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Government Publications and Information Dissemination: Indian Scenario

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Abstract

In India, government is the largest collector and largest publisher of information. It brings out thousands of documents every year in a diffused manner. Apart from regulatory bodies, a number of statistical agencies have been created for the purpose of collection, processing and dissemination of data on Indian society and economy. The purpose of this paper is to identify different genres of print or non-print sources of information that are generated by the government agencies. The factors responsible for limited access to government information and use of electronic media for information dissemination have also been discussed in this paper.

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0.Introduction

In a democratic state, information about governments' own activities is of crucial importance to all citizens, especially to beneficiaries of welfare programmes; and to voters who need to make judgments regarding public policy. The Indian government has expanded its activities after 1947 (i.e. the year of independence). A large number of planning and policy-making institutions have been founded in addition to regulatory bodies. A close look at the publication *Allocation of Business Rules* which contains details of activities of government agencies would substantiate this statement. Now the government has become the largest repository of data and information. It publishes quite a large number of documents in a diffused manner. The publications include reports of regulatory bodies (e.g. Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Finance etc.); legislative agencies, experts' groups; results of surveys and census operations (i.e. statistical compilations). The government also publishes all sorts of compendiums regarding working of different agencies and implementation of development programmes.

Of late, government agencies in India have made efforts to disseminate information to general public through the Internet. National Informatics Centre (NIC) has developed websites in which one can get an overview of working of government bodies. Now, there has been a greater emphasis on free flow of information from government to public as it is considered to be an indicator of good governance. The purpose of this paper is to identify different genres of print or non-print sources of information generated, processed and disseminated by the government agencies in India. The factors responsible for limited access to government information and the use of electronic media for information dissemination have also been discussed in this paper.

1. Government Documents: Major Groups

A close look at official documents collection of a library would reveal that government at all levels; i.e. municipal; district, state and union publish thousands of documents in a year. However, from the viewpoint of users, Indian government documents can be divided into following major groups.
- Administrative Reports: These are generally published annually containing summary records of the activities and achievements of government agencies.
- Statistical Publications: Results of statistical operations such as sample surveys, censuses and statistical series derived out of administrative records of regulatory agencies of government come under this category.
- Commission and Committee Reports: Ministries, departments and their subordinate bodies frequently appoint committees and commissions consisting of one or more members. The purpose is to enquire into various problems or to elicit expert opinion on certain current issues. The findings are recorded and published as reports. The theme and content of such publications are valuable sources of information as these committees and commissions have special powers to ask for any information required by them.

- Research Reports: The results of government sponsored research projects fall under this category. Many government agencies have their own research wing. Some of these assign their research projects to autonomous institutions.

In addition, there are certain other categories of publications, which are required to carry out judicial, legislative and administrative responsibilities of the state. They are:
- Bills, Acts, Laws, Codes etc.
- Law Reports and Digests
- Rules and Regulations; and
- Records of proceedings (e.g. _Lok Sabha_ and _Rajya Sabha_ (Houses of Indian Parliament).

Reports are useful source of information about what has happened in the process of administration; and what is followed by the administrative wings of government. From the viewpoint of researchers, the value of these documents is enhanced by the fact that their content is independent of the investigators selective process. However, they suffer from lack of homogeneity and from somewhat erratic availability.

There is another category of documents, which are published regularly through normal trade channel; and treated as reference sources by the librarians. Examples are:
- _India: A reference Annual_
- _Statistical Abstract_
- _Mass Media in India_
- _Who is who: Lok Sabha_ (i.e. Lower House of the Parliament) etc.

In addition, works on Indian society and culture as well as biographical accounts of national leaders and freedom fighters are published under the aegis of Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Periodicals in the fields like science and technology, agriculture, socio-economic planning etc. mostly containing development news and articles by specialist practitioners are regularly published. Maps and charts (mostly for publicity purposes) are also released by the government agencies.

Needless to say, guarantee of authenticity is one of the abiding characteristics of a government information source. Many government publications are unique in nature. For example, _The Gazette of India_ is deemed as an authentic record of acts. _Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha_ debates i.e. Parliament debates, contain primary data on a wide array of subjects. The publications such as _Budget of India, Economic Survey_, and _National Accounts Statistics_ are extremely popular and one cannot dislodge them from the minds of researchers by compiling a similar type of compendium.

In fact, use and non-use of a government publication depend on how the contents are organized and how a particular title is publicized among the users. The ability or skill of a user to extract relevant information is also important. Now a days, evaluation of a source is more in terms of how the information is delivered rather than the information itself. In many cases, inexplicable format of official publications creates problem for non-official users. The absence of proper bibliographical aids also adds to their woe. Many privately owned information disseminating agencies take advantage of this condition and earn huge profits by selling government data in a repackaged form. In fact, people

working in publication units, research wings or libraries of government departments are required to activate the use of their department's publications. A person who is aware of his or her work place surroundings can perform better. However, this attitude of awareness is more difficult to instill than operational skills such as indexing, classification or compilation of a bibliography.

1.1 Statistical Publications:

In terms of utility and actual use, statistical publications can be reckoned as the most important category of government publications. India has built over the decades, a fairly sophisticated system of statistics, known to be very vast and generally the best managed amongst the developing countries. The idea that reliable and accessible official statistics are indispensable in the democratic society and market oriented economy is alive in many parts of the world.

India has a federal structure of government with a division of responsibility for administration between the central government and states. In most cases, statistical data collection programmes are organized basically at state level and national statistics are built up from below. Much of the statistical activity is now concurrent and this has helped in coordination of statistical programmes at center by the apex body i.e. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) a special unit of the central government. The apex body, i.e. statistics wing of MOPSI has two major constituent units.[1] They are:

- Central Statistical Organization (CSO) and
- National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO).

Apart from these two major agencies, there are quite a few other statistical organizations responsible for collection, processing and dissemination of data on important socio-economic variables. The details of databases developed by the major agencies including a brief description of the spheres of their work are stated below: [2]

Central Statistical Organization (CSO) co-ordinates the statistical activities of central, and state agencies, and it keep a close liaison with international agencies. Major databases developed by CSO include:

- National Accounts Statistics (NAS);
- Annual Survey of Industries (ASI);
- Index of Industrial Production (IIP)
- Economic Census (EC);
- Consumer Prices Index for Urban Non-Manual Employees (CPIUNME).

National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) conducts multi-subject household inquiries in randomly selected villages and urban blocks spread all over the country. In each round of its survey, NSSO takes a sample of 12,000 to 14,000 villages and blocks in its central sample and 14,000 to 16,000 villages and blocks in its state sample.

The subject on which NSSO conducts sample surveys include household consumption, employment, unemployment, manufacturing and trade, agriculture, social sectors (including education, mortality, maternity and child, medical service, public distribution), housing conditions, prices (including data on rural credit) etc.

NSSO has played a key role in building up a sound database covering several sectors of the economy and providing valuable inputs in planning and policy formulation. Apart from conducting socio - economic surveys, Field Operations Division of NSSO undertakes fieldwork for ASI and follow up surveys for EC, besides collection of price data from rural and urban sectors. Thus, in certain statistical endeavors, it works in close cooperation with CSO and other bodies. The databases created by NSSO in recent years are available in electronic form.

Registrar General of India (RGI) is one of the premier statistical agencies in India responsible for conducting population census and registration of births and deaths in the country. Census of India database is considered to be the largest repository of data. It contains data in various forms, which include classification of persons by sex and age, marital status, rural/urban residence, educational standards, economic activities etc. The census schedule is the main apparatus for collection of data. During the last five decades, several changes have been introduced in census schedule to reflect socio-economic conditions of population. The databases pertaining to vital events (i.e. birth and death) are collected through Vital Registration System (VRS).

Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics (DGCIS) has created a foreign trade database. The database developed by DGCIS is basically a by-product of regulatory mechanism of the government.

Statistics of India's foreign trade are complied according to general system. All goods entering the customs area by land, sea or air whether for home consumption or for subsequent re-exportation are called imports. All goods which are products of the country and which leave the customs frontiers are called exports. Goods, which were previously imported and are subsequently exported, are called "re-exports." Recently time lag in foreign trade data has been reduced considerably as a result of computerized processing.

Directorate of Economics and Statistics (DES) is the apex body for agriculture statistics in India. Though agricultural statistics is primarily the responsibility of states, DES is the co-coordinating agency for data collection and processing of results. DES develops advance estimate database pertaining to area and yield through a Timely Reporting Scheme (TRS) and General Crop Estimation survey (GCES). Agricultural Census is conducted every five years by DES; and it provides data on land holdings.

The Labour Bureau is responsible for developing database on labour and employment. Data are collected from different regulatory agencies and statistical organizations like NSSO, RGI, etc.

The RBI is responsible for developing database on banking and finance. The source of data for RBI is statistical return submitted by banks. According to Banking Regulation Act, 1949 every banking company is required to submit a monthly return to RBI showing overall assets and liabilities as well as data pertaining to their business operations. RBI also conducts ad-hoc surveys on banking business particularly in rural areas and in the process collects additional information.

Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development is responsible for publication of education statistics at all India level. The principal sources of data are Directorate of Education in states, University Grants Commission, All India

Educational Surveys conducted periodically by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi, and population census data of RGI.

In India, just five years ago, the only way to disseminate statistical data to the users was by printed reports. All statistical agencies disseminated data through print media in the form of serials or ad-hoc publications almost always at subsidized rates or free of cost and sometimes on no-profit no loss basis. The vast myriad of statistical publications are released all over the country in a dispersed manner have found place in many government libraries by virtue of 'free mailing list' culture of the government. The staff working in the libraries are drowned in the ocean of data coming from all corners of the country. Even now, most of these reports do not have adequate bibliographical details and it becomes difficult to process them properly for the purpose of maintaining in the library. In the year 2000, a national policy on the dissemination of statistical data has been approved. According to this policy, researchers can have access to unpublished data in electronic form. However, in order to maintain confidentiality provision, (Statistics Act 1953). The unit level data (i.e. a household or an enterprise) is to be released after deleting identification marks.

In recent years, the statistical system in India has developed cracks in a variety of ways. The earlier regulated and planning regime has given way to a liberalized setting in which economic agents ceased to be obliged to furnish timely and accurate information to the data gathering machinery.

1.2 Administrative/Working Group Reports, Committees and Commission Reports and Other Similar Publications.

Apart from statistical publications, the government at levels publishes a large number of volumes in the form of reports. Social scientists believe that reports are intrinsically less reliable than official records that normally remain buried in files; as they contain some intention of justifying the actions and minimizing the failures of the concerned organizations.[3] Libraries such as The National Library, Calcutta, Central Secretariat; Planning Commission; Ministry of Industry and Commerce; etc (all located in New Delhi) have a strong collection of government reports.

Most of the committee/commission reports, working group/task force/expert group recommendations and administration reports (i.e. annual reports of working of different government bodies) are unpriced publications. Therefore, they are not available through traditional trade channel. However, there are a number of government reports published with a price tag. Most of the prominent social science libraries in India acquire government reports from agents who deal with official publications where as libraries attached to government departments and institutions directly funded by the government have the privilege of getting complimentary copies of reports through the government's free mailing list' system. Priced reports are supplied to the libraries on an 'as and when published' basis by the agents.

The utility of a report is closely interwind with timeliness of its release. Timeliness means both speed and punctuality. The meaning of speed is that the government reports are made available to the users soon after the period of time to which they refer, where as punctuality means that the reports are made available near to the date of their release, which has been decided and made public in advance.[4] As there is hardly

any coordination among the different units of a government body, timeliness factor in release of a report is often not assigned a priority. Many reports are published with a time lag of two to three years.

Some of the government reports are published as serials; and there are gaps in their collection is in most of the libraries. Serials by definition are published in successive parts and intended to continue indefinitely. They are different from monographs for they continue and change. Normally monograph entries stay unchanged once they are made but all characteristic of a serial may alter during its lifetime. There is no bibliographical control for these compilations at any level of government. A majority of these reports remain confined to government offices and are never distributed. In fact, diversity of practices in government offices with regard to printing, distribution and announcement of government reports has generated a genuine demand for coordination and integration of bibliographic activities.

Most of the reports are distributed among priority users with the help of a mailing list. Maintenance and revision of a mailing list is normally done by a junior level official. As a result, analysis or judgment is not applied as to what names are to be placed on the list. This means that potential users of a report may not get an opportunity to consult it. During 1976's and 1980's many government publications were indiscriminately marked as 'for official use' or 'for restricted circulation'. There is an urgent need to launch an awareness campaign to increase the distribution and use of government reports. User's group from academic institutions and research units must be associated with this campaign.

In USA, the Federal Depository Library Programme has served as a major public access point for government information for well over 130 years. All government publications delivered to designated depositories or other libraries are for public use without charge. Similar type of arrangement is needed for Indian government publications, under overall supervision of a coordinating body.[5]

2. Access to unpublished Records

There are mainly two aspects of public access to government information. One is access to published data and the other is unpublished administrative and other records. One can have access to published information thorough print media or through the concerned department/ministry. It is difficult to have access to unpublished records. The provisions of *Official Secrets' Act (1923)* empower the officials to withhold information from the public.

One cannot dissuade the fact that enormous amount of data and information are collected and processed by the government and only a part of it is made available to the public. There are quite a few reasons why information collected by the government is not made available. It is argued that some of this information is obtained on the condition that its confidential nature will be respected. It is also said that personal information acquired for the purpose of doing a specific statutory duty should not be made available for other purposes. These principles are embodied in *Collection of Statistics Act. 1950.* And finally, it is often said that the primary tack of a government agency is to carry out its statutory responsibilities and that dissemination of information collected in the course of these duties may be a burden on resource and also a deviation from their main activities.

This argument loses credibility when one considers the need for open government. It is now believed that all rights in a democratic society extend from one's ability to access information and citizens should have ready access to information in order to keep government accountable.

In India, Right to Information (RTI) movement gained ground only in the last decade. It has been led mainly by grass root activists and NGOs. Their awareness raising efforts through forums like *Jan Sunwai* (i.e. public hearing) in Rajasthan state has ensured some degree of accountability on the part of the local level authorities.[6] The movement to make information a right and accessible to ordinary citizen have been somewhat slow and sporadic. Since 1996, nine Indian states have implemented laws guaranteeing the RTI, albeit with varying degrees of circumscription. In some states RTI acts have been successful mainly due to persistent efforts of groups such as the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS), in Rajasthan state, *Parivartan* in Delhi and the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI). The Rajasthan RTI legislation has helped villagers to monitor development and relief progammes. In Delhi, *Parivartan* led campaign has helped to expose corruption in public distribution system. A suitable central law on RTI would perhaps ensure stricter monitoring of many of the governments welfare programmes such as the proposed employment guarantee plan.[7]

In the present era of information society, it would be increasingly self-defeating for the government to try to control what information is released or available; and the real challenge is to provide leadership to the process by which people interpret and make sense of that information.

3. Government Information and Electronic Media

Recent advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has made it possible to develop and disseminate information in various forms and means of media on local, national, and international level. ICT has produced marvels like the Internet, World Wide Web, Interactive Multimedia, CD-ROMs, on-line digital libraries etc. The viewpoint that electronic governance can bring greater transparency and simplicity in governments' relationship with business and public now has a wider acceptance. In addition, 64th and 73rd Amendment of Indian Constitution has made provisions for *Gram Panchayat* (i.e. Village Assembly) based administration. A citizen can how participate in decision-making process for which the person is required to be information literate. The government has initiated plans and programmes to provide access to official information through electronic media.

Almost all the government ministries, departments, subordinate offices and government funded autonomous organizations have their websites on the Internet created by the NIC (National Informatics Centre, India), (http://www.nic.in). The spheres of activity, plans and programmes of different ministries and departments are made public through their website. For example, The Planning Commission has put all important plan documents and other publications on its website. Similarly, statistics wing of Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) has a website which contains annual report of the Ministry. It also contains information about publications released by MOSPI and the necessary guidelines for obtaining the publications. The latest macro-economic indicators and socio-economic statistics released by MOSPI have also been included.

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has a website which provides access to information on many subjects like a) money market operations b) RBI rules c) statement by RBI on recent developments in the foreign exchange markets. In most of the cases, the website of a government department also include a profile of the Minister in charge, administrative set up and a report of the working of the organization.

In states like Maharastra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, several initiatives have been taken to put electronic governance machinery into action with the help of the Internet. Maharashtra has a plan to create community Internet center on a commercial basis. The purpose is to use Internet in areas like a) admission to schools and colleges b) job search c) health care d) public grievance redresssal e) distance education f) disaster warning g) land record h) water management etc. Andhra Pradesh has published a document, *Vision 2020*. The document promises to provide Andhra Pradesh residents with 'one shop one-stop' service by making automated services available round the clock and providing information kiosks to ensure access to these services for all.

In the southern states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, computerization of land records has been taken up as an e-governance project. The project has been used as a substitute for governance mainly to cover up the inefficiencies of the administration, and more crucially to lessen the interaction between landholders and government officials.[8] It has been rightly said that ICT can be used as a lever by imaginatively using it first to remove illiteracy and secondly to improve governance by empowering people with access to information, bring greater transparency and reduce corruption by removing delay and lack of transparency.[9]

4. Concluding Remarks

In India, the government is the largest producer of data and information. Reports, serials and other publications are released in a dispersed manner by the government. There is an urgent need for a coordinating agency which can monitor the publishing activity. A proper bibliographical control is also necessary. Following measures can be taken to activate the use of government publications.
- Sharing of access/collection development responsibilities based on subject strength of libraries or geographic considerations.
- Identification of government information holdings through on-line catalogues, union lists and other locator systems.
- Training of staff and users in the use of electronic information sources.
- Provision for feedback mechanism for information creator and access providers to evaluate.

At present, there is a greater stress on ICT. The government agencies have created their own websites on the Internet. However, information or content development has not received enough attention. There is an urgent need to understand that content is more important than conduit, and proper content development is important for implementation of information facilitation programmes through e-governance. And it can precipitate the emergence of a more informed and educated group, which can assert a role in the governance. Information society will ultimately lead us to an economy that adds value through information, ideas and intelligence.

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