

Online citizens' charters as a neo-liberal 'technologies of government' in India: A critical assessment

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Focus of paper

- neo-liberal *governmentality*
- theoretical framework of Michel Foucault
- performance of Citizens' Charter in India, and its online component, as a new neo-liberal "technologies of government"
- highlights linkages to e-governance
- implications of online citizens' charters, particularly in developing country context



Theoretical frameworks & important concepts - 1

Governmental Rationalities and Technologies of Rule:

- *governmentality* = art/rationality of government in the political domain ('hows' of governing and of being governed)
- *technical* aspect of governmentality a.k.a 'technologies of government' = strategies, techniques, knowledges and devices
- recent neo-liberalism described in terms of *innovations* in government

Theoretical frameworks & important concepts - 2

- **citizens' charters (CCs) & e-governance** situated within a **neo-liberal** framework
- CCs introduced as part of NPM reform movement
- India: A Charter “hot spot”: Indian CC programme modelled along lines of UK Citizens' Charter
- e-gov for better service delivery part of neo-liberal (technocratic ‘good governance’) discourse in India in 1990s
- CCs increasingly part of e-gov programmes as a “best practice”

Research questions

- RQ1: Whether *new ensembles of governing* (formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections) were created in the process of adopting the citizen's charter programme in India?
- RQ2: The status of implementation of *online* citizens' charters, and their implications, particularly in terms of the stated good governance goals, in the Indian context?



Implementation: An Investigation

1st dimension: implementation of CC programme

Mistakes of early phase rectified – reforms examined at Central level, in terms of new ensembles of governing:

1. Information and Facilitation Counters (IFC)
2. Task Force
3. Compilation of information
4. Regional seminars and capacity-building workshops
5. Model for excellence
6. Publicity and website - <http://goicharters.nic.in/>

The Internet: An Investigation

2nd dimension: use of, and performance on, the Internet (Central and State government websites):



1. no complete listing of charters
2. obsolete information due to lack of updates
3. variations in online presence
4. lack of customization
5. poor quality
6. issues of language

Findings - 1

RAI:

- CCs yet to be truly accepted as a tool for better governance
- however, as a neo-liberal 'technologies of govt', new ensembles of governing were put into place in light of evaluations
- yet, Indian context makes it uphill struggle to achieve acceptable service quality

Findings - 2

RA2: Overall, two main sets of issues, viz.

1. issues relating to information available on websites - both quantity and quality
2. fundamental problems of access to ICTs (digital and other divides)
 - Such barriers result in only partial fulfillment of good governance objectives
 - Need to 'animate' CCs (think beyond conventional modes of dissemination, mobiles?)

Concluding remarks

- need not denounce all neo-liberal innovations as unambiguously “bad”
- is some merit in fundamentals of good governance
- however, problems of adapting neo-liberal reforms in developing countries (technology, expectations, consequences)
- hence, must question neo-liberal rhetoric that conducting government business online automatically enhances democratic functioning