RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPACT OF ICT IN STRENGTHENING TRANSPARENCY IN RURAL LOCAL GOVERNANCE: A CASE STUDY IN FOUR GRAM PANCHAYATS IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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Manuscript Info	*Abstract*
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The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in local governance and public service delivery systems has added a new dimension in the recent times. In West Bengal, processes of decentralisation and institutional issues were assisted by special projects like SRD (Strengthening Rural Decentralisation) and ISGP (Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats) respectively supported by DFID (2005-2011) and World Bank (2011-ongoing). Emphasis on GIS based monitoring of decentralised planning process, tracking key services provided by Gram Panchayats, use of GPMS (Gram Panchayat Management System) software for administrative and financial management are few of these key measures which rely on the use of ICTs in the local governance system. Apart from that, Ministry of Panchayati Raj has issued several guidelines on use of uniform portal like e-Gramswaraj for uploading Gram Panchayat Development Plans online. It is widely believed that issues like accountability and transparency can be ensured in the institutions of Gram Panchayats with advent of such measures. In this article we will analyse the effectiveness of ICT in bringing transparency and strengthen institutional accountability in the Gram Panchayats. Four Gram Panchayats in the District of Birbhumwere selected to understand how the effective implementation of ICT measures impact on the overall institutional strengthening of Gram Panchayats. For the purpose and the rigour of the study the GPs were selected on the basis of identified socio-economic and other important methodological indicators. Elected Representatives and local residents were selected as respondents. Gram Panchayats were visited for this purpose. For the collection of data structured questionnaire, personal interview, FGDs and case study methods were also used.The finding shows that the role of ICTs in the rural local governance process is limited. The administrative practices, monitoring of planning cycle, GPs financial management has improved undoubtedly but it is not a panacea as viewed by some experts. The study argues that limited involvement of the local residents in the process with low attendance in Gram Sabha and Gram Sansads meetings cannot be compensated with the modern technologies.

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Introduction:-

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in local governance is reportedto have a number of potential outcomes.It is widely believed that the process is influenced by elements such as community activism and capacity within local governments' areas of jurisdiction. Furthermore, given the broad definition of governance, it is worthwhile pondering to actual role oflocal government in this information age(Odendaal, 2003). We are also reminded constantly that the impact of ICT is ambiguous; it unifies but also divides, it may level the playing fields in some instances, but it also brings about inequality (Frissen, 1997).Carter (1997) refers to the potential deepening of the relationship between the information ''haves'' and ''have-nots'' that may emerge if access to information technology and its benefits are not achieved. If ICT were to facilitate democratic and inclusive governance, it would need to address the ''Digital Divide'' directly. The role of Local Governments is therefore interesting in this regard. On the one hand, local government is best placed to respond to local needs meaningfully and appropriately. It may be worthwhile exploring how well local government is placed to mitigate digital inequalities (Odendaal, 2003). In India, advent of information communication technologies' is relatively a recent phenomenon. Panchayats play a significant role in delivering essential services to the needy and poor in rural areas. Uses of ICTs bring advantage to the local institution to manage things more successfully. In this paper, I have tried to analyse the extent of success Gram Panchayatscan able to bring by using ICT methods in the governance process.

Since the late 1970s, West Bengal has pursued an alternative approach to rural development based squarely on institutional reforms, involving land reform and decentralized local governance. A functioning three tier systems of rural local governments was instituted since 1978, well in advance of the 73rd Constitutional Amendments which mandated such a system throughout India. The State Government identified further areas in functioning of PRIs (Panchayati Raj Institutions) which needed systemic improvements in quality of governance with wider and better participation, greater transparency, accountability and responsiveness towards the poor for economic development with more equity and social justice.

The paper is divided in few sections. In the first part we have described the background and importance of decentralised PRI system in India. Next, the argument on relevance of ICT and its impact in local governance process is presented. Finally, we have illustrated the concept with empirical data from four Gram Panchayats in West Bengal on how they are managing governance process with using various ICT methods in order to maintain transparency in local governance.

Strengthening Rural Decentralization through Panchayati Raj Institutions in India
The institution of Panchayati Raj is as old as Indian civilization itself. It was in existence since ancient periods.The word 'panchayat' is derived from the word **pancha(five)** whichhas references into the existence of assembling five (pacnh) wise elder people in the village to decide village problems. Mahatma Gandhi gave thrust on the importance of villages in country's economic and social development. He believed that Indian independence must begin at the bottom, thus making every village a republic or panchayat, enjoying full powers. (Mahesh, 2011). Gandhi's dreams lead to the inclusion of Article 40 in the directive principles of the state policy of constitution of India. But interestingly after independence, the concept of Panchayts were not in the primary focus for the policy makers. It was rather in late 1960s again the idea of Panchayati Raj came up into the central focus after few states followed this model successfully. After five decades of independence, in the year 1993, the Government of India took a revolutionary step by enacting Panchayati Raj Institutions a part of the Constitution. Panchayati Raj Institutions are now the backbone of implementing most of the socio-economic development programmes in the country. It is the institution mandated for promoting economic development with social justice. (ibid).

India has made considerable efforts to strengthen the voice of the rural poor through decentralization. 73rd Constitutional amendment in 1993 has paved the path for decentralized government structure in the country. The motive was to bring government closer to the rural people and improve the condition of public services (World Bank, 2006). It has strengthened the voice of local people and the accountability of public sector decision-making through the democratic process. In a country as diverse as like India, decentralization thus became the core of India's strategy to improve service delivery. The 73[rd]Constitutional Amendment created provisions for three tiers of democratically elected rural governments - at the district level (District Panchayat or ZilaParishads); the

block level (Block Panchayat or Panchayat Samitiy) and the village level (Gram panchayat or GP) (World Bank, 2006).

Transparency and Accountability in Local governance

Transparency and accountability are vital factors in the effective performance of local government including both political representatives and the bureaucracy. Conceptually there is little disagreement on the political and administrative dimensions of accountability, and their relation to the institutions of local government. Transparency and accountability are expected to reduce rent-seeking in development activities. There is, however, a wide gap between normative principles and the actual manifestation of accountability. Political and bureaucratic processes, hierarchical social environment, low citizen's participation and lack of deliberation have undermined accountability in governance.In a democracy, representatives are accountable to the citizens and one of the means of accountability is elections, where the electorate can exercise its power and decide whether to retain them in office or to replace them with the others. A crucial factor in the process of accountability is citizens' involvement in the governance process. The implication here it the demand factor that the citizens are aware of what is legitimately due to them from the elected representatives and the officials. It entails not only communicating their preference to the representatives but also being informed about the management of public funds and the outcome of panchayat decisions on development works. In contemporary times, the concept of accountability covers various other concepts including transparency, equity, responsiveness, etc. (Bovens, 2007)

Impact of ICT in local governance:

Usage of Information and communication technologies in governance process started a decade ago. ICT and e-governance for a nation like India where a huge population is not having accessibility to basic needs for their livelihood is a paradox. But it leads towards their economic and social development. ICT involves the representation of any information in digital form along with its electronic processing, storage, retrieval and dissemination. The information may comprise of news, circulars, reports, educational material, entertainment material and application forms etc. and can be accessed by many people in either horizontal or in sequential manner. The current era of globalization increasing competitiveness requires that every citizen should be resourceful to run their livelihood enterprises. For seeking the solutions, they have to be in contact with institutions irrespective of their location through electronic media. It can also expedite agricultural development and also beneficial in micro-finances administration. Internet facilitates people to interact with government, conduct businesses, communicate with peers, innovate, imbibe best practices into their lives and imitate their opinion. Further, the access of ICT helps in creating sustainable economic relationships and efficient markets. Moreover, it is also helpful in eradication of poverty and improving health. Globally there are various countries which are endeavouring towards rejuvenating their public administration by making it more proactive, accountable, service-oriented and transparent. This transformation requires intervention of technology in administration and hence ICT can play significantly important role in advancement of public sector and its administration. The use of ICT in governance facilitates communications and enriches coordination of bureaucrats or elected representatives within different tiers of government.

Case study on the Impact of ICTs in Four Gram Panchayats in West Bengal

Four Gram Panchayats from Birbhum district of West Bengal were selected for this study. Gram Panchayats were selected from two different development blocks. Details of study area is indicated in Table No. 1.

Table No. 1:- Details of Study Area.

State	District	Block	Gram Panchayats
West Bengal	Birbhum	Murarai-II	Paikar - I
			Jajigram
		Illambazar	Illambazar
			Dharampur

Methodology of the study:-

Gram Panchayats were selected based on the Mission Antyodaya score published by Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. Two higher scored and two lower scored Gram Panchayats were selected from two development blocks in Birbhum district for comparative analysis. (see Table No. 1). The approach of collecting information was a combination of primary and secondary data through methods like semi-structured questionnaires and Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) with the community, elected representatives and employees of the concerned

Gram Panchayats. Primary data collection was carried out in the villages with general population in selected households. Secondary data was collected from the data, reports available in the GP office and other relevant secondary sources. Field work was carried out in the month of October, 2021.

Result and Analysis:-
The key findings derived from the analysis from the field level data at the Gram Panchayat are presented in this section. The primary data wereanalysed and substantiated further with the inputs from the consultations with various stakeholders.

Demography and Socio-Economic condition in Selected Gram Panchayats
In this section, details of demographic and other socio-economic issues are presented. As indicated in the Table No. 2, the population size of Gram Panchayats is more than 10 thousand. Illambazar GP has the highest population size with more than 30 thousand population. Dharampur GP has the lowest population with around 16 thousand population.

Table 2:- Population Size in sample Gram Panchayats.

District	Block	Gram Panchayats	Total Population
Birbhum	Murarai-II	Paikar - I	32800
		Jajigram	29250
	Illambazar	Illambazar	31130
		Dharampur	16320

Source: Field Data

In all four Gram Panchayats, percentage of scheduled caste and schedule tribe population is presented in Table No. 3. Illambazar GP has the highest number of SC and ST population among all four Gram Panchayats. Paikar-I has the lowest percentage of SC, ST population among all sample Gram Panchayats.

Table No. 3:- Percentage of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population (percentage).

District	Block	Gram Panchayats	SC Population	ST population
Birbhum	Murarai-II	Paikar - I	10.00	0.20
		Jajigram	25.02	1.06
	Illambazar	Illambazar	35.70	16.08
		Dharampur	20.30	4.04

Source: Field Data

According to field data, 84.00 percent of total population is literate in Illambazar GP whereas only 42.30 percent of total population is literate in Jajigram Gram Panchayat. (Table No. 4)

Table No. 4:- Total Literacy (Percentage).

District	Block	Gram Panchayats	Total Literacy
Birbhum	Murarai-II	Paikar - I	45.00
		Jajigram	42.30
	Illambazar	Illambazar	84.00
		Dharampur	66.76

Source: Field Data

Sex Ratio is an important indicator of gender equality in a society. It signifies the number of female against 1000 male members in an area. Paikar-I GP has the highest sex ratio among all four selected Gram Panchayats. (Table No. 5) Gram Panchayats has an important role to play in women empowerment through implementing activities related to women and child development in planned activities.

Table No. 5:- Sex Ratio.

District	Block	Gram Panchayats	Sex Ratio
Birbhum	Murarai-II	Paikar - I	972
		Jajigram	964

	Illambazar	Illambazar	935
		Dharampur	927

Source: Field Data

Gram Panchayats are mandated to deliver basic services in rural areas. Coverage of Sanitation is a key indicator of socio-economic condition in rural areas. According to data collected in the field level, all four Gram Panchayats

Table No. 6:- Coverage of Toilet facilities in Households (Percentage).

District	Block	Gram Panchayats	Households having Toilet
Birbhum	Murarai-II	Paikar - I	99.00
		Jajigram	80.00
	Illambazar	Illambazar	90.00
		Dharampur	98.00

Source: Field Data

have been failed to achieve OpenDefecation Free (ODF) status. However, Paikar – I has almost achieved 99.00 percent of households covered with individual toilet. Illambazar has also 90 percent covergage of toilet facilities in households in Gram Panchayat area. Among the four GPs, only Jajigram GP has toilet coverage of 80.00 percent. (Table No. 6)

Participation of people in the Gram Sabha Meetings
Gram Panchayats are mandated to prepare Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) for better implementation of schemes and programmes at the grassroots level. Towards the beginning of the GPDP preparation phase, in order to identify the needs of the villages, Gram Sansad meetings were held and immediate needs of the villages were discussed. Organizing meetings of all Gram Sansads is a precursor for the planning process at the GP Level. Gram Sabha meetings are annual meeting of community or total electorate in the Gram Panchayat area. Generally, four Gram Sabha meetings are to be organised by a Gram Panchayat. According to guidelines issued by Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Gram Sabha meetings should be held mandatorily for greater accountability in rural local governance. As per the 73rd constitutional amendment, Gram Sabha is the final authority to approve the plans.

Table No. 7:- Participation of People in the Gram Sabha Meeting.

District	Block	Gram Panchayats	Total Electorate	Number of people attended Gram Sabha meeting
Birbhum	Murarai-II	Paikar - I	19795	971 (4.91)
		Jajigram	19310	965 (5.00)
	Illambazar	Illambazar	25064	1267 (5.06)
		Dharampur	11401	602 (5.28)

Source: Field Data. Figures in parenthesis are percentages

In the Table No. 7 it is quite evident that the percentage of attendance were very low in the Gram Sabha in sample Gram Panchayats during 2019-20. Despite rigorous attempts to mainstream the process of GS meeting, attendance is low in each of the Gram Panchayat. Though, the performance of Dharampur is better compare to rest of the GPs. It is quite evident that the use of GIS based monitoring has very little impact as far as the attendance of people in Gram Sabha meetings.GPs even failed to achieve minimum mandatory attendance requirement of ten percent in all GPs.

Impact of Web-based Monitoring Process in ensuring Transparency and Accountability in sample Gram Panchayats
Transparency refers to the availability of information to the general public and bringing clarity about government rules, regulations and decisions. Accountability is often referred as those who rules are answerable to those from them derive their authority through establishing standards or criteria for judging the performance of public officials. As a first step the GIS (Geographic Information System) based monitoring system has been instrumental in the promotion of ICT tools at the GP level with an aim to increase transparency and accountability by capturing

participation of community members in GP planning process. The officials at District and Block level responded that it enables them to monitor the progress of activity at the GP level on a real time basis and brings greater transparency in GP functioning. Interactions with officials at GP level revealed that there need to be more orientation on the objectives and expected outcomes of the GIS based monitoring system.

Ministry of Panchayati Raj has started promoting various e-governance platforms for promoting transparency and good governance in Panchayati Raj. MoPR has undertaken e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project(MMP) with a view to introduce and strengthen e-Governance in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) across the country and build associated capacities of the PRIs for effective adoption of the e-Governance initiative. Initially, under this project, Panchayat Enterprise Suite (PES) has been conceptualised which comprises 11 Core Common applications. Some of these applications are Local Governance Directory, Area Profiler, E-GramSwaraj, GIS portal called Panchayat Manchitra etc.

Table No. 8:- Reaction of Employees on efficacy of web-based monitoringon GP functioning.

Improvement in GP Functioning throughWeb based Monitoring System						
SampleGram Panchayats						
Respondents	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Neither Agree or Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Total**
Elected Representatives	10 (62.50)	2 (12.05)	2 (12.05)	1 (6.25)	1 (6.25)	16
Panchayat Secretary	4 (100.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	4
Other functionaries of Gram Panchayats	12 (75.00)	2 (12.05)	1 (6.25)	1 (6.25)	0 (0.00)	16
Total	26 (72.22)	4 (11.11)	3 (8.33)	2 (5.55)	1 (2.77)	36 (100.00)

Source: Data collected from Field and analysed by authors. Figures in parenthesis are percentage

During the flied visit, opinion of key stakeholders was recorded on impact of web based monitoring on functioning of Gram Panchayats. It is quite clear that employees were comparatively satisfied with the outcome of web-based monitoring system started in the ISGP Project compare to their elected representatives'counterparts who were satisfied but not to the extent like their employees. The reason can be multiple. It can be the outcome of less awareness of the technical process by elected leaders than employees. Most of the handholding support is given to the employees directly whereas elected representative mostly depend on the employees to get the information indirectly. So it is evident they do not get any incentive to look into the process minutely.

Perception onImpact of ICTs in GPs:
Although in all selected Gram Panchayats, implementation of e-GramSwaraj portal is running successfully but in reality usage and the level of impact it created is a question that has been raised in this analysis. During the study it was asked whether the employees, elected representatives use the portal that has been put in place for greater transparency and for better planning and implementation. The result shows in Table No. 9 is around 72.22 percent of all respondents were fully aware about the portal ofe-gramswarajsystem as it eases their work but in case of political representatives not all were fully aware about the technicalities of the portal.

Table 9:- Awareness and Perception on e-Gramswaraj portal.

Awareness on e-Gram Swaraj Portal					
Sample Gram Panchayats					
Respondents	**Fully Aware**	**Somewhat Aware**	**Neutral or no response**	**Not Aware**	**Total**
Elected Representatives	10	2	2	2	16
Panchayat Secretary	4	0	0	0	4

Other functionaries of Gram Panchayats	12	2	2	0	16
Total	26 (72.22)	4 (11.11)	4 (11.11)	2 (5.55)	36 (100.00)

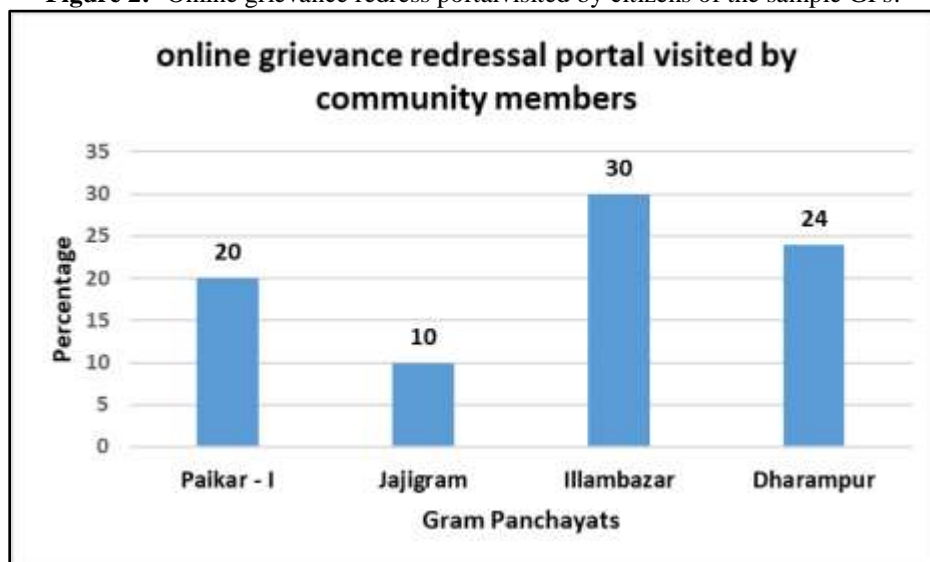Source: Data collected from Field and analysed by authors. Figures in parenthesis are percentage

Figure 1:- Website/Mobile application used by the elected representatives of the GPs.
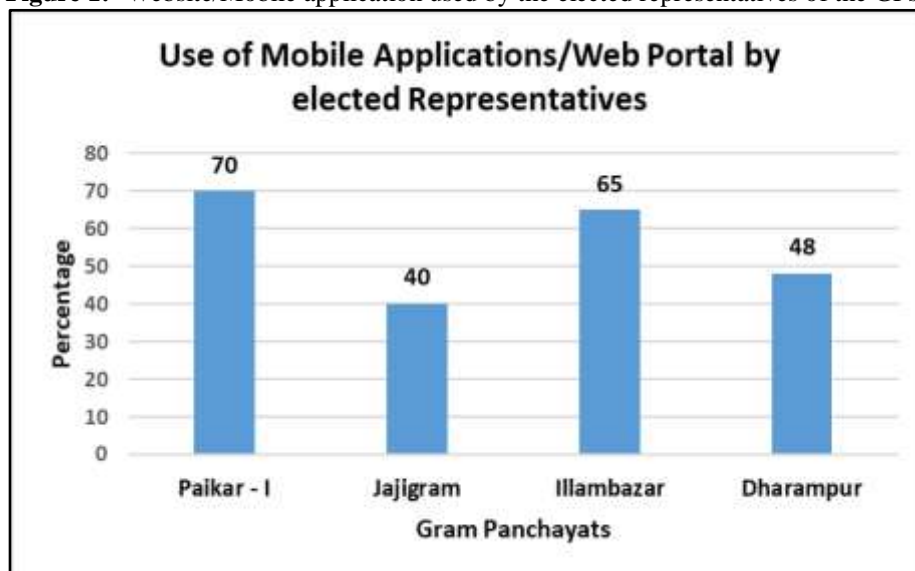
Source: collected and analysed by author.

Access and interest of checking project website much less in the citizens in both the GPs. In the figure no. 1 shows that elected representatives in Paikar-I (70%) and Illambazar (65%) relatively more regular in visiting website or using mobile application than other two Gram Panchayats for accessing necessary information regarding Gram Panchayat functions. When asked about the reason, elected members of the concerned Gram Panchayats reacted that they are not aware of the process at all. Some of the respondents reacted about the inefficiency to overcome the technicality as it is a hindrance in the process. In case of elected leaders, they also said that necessity of visiting website did not arise as they feel they are in touch of the GP employees for getting such information.

Figure 2:- Online grievance redress portalvisited by citizens of the sample GPs.
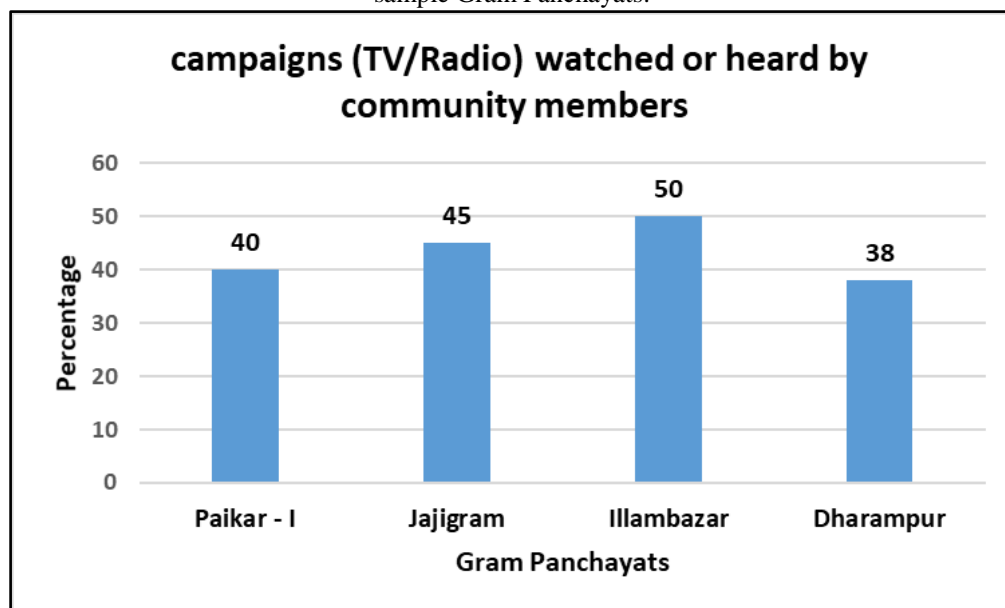

Source: Data collected from field and analysed by authors

Grievance redressal is a vital system to strengthen transparency mechanism in governance process. We have asked 50 members from various CBOs of four GPs on whether they are aware or visited the online grievance redressal portal launched by Panchayat Department to register complaint about services or any matter related to Gram Panchayats. Only 30 percent of community members from Illambazar Gram Panchayat responded that they have visited the portal but in other GPs the percentage of community members visited the portal are low.

Other communication strategies:
In order to promote better communication to the villagers, through ISGP project initiative, Department of Panchyati Raj and Rural Development started commercial campaigns through Radio jingles and televised advertorials. we asked some of the respondents in the villages whether they have noticed such advertorials or radio jingles and/or whether it created any impact on their mind. The topic on the advertorials was varied in nature e.g. environmental issues in locality, social issues, better service delivery, sanitation etc.

Figure 3:- Radio jingles / advertisement on Televisions on Gram Panchayats visited or heard by Community in sample Gram Panchayats.

Source: Data collected and analysed by author.

It is clear that penetration of Television is growing rapidly in rural areas. Impact of TV commercials has much more impact than other mode of communication in respect to promote or disseminate ideas on service delivery. Information sharing through radio and TV still a preferable option for the policy makers in order to disseminate information on vital social and environmental issues. Figure 3 indicates that more than 40 percent of respondents watched TV advertisements or heard radio jingles on local governance in the selected GPs.

Other than the digital ICT tools, different traditional messaging through hoardings and wall writings were carried out as part of information dissemination campaign in the process. Awareness messages about services provided by Gram Panchayats to the residents, dealing with early marriage, Gram Sansad Sabha & Women were disseminated through hoardings. Wall writings were used to propagate messages related to service provision of GPs, water conservation, soil conservation and ecology preservation, Gram Sansad Sabha participation etc.

Common Service Centres (CSCs) are the physical facilities for delivering e-Services to rural and remote locations where availability of computers and Internet are negligible or mostly absent. Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and Ministry of Panchayati Raj jointly promoted co-locating common service centres in Gram Panchayat areas for better delivery of e-services and promoting transparency in governance process in rural areas of the country.

Table No. 10:- Awareness on services provided by Common Service Centres (CSCs).

Awareness on e-Gram Swaraj Portal					
Sample Gram Panchayats					
Respondents	Fully Aware	Somewhat Aware	Neutral or no response	Not Aware	Total
Elected Representatives	4	2	2	8	16
Panchayat Secretary	2	0	0	2	4
Other functionaries of Gram Panchayats	4	2	6	4	16
Total	10 (27.77)	4 (11.11)	8 (22.22)	14 (38.88)	36 (100.00)

Source: Data collected from Field

We have asked selected respondents whether they are aware about the services provided by the CSCs in their GP area. Only 27 percent of total respondents were fully aware and 11.11 percent were somewhat aware about the services provided by the Common Service Centre but around 38 percent of respondents were not aware about the CSC and the services provided by them. It shows that Gram Panchayats were not in close coordination with the CSCs at the village level.

Conclusion:-
Information sharing and dissemination has increased to a considerable proportion in the Gram Panchayats. ICT methods have also played a significant role in that. But most of the cases internal management of GP functions are beneficial out of the intervention. Concerned citizens and general population are still very much distant from the process. People at the local level were not fullyaware on the initiative taken by the GP authorities. Inclusive awareness generation and developing capacity is need of the hour. The whole process need to be looked at from the people's perspective. Relevance of Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meeting are diminishing due number for factors. Technology intervention can propagate better monitoring of the process but the solution lies with the inner strength of the process. It is high time to promote digital literacy in rural areas. The usage of modern ICT methods in governance process is here to stay. Developing capacities of elected members on various important portals and applications should be mandatory in training sessions. Customised training modules and materials should be prepared with association of expert agencies. Most of the Gram Panchayats are now connected with computers. Therefore, online training can also be introduced for elected members and employees on issues such as planning, monitoring and implementation of development programmes aimed for economic and social development of rural population in the country.

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