and by various ministries, departments and divisions. These documents are considered as primary sources of information having historical and current value. On the basis of previous studies (Mohinder Singh, 1982; Walia, 1999), various types of Government of India documents which have been identified are as follows:

- **Administrative Reports:** Most government agencies issue annual or other periodic reports containing their accomplishments of the preceding year and their proposed activities for the upcoming year.
- **Budget Documents:** It provides information on the previous year's budget estimate including revised estimate of revenue and expenditure, also the actual revenues and expenditure. Speech of the Finance Minister on the floor of the Parliament, Budget at a glance, and demands for grants etc. also comes under this category.
- **Census Publications:** Census publications in India remain the largest single source of data in respect of land and its people.
- **Commission and Committee Reports:** Commissions and committees are appointed by different ministries and departments of Government of India, in addition to the statutory commissions and standing committees of the Parliament. These reports are brought out on all the issues wherever government machinery has sought expert opinion or enquired on various problems and issues.
- **Government Notifications:** It includes Office Memorandums, Gazette Notifications, Circulars, and Notices etc.
- **Plan Documents:** The Planning Commission brings out Plan Documents such as Five Year Plan as well as annual plans, progress reports, mid term reports and studies on various aspects on planning. It deals with the objectives, resources, policies and programs of development of different sectors.
- **Research Reports.** Research which is conducted on a broad range of topics sponsored by Government of India is also an important source containing primary research data on a host of topics.
- **Records (National Archives of India):** Government records are also important information sources for historical research. Records of Government of India which are twenty five years old are kept preserved in National Archives of India.

- **Statistical Documents:** Statistical documents contain data on different segments of population and its socio- economic conditions. Census publications and Economic Surveys are very significant documents.

In addition to the above, there are large number of judicial and legislative information in the form of legal documents which includes Bill, Acts, Laws, Codes etc., Laws Reports Digest, Rules and Regulations, Publications of the Parliament such as Parliamentary Debates of the Upper House and Lower House of the Parliament, and Reports of various Parliamentary Committees. All these documents are very significant sources of information which should be promoted for maximum utilization by various categories of the community.

There is no dearth of secondary publications being brought out by government. It is in the form of Yearbooks, Digests, Biographical accounts of national personalities and freedom fighters, booklets and leaflets providing information regarding government initiatives for the society. Periodicals, maps and charts, catalogues and bibliographies are also being brought out by some government organizations. These publications are made available in printed form and are being distributed by individual departments and no centralized efforts have been made so far (Majumdar, 2004).

3.2 Government Information in the Digital Environment: Indian Scenario

As the Internet is gradually transforming the social and economic fabric of society, government agencies worldwide are adopting 'e-government practices to enable a better and broader access to public services. Websites and portals, having the ability to integrate disparate infrastructure and applications have emerged as the logical front and for government initiatives to deliver a wide variety of information and services to its citizens. A large number of government websites have been set up all across the world over the last few years. Government of India is also aware of the potential of Internet and is providing a variety of information; services through its websites. There are 5149 government websites in India (GOI Directory, 2009). While going through Websites of Government of India at the Central level reveals that most of the important government entities have already made headway in establishing their presence on the Net.

3.2.1 Role of National Information Centre (NIC)

NIC was set up under the Department of Information Technology in 1977 by the Government of India. It provides network backbone and e- governance support to Central Government, State Government, Union Territories' Administrations, Districts and other government bodies. The National Portal of India is developed and maintained by National Informatics Centre (NIC, 2005a) with an aim to provide comprehensive, accurate, and reliable and one step source of information about India and its various facets including its Government, heritage, economy, news, online information and services etc.

3.2.2 National Portal of India

National portal of India is initiated as a Mission Mode Project under the National E-Governance Plan (NeGP) (NIC, 2005b). It is designed and maintained by the National Information Centre. It provides a single window access to information and services being provided by the various Indian Government entities. The content in this portal is the result of a collaborative effort of various Indian Government Ministries and Departments in the Central/ State/ District Level. The National Portal of India

provides a very useful link to ‘Government’ (NIC, 2005c) through which various government documents can be accessed through different web pages which are as follow:

i. Documents: This web page provides a one-stop source for important documents and reports released or published by the Indian Government at the Central or State level. This section is constantly enhanced.

- **Types of Online Government Documents**

The National Portal of India (2005d) is an excellent place to begin a search for different types of government documents produced by various government agencies at the Central, State/UT and Local level on the Webpage ‘Documents’. These documents are available in full text and can be searched through the type of government documents or by the name of ministries/departments. Types of documents available online are twelve which are as follows:

Table no. 1: Digital Government Documents on National Portal of India (NPI)

Types of Govt. Documents on NPI	Number of Documents
Annual Report	222
Budget	139
Census	25
Citizen’s Charter	332
Circular/ Office Orders	339
Gazette Notification	850
Guidelines	357
Plan Documents	194
Policy	352
Reports Surveys	190
Statistical Reports	222
State Profiles	44
Total	3326
Others	3037
Grand Total	6363

Source: National Informatics Centre.2005d.

Search of government documents on the webpage ‘Documents’ revealed that number of documents available under various categories is 3326. At the end of the list in the category of ‘Others’ a total of 3037 documents are available online which means that total number of online documents available in full text online through types are only 6363. It highlights that online government information in India is at an initial stage. Maximum numbers of documents available on this webpage are Gazette Notifications i.e. 850 followed by Circular/ office Orders i.e. 399. Census publications are only 25. Most of the documents are current in nature i.e. from the year 2000 onwards. Very few documents of 1990s are available online through this webpage.

- **Online Search through Sponsoring Agencies of Government of India**

At present total number of ministries listed on the portal are 48 but documents can be searched under the name of 29 ministries and few other government

agencies only such as Election Commission, Planning Commission etc. The search results shows that very few government documents published in the last few years are available online. A total of 374 documents are accessible through this webpage. (NIC, 2005d)

Table no. 2: Online Government Document Accessible through Government Agencies on NPI

Online Government Agencies	Number of Documents
Central Government Ministries	274
Election Commission of India	8
Planning Commission	8
Reserve Bank of India	44
Securities and Exchange Board of India	14
Other Organizations	26
Total	374

Source: National Informatics Centre.2005d.

- **Online Government Information at the State/ UT Level**

Various types of government documents in digital form such as annual reports, budget documents and statistical documents are produced at the state level which can be accessed through the National Portal of India. Availability of total number of State Government documents of different States (NIC, 2005d) is shown in table no. 3.

Table no. 3: Online State/ UT Government Documents

States Governments	Number of Documents
Andaman and Nicobar Island	89
Andhra Pradesh	317
Arunachal Pradesh	129
Assam	7
Bihar	1
Chandigarh	439
Chattisgarh	8
Daman and Diu	6
Delhi	34
Goa	155
Gujarat	74
Haryana	47
Himachal Pradesh	655
Jammu and Kashmir	239
Jharkhand	60
Karnataka	3
Kerala	140
Lakshadweep	5
Madhya Pradesh	1064
Maharashtra	1
Manipur	184
Meghalaya	140
Mizoram	700

Orissa	589
Pondicherry	262
Punjab	37
Rajasthan	136
Tamil Nadu	98
Tripura	165
Uttar Pradesh	166
Uttrakhand	48
West Bengal	1
Total	5999

Source : National Informatics Centre.2005d.

The above table brings to the fore certain interesting facts with regard to the initiatives taken by various state governments in making their respective government publications available online. Small states and Union territories like Meghalaya, Manipur, and Chandigarh have digitized a fairly greater number of government documents in comparison to larger states like Maharashtra, West Bengal, Bihar (all three have just 1 online government document available). Thus this implies that it is not lack of resources which is a problem for digitizing the government documents as the larger states have equal if not more human and financial resources than the smaller states but it is the emphasis, the policies formulated and the priority given by the higher authorities of a particular institution which is responsible for providing greater online access to government publications.

- ii. **Policies:** The Indian Government, both at the Central and State level, formulates and issued policies related to different sectors and thrust areas from time to time. Users can browse, search and access the full texts of the Policy Documents. It also provides links to the various policies that have been issued in the recent past.(NIC, 2005e)
- iii.**Schemes:** Indian government, at all levels, announces Welfare Schemes for a cross section of the society from time to time. This webpage is an easy and simple point access to information about welfare schemes of the government and their various aspects including eligible beneficiaries, types of benefits, scheme details etc. (NIC, 2005f)
- iv.**Publications:** India Portal also provides link to the publications brought out by the Publication Division, (NIC, 2007g) which functions under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. It is one of the leading publishing houses of the country and the largest in public sector. It is a repository of books and journals for highlighting matters of national Importance and India's rich and diverse cultural heritage. It holds the exclusive mandate for preserving national heritage and disseminating information through the production and sale of low priced, quality reading material on subjects of national importance. Till date, 7600 titles have been published; of which 1500 are line today. Besides books, the Publication Division has also brought out 21 journals in various issues of national and social significance. The subjects range from art, history, cultural biographies of eminent persons, land and people, flora and fauna, children's literature, science and technology and Gandhian literature to work of reference

like India- A Reference Annual The Division also brings out selected speeches of the President and Prime Ministers of India. With headquarters at Delhi, the Division functions through its various field units at New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Patna, Lucknow, Hyderabad, Thiruvananthapuram and Yojana offices, at New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Guwahati, Hyderabad and Bangalore. The offices of Employment News and Journals unit are located in New Delhi.

v. **GOI Directory:** A one – point source to know all about Indian Government websites at all levels and from all sectors, such as President of India, Vice President of India, Prime Minister’s office, Parliament of India, Supreme court of India, Cabinet Secretariat, Apex/Independent offices, Legislative Assemblies in States, Courts in India, Central Government Ministries/ Dep. States/U.T. Government, Indian Missions Abroad, Foreign Missions in India. Union Budget and State Government Budgets for last ten years are available on GOI Directory on its web page Documents. (NIC, 2005h)

- **Budgets Documents:** National portal offers complete details of the Union Budgets, Economic Surveys, Railway budget and State budget of the previous decade. This web page tells us how the financial status of the country has altered in the Past ten years.
- **Union Budgets:** Central Government Union Budget is available online from the year 1997-98 to 2009-2010. Railway budget is also accessible for year 2009-2010.
- **State Budgets :** Budgets of state governments are available online in full text for 14 states i.e. Andhra Pradesh , Bihar , Chhattisgarh , Goa , Haryana , Himachal Pradesh Jammu and Kashmir , Madhya Pradesh , Maharashtra , Orissa , Rajasthan , Tamil Nadu , Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal
- **Economic Survey** is available online for two years i.e. 1997-98, 2007-08.

National Portal of India provides link to GOI Directory through which vital statistical documents and plan document can be accessed such as Census of five states and Eleventh five year plan (2007-12). Number of documents accessed through this webpage are 39.

vi. **Constitution of India:** Full text of the Constitution of India in English and Hindi can be accessed through Webpage on Government. Amendments acts up to 92nd Amendment Act are available. Search facility is also provided to search the full text through Short Title of the Act, Number of the Act, Year etc. (NIC, 2005i)

vii. **Who’s Who:** It gives information about the personalities holding highest office in the Central Government. This section includes all the Rules passed by the Parliament and the state legislative assemblies as well as the subordinate legislative information sources. (NIC, 2005j)

viii. **Parliament:** Legislature of the Union which is called Parliament consists of President and two Houses, known as Council of States (Rajya Sabha) (NIC, 2005k) and House of the People (Lok Sabha) (NIC, 2005l). The Council of States or the Upper House (Rajya Sabha) of Parliament has been actively involved in the use of ICT to make access to Parliament related documents. The websites of the

Upper House and Lower House are the storehouse of millions of pages of information. These websites give information on Proceedings of the Houses, committee's information, Business of the Houses, Debate held in the Houses, Parliament Questions and Answers, Status of Legislation etc.

ix. **Acts:** This page lets you access the full text of all the Central Acts Passed by Indian Parliament ever since 1834 by searching the India code Information System (INCODIS), a facility developed by the Legislative Department of the Ministry of Law and Justice, in association with National Informatics Centre. The India code Test base contains all the Sections, Schedules, short Title, Enactment Date and Footnotes in every act, furthermore, the Statement of objects and Resources (S.O.R.), Table of Contents (TOC), or the States of an Act can also be retrieved through INCODIS. The INCODIS is a user-friendly system, through which users can look up the Acts or Amendments of their interest comfortably, provided they know the Act year, Act number, Section number, Schedule number, or some key words included in the Act. (NIC, 2005m)

x. **Rules & Regulations:** This category includes all the Rules passed by the Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies as well as the Sub-ordinate legislations issued by the Departments based on those Rules & Regulations. (NIC, 2005n)

3.2.3 Judgment Information System (JUDIS)

JUDIS consisting of complete text of all reported judgments of Supreme Court, Higher Courts of few states such as Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Mumbai, Chennai, Goa, Allahabad, Guwahati and Tis Hazari Delhi District Court Judgments can be accessed through part name, Advocate, Date of judgment and more important by free text search. This enables the users to retrieve all relevant judgments on a particular subject. (NIC, 2005o)

Other relevant information pertaining to judiciary is:

- Cause Lists on Internet: These are scheduling of cases to be heard by the courts on the following day.
- Daily orders of Supreme Court and Delhi High Court are available on the web.
- SUPLIS: This package contains the citation information of all reportable cases decided by the Supreme Court. It provides citation from five journals and cases can be easily located on the basis of citation.

Relevant information is produced by Executive, Legislative and Judicial Bodies of Government of India and expenditure incurred on the collection of data/ information is very high. In view of this it is important that government information in printed as well as digital form should be fully utilized for the benefit and welfare of the society.

4 Conclusion and Suggestions

Government information is an important component in any collection development program. It is fundamentally important for society to have such information easily available and accessible, even if people do not use it heavily. Government of India e-government initiatives has resulted in a multitude of websites and a vast amount of

official information on the web. In this study an attempt has been made to assess the Government of India Websites to find out the online access of Government of India documents. The study reveals that digitization of government documents in India is at an initial stage. At present many current government documents are available; however, more efforts are required on the part of government at various levels, ministries and departments, National Library of India, National Archives of India, and Government Libraries for the digitization of retrospective government information available in printed form.

Online government information is available at National Portal of India as well as Websites of Central Government Ministries and Department, Autonomous Government Agencies, Websites of State Government, National Library of India, National Archives of India and other government libraries. However the government documents are scattered at different sites and the retrieval mechanism is not efficient. There is a dire need of Online Union Catalogue of government documents, current as well as retrospective produced at various levels to achieve complete bibliographic control over this vital national recourse and heritage. It is essential that Department of Publication and Publication Division of Government of India must make concerted efforts for improving the bibliographic control of government publications and use every possible means to make the publications widely published. These publications need to be promoted not only to boost the sale of publications but also to promote their maximum use.

Though NIC is doing a commendable job as far as design and maintenance of government websites is concerned, however in the area of content management more coordination is required from library and information professionals. Efforts are required to develop a National Government Information System which should be managed by a centralized agency for timely and easy access to government information. It requires close liaison between all the agencies of the government who are involved in the creation and management of government information such as National Informatics Centre, Department of Publications and Publication Division of Government of India, National Library of India, National Archives of India and other Government Libraries in order to improve the access to online government information.

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