

National Portal of India*

(<http://india.gov.in>)

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ABSTRACT

India, the largest democracy in the world, is set to emerge as an ICT superpower in the new millennium. Realising the importance of 'electronic governance', the Indian government has laid a lot of emphasis on anytime, anywhere delivery of government services. Already, over 5000 web sites of various Indian government entities, including ministries, departments, state/union territory (UT) governments, district administrations, organisations, etc., exist on the internet. This implies that citizens have to visit a large number of web sites for different services. Sometimes, one also has to visit several web sites to avail a single service. Different web sites follow different technology standards, design layouts, navigation architecture, etc making it confusing for the citizen.

For making such information and services accessible in a convenient manner, the national portal of India has been designed and developed by the National Informatics Centre as a mission-mode project under the National e-Governance Plan. The objective behind the portal is to provide single-window access to the information and services provided by the Indian government for its citizens. The portal provides a unified interface for over 5000 Indian government web sites and acts as a logical front end to the e-governance initiatives under various central/state/UT government schemes and programmes. It caters to a wide range of target audience and stakeholders right from common citizens, government departments and the corporate sector to NRIs, national and international media and the general public across the world.

Introduction

An important dimension of good governance in any country is provision of anytime, anywhere access to government information and services through optimum utilisation of ICT. These services are often provided through a number of different departments working in different sectors of develop-

* CSI Nihilent e-Governance Awards 2005–6, Best Project – Technology.

ment. This implies that citizens have to visit a large number of web sites for different services. Sometimes, one also has to visit multiple web sites to avail a single service. Different web sites follow different technology standards, design layouts, navigation architecture, etc. This results in a lot of inconvenience at the citizens' end and requires a lot of learning on their part to avail these services, thus defeating the very purpose of the various initiatives. An ideal solution to all these problems lies in having a *national portal* to act as a comprehensive one-stop source of government information and service delivery.

National Portal of India—the Success Story

The scheme of the National Portal of India, to act as a common gateway for over 5000 Indian government web sites, was designated as a mission-mode project by the Department of IT under the National E-Governance Plan (NEGP). The portal has been designed, developed and hosted by the National Informatics Centre, with active collaboration from a large number of ministries, government departments and state/UT governments. The first version of the portal was formally launched and dedicated to the nation by Thiru Dayanidhi Maran, the Union Minister for Communications and Information Technology, at a public function on 10 November 2005. Shri. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, presided over the function (Figs 1 and 2). The National Portal received favourable media coverage (Fig. 3)



Fig. 1 Shri. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission; Thiru Dayanidhi Maran, Union C&IT Minister; Shri. Brijesh Kumar, the then Secretary (IT); and Dr. N. Vijayaditya, DG, NIC (from R to L) at the launch of the national portal



Fig. 2 Union C&IT Minister and Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission observing a demonstration of the National Portal. In the picture (from right to left): Thiru Dayanidhi Maran, Shri. Montek Singh Ahluwalia and Ms. Neeta Verma (Senior Technical Director, NIC)

Fig. 3 Press Coverage after the Launch

*“Mother of all Portals—A Gateway” “...**india.gov.in** is likely to be the biggest portal in the world which can fulfill the requirement of the Countrymen...”* PRESENSE, July 2006, http://primepointfoundation.org/presense/PResense_july06.pdf

“Union Government has launched a new portal, National Portal of India to facilitate the access to all the Government (union as well as State) related information”. Dinamani, 13 November 2005 (<http://www.dinamani.com>)

“Indian Government launches Mega Portal ‘india.gov.in’ ;ContentSutra.Com, 12 November 2005 (<http://www.contentsutra.com>)

Maran launches National Portal; The Hindu, 11 November 2005 (<http://www.hinduonnet.com>)

Objectives behind the Project

- To establish a one-point source for availability of information and services pertaining to any Government of India constituent, be it the

central government ministries, departments, state/UT governments, districts, panchayats or even organisations and affiliates, for the benefit of the citizens, businesses and other target audiences.

- To define standards for publishing the information and electronic delivery of government services, in turn facilitating a unified interface and seamless access to a wide variety of services for citizens from all walks of life and from varied demography.
- To provide a ready infrastructure to facilitate implementation of various e-governance initiatives by the government.
- To provide a platform to the common citizens and other stakeholders for participation in the process of governance.

Scope and Beneficiaries

The broad scope of this project is to establish a single-window access to information and services being delivered by any Government of India constituent, enhancing interaction between government and citizen (G2C), government and business (G2B), government and employee (G2E) and government departments, and to act as an integral part of the overall mission towards 'good governance'. By virtue of being the national portal, 'india.gov.in' has nation-wide content coverage, in terms of information – even from districts and panchayats – and a world-wide reach for its target audience and beneficiaries, namely:

- Indian citizens of all age groups and demographic backgrounds
- Government ministries, departments and associated offices and the staff therein
- State/UT governments, district administrations and panchayats
- Legislative and judicial institutions of the government
- Public sector enterprises and organisations
- Corporate sector and business establishments
- National and international media agencies
- Non-resident Indians and persons of Indian origin
- Public at large, across the globe

Features

The national portal comes with unique features and technology to facilitate improvement in speed of service delivery, enhancement in quality of services and convenient single-window access for multiple government information and services:

- *One-stop source of all information (single-window service)* The services offered by various government bodies are spread over hundreds of web sites at various levels of navigation hierarchy and many of them remain

largely unnoticed. The portal acts as a platform to connect all these services in such a manner that they become easily accessible and available to the citizen as well as other stakeholders. The target audience may need to only visit the national portal, rather than a number of web sites, for a desired information/service belonging to the government sector. The information is available on the portal in a predictable and consistent manner. To augment the huge information resource available in the portal, it is served with a state-of-the-art advanced search facility that is able to index and organise vast amounts of information optimally.

- *Comprehensive content:* The national portal presents comprehensive information on all aspects and constituents of the government, whether central, state or local. Any information on an individual department's web site or any electronic services for citizens available anywhere in the country is accessible through the national portal. In other words, the portal does not belong to just one group or sector of the government, its mandate includes complete and comprehensive information of all the various entities including the legislature, judiciary, executive, apex institutions, local government bodies, public sector undertakings, government institutions and organisations, etc.
- *Citizen orientation:* The national portal has been built from the users' or citizens' perspective, rather than from the perspective of the government. In other words, instead of presenting and categorising the information and services on the basis of government departments, information is presented in a manner citizens would find useful. The various components of the portal have a uniform look and feel to ensure ease of navigation and consistency in design.
- *User-centred design:* As more people are accessing government information and services online, the portal has become a citizen's first point of contact with the government. Well-established principles of usability and human-centred design have been applied while designing the interface for the portal.
- *Personalisation/customisation – (serving diverse user needs):* The portal has features for personalisation of content, which entails providing information suited to specific categories/kinds of target audience classified according to factors such as their geographical location (urban/rural, specific region of the country), contexts and scenarios of use (citizen, NRI, foreigner interested in India), etc.
- *Content repository:* The national portal has become a huge repository and dispenser of information on a variety of subjects. A whole lot of meta-data has been defined/stored for each item of information, and all this has been stored in a data base/repository for easy and efficient management.
- *Dynamic generation of content:* Since the national portal is the repository of a huge amount of content being sourced from/maintained by multiple

sources and different teams at multiple geographic locations, a comprehensive content management system (CMS) to effectively manage the content has been developed for the portal. This is useful for not only carrying out future modifications and updations to the portal content, but also allows a convenient change in the content architecture of the portal. The CMS also provides the facility for searching across the entire content base, presenting content in multiple formats and facilitating delivery of information through multiple channels.

- *State-of-the-art tools and technologies:* The portal is hosted on the Internet Data Centre of the NIC to ensure fast 24×7 access from anywhere in the world. The portal is accessible across different connectivity modes, devices and software.

Content Highlights

An attempt has been made through the portal to provide comprehensive, accurate, reliable and a one-stop source of information about India and its various facets. The information in the portal has been well classified into distinct modules, which are also interlinked at relevant places to provide the visitor with a holistic view. The main sections of the portal include:

- *Citizens:* Useful information for Indian citizens residing within the country on issues vital to their day-to-day living such as health, education, employment, housing, travel and tourism, law and order, banking and insurance and taxes.
- *Business:* Meant for those currently involved in business or those wishing to start and grow a business in the country. Information is provided on useful topics such as how to set up a business, incentives offered by the government, doing business abroad, laws and legislations, etc.
- *Overseas:* A section meant both for Indian diaspora and foreigners visiting/living in India. Here, one can find information on NRIs/PIOs, visiting India, studying in India, embassies and consulates and travel advice.
- *Government:* This module provides information about the Indian Constitution, the Parliament, who's who in the Indian Government and information about government policies and schemes. There is also a special section on government employees, focussing on their information needs.
- *Know India:* A section to visit if one wishes to know about India's profile, its unique culture and heritage, national identity symbols and states/UTs/districts. There is also a special section exclusively for kids to enrich their minds with the various facets of the country.
- *Sectors:* Useful information about the various sectors of the Indian economy, such as agriculture, commerce, education, communications, defence, etc.

- *How do I?* This section provides access to a variety of government services to citizens across sectors . . . right from obtaining a birth certificate to applying for a passport. In addition, the services, which are provided on-line either partially or completely, are prominently highlighted.
- *Forms:* A repository of important application forms required for availing various services and facilities provided by the government. There is an easy search facility to locate the desired forms.
- *Government tenders/government policies:* Sections providing information about the various tenders and policies issued by the various departments in the government.
- *Greetings:* A facility to send personalised greetings featuring photographs on the varied and colourful aspects of India.

Beside these, other useful information on the portal includes access to government web directory, telephone directories of all states/UTs in India, data base of NGOs operating in the country, facility to search for STD/ISD/PIN codes, quick links to documents and reports published by the government, latest national/international news and government press releases, web casts of prestigious national/international events, etc.

On the Cards

The national portal is continually evolving with enhancements in content, access and technology. Feedback received from various segments of the society in India and abroad are carefully examined and become a major source of input for further enhancements and evolution of the portal. Some of the features that are being developed for the near future include:

1. Hindi and other regional language version of the portal
2. Integration of an advanced search engine
3. Mobile version of the portal
4. Universal accessibility

Cost-Effectiveness

The National Portal Project has been developed in the interest of the citizens of the nation, and hence is not based on any revenue-generation model. The project has been funded by the Department of Information Technology from the funds allocated for the implementation of mission-mode projects.

Impact of the Project

The project has exceeded expectations by far in terms of achieving its intended objectives. The publication of information and documents on the internet and online delivery of citizen services such as government tenders, policies, citizen charters on the portal, as well as status of applications submitted for various government services has not only benefitted the end users or common citizens but has also fulfilled the other basic objectives of electronic governance, namely:

- Enhancing transparency and accountability
- Raising the trust levels of the stakeholders
- Increasing efficiency in service delivery
- Encouraging effective citizen participation in the process of governance

Besides this, the national portal has provided a readily available base infrastructure to the government departments/organisations for launching their new e-governance services for the benefit of citizens, businesses and other stakeholders.

Indirectly, the portal has also contributed towards employment generation and growth of ICT-related business, since it has been observed, through experience, that popular e-governance services such as dissemination of exam results, computerisation of land records, etc., leads to a growth in the usage of public ICT infrastructure such as cyber cafes, information centres/kiosks, etc.

The tremendous popularity of the portal can be gauged from the fact that it has been receiving a large number of hits from all over the globe (Fig. 4). Ever since its launch, it has got over 90 million hits from all corners of the world, and the number seems to be growing steadily with passing time.

Fig. 4 *Appreciation Mails received for the National Portal*

“All I can say is “Excellent”. Probably this word is not enough for the work you have done ... I was not aware that there are so many services available for the public. It is really wonderful work you have done...

Dinesh Reddy (reddy.dinesh@tcs.com)

“To whoever has taken this initiative, I think its a wonderful effort and the result is dazzling! I was pleasantly surprised by the contemporary look of the web site and the information that it gives out.”

Bhavna Purandare (bhavnapurandare@rediffmail.com)

“I am completely impressed by this portal. I never knew that we had such an excellent site as a single-point contact to almost all departments of the government.”

Binay (binzone@rediffmail.com)

“The site is marvellous. It happens to be a consolidated database of whole of India. Also, the site is updated on regular basis. I find the site extremely useful. Kudos to the organisers”

Sustainability and Ease of Replication

In order to facilitate coordination and easy management of the project, necessary institutional arrangements have been made to facilitate availability of content, its usability, ownership of applications, technology and its sustained utilisation at all levels of decision making.

Multi-level committees including a governing council have been set up to facilitate the portal to fulfil its mission.

The intrinsic architecture of the portal has kept in mind replicable issues. With the expertise generated during the development and implementation of the project, the national portal of India can also be leveraged for similar projects across other geographical locations.

Some of the essential components of the project that make it easily replicable include:

1. The thoroughly worked out generic information architecture makes it easily adaptable to a large number of government constituents.
2. The development of a robust content management system (CMS) with a well-defined workflow to facilitate contribution of content from the point of its generation with multiple-level moderation. Features like role bases access, accounting, logging and auditing make the CMS thorough, sturdy and replicable in a variety of projects.
3. The deployment of state-of-the-art technology architecture based on widely accepted web standards and features of security, inter-operability, device independence and universal accessibility.

The demand from citizens for a single-window access of all government information and services, the thrust from the government for effective e-governance solutions and the recognition of the national portal of India as one of the mission-mode projects of the the government along with the dedicated and experienced national portal team ensures the sustainability of the project.

Conclusion

The portal 'india.gov.in' is a quintessential national portal that presents a kaleidoscopic view into the country's affairs, including all governmental operations, citizen information and services, Indian culture and heritage and a host of other activities within a state-of-the art technology framework. The national portal is, in fact, a one-stop centre for information on any and every Government of India constituent. Simply put, the strength of the national portal lies in the assimilation of rich and comprehensive content amassed through meticulous study and investigation and a unique user-friendly way of presenting that information. From academic information and information related to services for Indian and foreign students, recruitment and employment services, travel and business, to information on the cultural extravaganza of the country, the national portal has it all – thus fulfilling the mission of 'making life easy for the common citizen'!!