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Rural Digital Services

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The note has been written by Anirban Mukerji (anirmukerji@yahoo.com) as part of his assignment with the State Government of Karnataka.

Rural Digital Services Program

Genesis of the program: Karnataka has been the pioneer in computerisation of land records under the Bhoomi program and despite its many benefits it had one disadvantage, that of centralizing the distribution points for the land records to the farmers. Prior to bhoomi, the farmer would obtain his land record from the village accountant of his village but now he had to travel to the computer centre at the taluka office. The Government realized that it had neither the means nor the capability to establish and maintain computer centres at the village level for distribution of land records and it needed to partner with a private entity for this task. However to ensure that the project is financially attractive for private organizations it was required to expand the portfolio of services that could be delivered from the village telecentres. This was the genesis of the Rural digital services program.

Which services : Besides distribution of land records, the revenue department of the state delivers several other services to the citizens like issue of caste and income certificates, accepting applications for social security schemes, registration of births and deaths etc. Also since bhoomi was introduced in the revenue department, all levels of the revenue department from the village accountant to the Deputy Commissioners (District Collectors) had been exposed to a very successful implementation of an e-governance program hence were amenable to implementation of another e-governance program. Also because of the bhoomi program, the computing infrastructure for deployment of an e-governance program like servers and connectivity to a central database was available at the taluka office of the revenue department. Hence as a first step it was decided to computerize the delivery of about 28 services that are delivered from the taluka office of the revenue department under the RDS platform.

Challenges: One of the advantages of Bhoomi was that that the base data – i.e. the land record was available and needed to be computerized (though it has been an extremely challenging task). However delivery of RDS required creation of a citizen's database which was a herculean and a controversial task. Hence it was decided to develop the software in a manner that would computerize the existing workflow in the taluka office and create a citizens' database in an incremental manner.

Path taken: Starting from mid 2003, the state government very patiently engaged in pilot deployment of RDS in Mandya taluka of Mandya district. N-Logue communications Chennai (a company promoted by Prof. Ashok Jhunjhunwala of IIT Madras) had set up village telecentres in Mandya and this was leveraged by the state government. The software for RDS was written by NIC on .net platform. Over a period of three years the number of services delivered through RDS was increased to cover all the services that are delivered from the taluka office of the revenue department. The state government and NIC worked on several deployment models before arriving at the current model that is

depicted below. Additionally the RDS pilot in Mandya was expanded to 12 other talukas in the state.

Diagram of RDS Infrastructure for Revenue Department

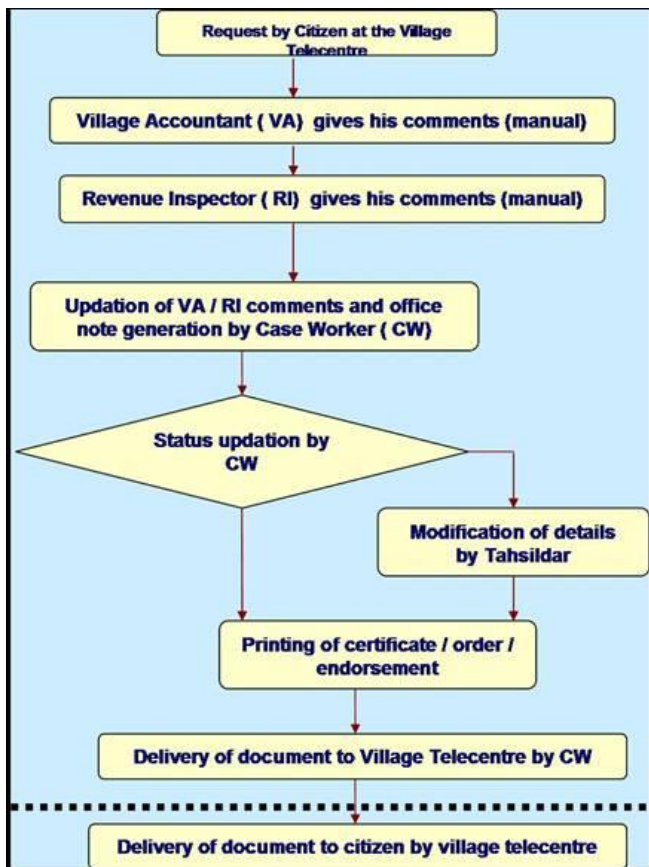
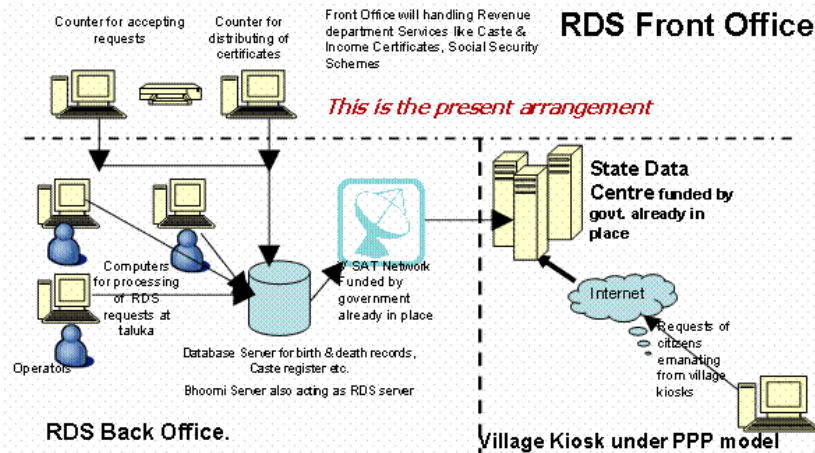


Figure 2- Process flow of RDS

Building blocks: The State government of Karnataka as part of the NEGP (National e-Governance Program) was one of the first states to build a State Data Centre. This state data centre functions as the only access point from the internet to the departmental servers. The village telecentres connect to the State data centre for communicating the requests of the citizens to the taluka offices. The State data centre also functions as a disaster recovery centre for other e-governance projects of the state.

Conclusion – The pilot deployment of RDS has been enormously successful and over a span of 2 years over 1, 00,000 services have been delivered to the citizens from the 12 taluka offices in the state. These services include issue of various types of caste and income certificates, accepting applications for social security schemes, registration of births and deaths and issue of birth and death certificates and issue of other types of certificates like agricultural labour certificate etc. The pilot deployment of RDS in 12 talukas also gave the state government the confidence to go ahead and scale the program to cover all the balance talukas of the state.

To achieve the same a private partner was chosen through a transparent tendering process to set up 800 village telecentres in the state. These village telecentres will function as a delivery points for land records and RDS to the rural citizens. Besides delivery of e-governance services, the private partner will also deliver other B2C services to the rural citizens through these village telecentres, thereby ensuring the financial viability of these village telecentres.

The scaled up version of RDS program launched in partnership with a private partner is aptly called “N em m adi” meaning solace in Kannada.