

E for Express¹: “Seeing” the Indian State through ICTD

Renee Kuriyan and Isha Ray

Abstract— This paper examines how, in their attempts to liberalize and modernize their operations, Indian states are using ICTD e-governance services to represent themselves in a new way to their citizens. It reveals how states come to be seen by their citizens through their everyday interactions at ICTD telecenters. The research finds that, with its e-governance services, the state is trying to recast its image to fit market-friendly principles such as economic efficiency, accountability and effectiveness. Citizens simultaneously trust the government as credible and are disillusioned with it as inefficient. Telecenter-provided e-governance services are partially re-shaping the boundaries between state, civil society and markets.

Index Terms—e-governance, India, state, public-private partnerships

I. INTRODUCTION

“Paying an electricity bill [in India] could easily involve a day’s wait at a government office where a cross official would demand a bribe for doing his job. The same was true for phone bills, water bills, taxes and all other interactions with government. Often the customer would first have to go to a bank to get a banker’s draft and then take it to a queue at the payment office. Even a small firm would need an employee whose sole task was to pay bills and deal with other aspects of officialdom. Now all of this can be done online.” (*The Economist*, Special report on technology and government, February 14, 2008)

The Economist report cited here, entitled the “Electronic Bureaucrat,” highlighted India as a nation whose government was on the path to technologically “leapfrog the rich world” by putting its services online. It argued that the Indian government was able to serve its citizens more effectively through its pioneering efforts in e-governance, with online electricity bill payment and issuance of government

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Renee Kuriyan is a Research Scientist with Intel Research, Beaverton, OR, USA (phone: 503 329 0688; e-mail: renee.kuriyan.wittemyer@intel.com).

Isha Ray is an Assistant Professor with the University of California, Berkeley, Energy and Resources Group (e-mail: isharay@berkeley.edu).

¹ *The Economist*, Special report on technology and government, February 14 2008

certificates and forms. The article drew attention to Andhra Pradesh (AP) in particular as the “hot-bed” of e-governance since it started e-Seva², a project which was upheld as a model of efficient

government service delivery [1]. The cartoon accompanying the article, entitled “E for Express” symbolized this new form of service delivery and the accompanying changes in the Indian bureaucracy (Figure 1). It depicted a sleek Indian express train carrying passengers on top of its roof and inside its cars, holding laptops and cell phones. The Indian railways were once emblematic of the country’s bureaucratic and slow-moving ways. At the same time, often associated with Gandhi traveling on their rooftops, the always-overflowing railways were symbols of accessibility to the Indian masses. The passengers in this cartoon, however, wearing expensive business suits and holding laptops, were a far cry from usual images of the “common man.” The cartoon also highlighted the links between modern technologies and an Indian bureaucracy that was changing from being slow and “neither equitable nor efficient”³, to one that is fast-moving, capable, and accessible to all. It hinted that with the spread of e-governance services and state of the art technologies the public’s experience of the government was being transformed.



Figure 1: E-governance in India, “E for Express” (Source: Economist, February 14, 2008)

This paper examines the implied hypothesis that, through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) projects,

² E-seva was launched in Hyderabad in 1999 with goals of “looking at ‘service’ from the citizens’ point of view” and redefining citizen services using state-of-the-art technologies. It is a public private partnership between the Government of AP and private service providers. It provides services such as: payment of utilities bills, government certificates, licenses, permits, transportation department services, bus reservations, passport services, and business services based on agreements with private businesses such as cell phone providers and banks (<http://esevaonline.com/>).

³ *The Economist*, Special report on technology and government, 2008

and in particular those that provide e-governance services, the nature and boundaries of the Indian state are being redefined. We do this through an analysis of telecenters that provide e-governance (and other) services in two states in India: Kerala and AP. Both states have been enthusiastic adopters of such telecenters, and both states have formed public-private partnerships (PPPs) in order to promote their e-governance agendas. We ask: Do citizens “see the state” [2] differently in light of governance and development services provided through these entrepreneur-mediated telecenters?

The term “see the state” is a twist on the pioneering work of James Scott, who, in *Seeing Like a State* (1998), examines the ways in which the state sees (and thus controls) its citizens. He argues that the state often attempts to make its populations “legible” through simplified, yet strategic and technical, processes (such as mapping, censuses, and various other standardized modes of representing the population). Conversely, Corbridge et al in *Seeing the State* (2005) examine how citizens see government agencies, through an ethnographic analysis of state-citizen interactions in eastern India. We build on Corbridge et al to further explore the shifting dynamics of state-citizen relationships through ICTD telecenters in southern India.

We begin by highlighting some of the important ideas in the literature on governance, e-governance and their associated reforms in India. Then, using two vantage points -- the view of the state and view of the citizens -- we argue that in both Kerala and AP, the state governments are turning to the private sector as partners not only for the provision of e-governance services, but to associate themselves with a liberal market order and the modernization process more broadly. The state is trying to recast its image to fit market-friendly principles such as economic efficiency, accountability and effectiveness, all of which embody the “good governance” agenda in India and elsewhere. These efforts reflect the state’s attempt to reposition itself in the context of a liberalizing economy and to alter the way in which it is perceived by its citizens. We find that citizens simultaneously trust the government as credible and are disillusioned with it as inefficient. We find that e-governance through decentralized entrepreneur-mediated telecenters are partially redefining perceptions and expectations of the state, the lay citizenry and the private sector. This hybrid version of government is gradually reworking both the way the state sees itself and how citizens see the state.

II. METHODS

Using a combination of methods such as interviews, participant observation, and literature and document review, we explored the reworking of these relationships through the case of ICT for development (ICTD) telecenters. Primary data collection took place on several trips to India over a period of 3 years from 2004 to 2006. We examined four projects in the states of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, all of which provided e-governance services to citizens via entrepreneur-mediated

telecenters. These were Akshaya in Kerala, and three separate projects in AP called Rural Eseva, Rural Service Delivery Points (RSDP), and Rajiv Internet Village Centers (Rajiv). The telecenter projects offered a glimpse into the realities and perceptions of good governance principles and government policies on ICTD. The telecenters in AP and Kerala focused on e-governance services that 1) provided entitlements (including certificates, licenses), 2) provided information (sectoral, agricultural, or health), 3) provided redress for grievances, and 4) enabled government bill payments (electricity, taxes, utilities). In Kerala the telecenter project offered computer education services as well.

We conducted 31 interviews with state actors within the Government of India (GOI) and within the AP and Kerala state governments, using a semi-structured interview protocol. These interviews explored each state’s strategies for delivering e-governance services, and how states perceived their roles and those of the private sector in the process. We conducted open ended, key-informant interviews with 16 local entrepreneurs in Kerala and AP from the four different projects. Through these interviews and shorter conversations with other entrepreneurs, we explored the role of entrepreneurs in delivering governance services and the position of the entrepreneur with respect to the state. In the telecenters of each project, we observed entrepreneurial behavior, and engaged in informal conversations with the users. We interviewed telecenter users and non-users in each district, using an open-ended interview protocol, exploring perceptions of both the project and the state with respect to their roles in development. Sixty-five interviews with household members were conducted in Kerala, and 70 in AP. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using interview analysis software. Finally, we analyzed literature and policy documents on good governance, ICTD, and the modern Indian state.

III. GOVERNANCE REFORMS AND E-GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

The expression “governance” is ambiguous and has become a catch-all term in the study and practice of development. The academic literature on governance is varied, containing perspectives from institutional economics [3], sociology [4, 5], development studies [6] and governmentality-oriented theory [7]. From a purely technocratic perspective, governance can be understood as a set of administrative or managerial tools, which, properly applied, lead to “good governance.” Administrative reforms of Western governments in the 1980s and 1990s, implemented under the market-oriented framework of new public management (NPM,[8, 9] underscored concepts such as efficiency, open markets, accountability, customer service and decentralization. NPM models indicated that market-based mechanisms for service delivery were more competitive and therefore more efficient than traditional government-based provision. The overall philosophy was that governments should be encouraged to perform like incentive-driven private businesses and entrepreneurs. Similar principles were later invoked in “good governance” reform programs in developing countries.

Development practitioners in recent years have defined good governance principles as transparent policymaking,

professionalism and accountability in government actions, and civil society participation. International development agencies have sought to operationalize good governance by restructuring and privatizing state bureaucracies, decentralizing state power through local government or nonstate actors, reforming legal systems, and implementing public private partnerships [10]. The rationale behind these reforms was that by “combating corruption, nepotism, bureaucracy, and mismanagement ... aid would be effectively used to achieve the objective of reducing poverty” [11: 270]. Critics of good governance argued that it had a neoliberal bias towards market-led development due to the influence of donors. Critics also charged that the words ‘governance’ and “government” were being used interchangeably because: “Governance appears to be used in place of government as if “government” was a difficult word to sell in a privatized, market-oriented society. Governance is about a ‘reinvented’ form of government, which is better managed” [12: 18].

In India, the good governance agenda developed against the background of a long history of concern over state-society relationships rooting back to India’s anti-colonial struggles [2]. Debates about good government with respect to appropriate power for India’s citizens, corruption, and abuse of executive powers have been part of the national agenda from the 1960s. The reforms of the 1990s, which liberalized the economy to a great extent, were introduced largely to address India’s balance of payments problem [2]. But a broader program of administrative and economic reforms was also supposed to tackle political challenges, or what Kohli called India’s “growing crisis of governability” [13: 23]. By this time, the centralized state had lost a great deal of legitimacy, and devolution through administrative reforms promised a range of benefits [14]. Prime Ministers from the 1990s onwards turned to a mix of deregulation, privatization, civil service reform, decentralization and PPPs to address a range of administrative “failures” in India.

Decentralization in particular was an integral part of the governance reforms and was viewed as a way to reduce the role of the state by fragmenting its authority and making it more responsive and efficient. Local governments were supposed to have better information on local needs, and were considered closer to their constituencies and thus more politically accountable, than centralized government agencies. Decentralization would thus “expand service deliveries as authority goes to those more responsive to user needs” [15: 173]. However, even local government institutions could lack accountability mechanisms and be vulnerable to corruption or to being captured by local elites. This frequently frustrated the goals of equitable public provision of services to the general population (Ibid).

In addition to decentralization, therefore, the administrative reforms included PPPs in service delivery. Since Indian states were often in fiscal trouble, with limited budgets to deliver government services, they also needed private sector partners for help with financial contributions and the modernization process overall. During our research, several government officials talked about the financial constraints of the government and its inability to scale service delivery without private sector participation. For example:

“The government is not having many funds. The private sector has funds and if the government supports [them] they can invest. In Kerala, [the] government is running out of money. We go for heavy loans from the Asian Development Bank... For the last ten years it’s been like that... There is a lot of work [to be done], but not much money.” (Interview, IT Mission, Kerala)

Officials in Kerala indicated that inadequate technical capacity was another reason why the government needed to move towards a PPP model for service delivery:

“There was no capacity with the government. That had to be built up and that is not something you can do overnight. In e-governance you find a much higher acceptance of the private sector as a player. The government acknowledges that they don’t have the technical or financial capacity in the government and they need to look to the private sector”

These constraints and incentives led several Indian states to introduce decentralized e-governance delivery projects through PPPs. E-governance measures aimed to improve administrative processes by using ICTs, and to build connections to promote socioeconomic activity [16]. In accordance with the principles of good governance, e-governance was meant to emulate the private sector’s qualities of reliability, transparency, scalability and treating citizens more like customers. The mainstream press was generally supportive of the promise of fewer lines, administrative efficiency and the electronic bureaucrat (Figure 2). For example, the *Indian Express* newspaper in a 2005 article credited e-governance with bringing citizens to the center of service delivery:

“E-governance has, in many cases, restored the choice to the citizen as to the quality and adequacy of services he is entitled to expect from public organizations. Citizen-centric governance meant government was for the people and the services were tailored to meet their requirements.⁴⁴”

⁴⁴ “Giving to people their new right: The right to good governance” (http://www.indianexpress.com/india-news/full_story.php?content_id=76910)

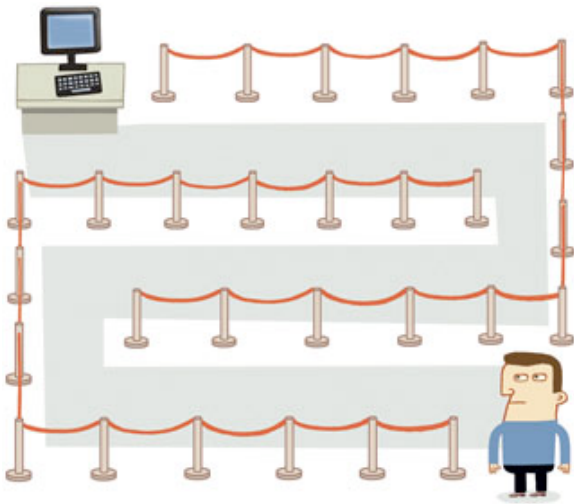


Figure 2: The Electronic Bureaucrat (Source: Economist, February 14, 2008)

The focus on e-governance led many state governments to adopt “integrated citizen service portals” or ICTD telecenters. Telecenters (or kiosks) were meant to bring government and other services closer to citizens and businesses through partnerships with local entrepreneurs [17]. Telecenter entrepreneurs had market-based incentives to perform efficiently; were situated at a village level; and in most cases were members of the communities that they served. Consequently, it was felt, they were best suited to make e-governance services responsive to the felt needs of the local population.

Despite the Indian states’ embrace of e-governance through telecenters, there have been a number of critiques of these projects. It has been argued that telecenter services were not reaching the poor [18], were unsustainable [19, 20], and faced political challenges in actually delivering e-governance services [5]. We now examine the influence of this new form of governance from the perspectives of the state and of the citizens that these initiatives are meant to serve.

IV. CONSTRUCTING THE STATE AND CHANGING ITS IMAGES

Our research aims to understand how the state represents itself to its citizens and how it comes to be seen by them through their everyday interactions at ICT telecenters. Several works of political anthropology depart from the conventional treatment of the state as an institution defined by its powers and operations, and instead examine the state as it is ‘imagined’, constructed and conceptualized through the experiences of its citizens [21-24]. These works analyze how the state becomes “socially effective through particular imaginative and symbolic devices” [25: 981]. Gupta (1995) argues that through ethnographic research on the state, for example with lower level officials and politicians, it is possible to “illuminate the quotidian practices of bureaucrats that tell us about the effects of the state” on the lives of ordinary people [24: 376].

What quotidian practices “construct” the state? Corbridge et al. (2005) argue that state-citizen interactions are based on everyday flows of power, money, commodities and

information. The poor in rural India form their understandings of the state through financial and legal transactions at local government offices [2]. They note that a poor person most directly experiences the state when he or she registers for birth or death certificates, receives a registration form, or picks up an entitlement. These are many of the e-governance services now offered by entrepreneurs in telecenters. With telecenter entrepreneurs in effect replacing the functions of local bureaucrats, we examined the ways in which the state is being “seen” or experienced by different groups of people accessing e-governance services through ICT telecenters. Our research indicates that at least some segments of the rural and peri-urban population have developed new images of the state through their encounters with telecenter entrepreneurs. They evaluate these experiences against their previous and often negative encounters with the local arms of the state.

We argue that both Kerala and AP, through changing their governance initiatives, are deliberately re-working images of the state versus the private sector. The growing acceptance of service delivery through ICTs, the political reality of economic liberalization policies, and discourses of India as a technological leader in e-governance have all influenced the types of images the state tries to portray to its citizens. We find that how the state is then perceived by civil society depends on a combination of factors -- the ambience of telecenters compared to government offices; how entrepreneurs interact with the public; how the state brands the telecenters to citizens (whether it is considered a private or a government office); and the extent to which citizens both trust, and are disillusioned with, the government.

Our observations in Kerala and AP support neither the strong proponents of the good governance agenda who advocate a minimized role for the state, or the strong opponents who fear that service through PPPs will, in effect, ‘privatize’ the state. We find that, rather than removing the state and supplanting it with the private sector, telecenter projects under the PPP model have created a space for the state to construct a better image of itself with respect to its citizens. These telecenters and their electronic delivery of services are being used as, and to some extent are becoming, symbols of responsiveness and of accessibility to all. The partnering of the state with private entrepreneurs is a key mechanism through which the state is trying to recast its image and be re-imagined by its citizens.

A. Representations of the State in Kerala and AP

Throughout India, at e-governance and telecenter conferences, and in our discussions with state officials at the central government and AP and Kerala state government levels, we found a similar discourse about the state’s need to change the way it treats, and how it was perceived by, citizens. There was a general consensus among government officials that the state needed to behave more like the private sector in service delivery. Officials in Kerala and AP indicated that one way to accomplish the change was to partner with private entrepreneurs who had an economic incentive to provide good customer service.

Entrepreneur-run telecenters represented a new concept of government service delivery that was fast, efficient, hassle free, and accessible to the “common man” (Figure 3). These attributes allowed states to renegotiate their standing with their citizens, a standing that was clearly low on account of previous encounters between the state and its citizens. A former AP official was clear on the expected differences:

“The appearance is totally unlike a government office. The ambience created is more of a private sector feeling- it has a uniform ambience built across all the service centers across the state- same design, same color. You have a feeling that you have not walked into a government office, but you’ve walked into something the private service sector would run. The beauty is that it starts at 8 in the morning and closes at 8 at night.”



Figure 3: Old versus new images associated with government offices and services. (Photographs shown in presentation at National e-governance conference in Kochi (2006) to show old and new forms of government service delivery)

Frequent reference to the telecenters’ appearance or ambience revealed that state employees were at least as concerned with their image as they were with making government services more streamlined. Several officials acknowledged that government offices had historically been very different in appearance than something that the private sector would run. They recognized that, unlike government offices in which officials often closed early, were not present at their offices, and were on the whole unaccountable, these new telecenters had much more responsiveness and flexibility. State employees explained that with telecenters, they were aiming for transparency, speed, and convenience for the citizen, and that wanted the government to *be seen as* more “common man friendly”. Our research showed that the business-like appearance of the telecenter actually represented a type of streamlining to users and also to the officials.

Both states emphasized the business-like aspect of these telecenter projects, a feature that is at the core of the good governance agenda. State actors, especially in AP, insisted that the credibility of the telecenter and e-governance projects could only be achieved when they were managed by the private sector because of their good services, longer hours, lack of resource constraints and flexibility. But both state governments wanted to make sure that the government’s name and brand was associated with these “private” telecenters. By having the private sector deliver the services but branding the centers with the government name, the state had found a concrete way to represent itself as protecting the public good and doing so in a business-like manner.

Our conclusion that both AP and Kerala were quite concerned about their public images is consistent with Madon’s (2005) study of image formation in the state of Kerala. She found that, given the historical resistance to and suspicion of the private sector in Kerala, the government was careful to manage the image of the Akshaya project. Rather than advertising the Akshaya project to the public as a PPP at first, it initially portrayed the project as social development bringing e-literacy to all. After a few years the government began to emphasize the private sector’s role in delivering services to citizens through state-entrepreneur partnerships. Madon attributed this change to the growing optimism and acceptance of IT in governance reforms and increasing confidence in the private sector in Kerala. The Kerala government in this case judiciously managed the image of the role of public-private partnerships and governance reform.

Despite their acceptance of private sector participation, state officials in Kerala and AP asserted that the credibility of the government brand was highly important for the PPP-based implementation of government services. One official we interviewed in AP stated,

“The image is that these private telecenters are the government. If you look at the transactions- there are millions a month. Probably 99% are government to citizen transactions... they are branded as government. That is why the credibility is much better. Because people will think twice if somebody else [who is private] wants to collect your electricity bill and pay taxes. People will think twice!” (Interview, 2006).

State officials asserted that despite its reputation for poor quality and slow services, some level of government association with the entrepreneurs created credibility for the telecenters. The images of the state were constantly being constructed and renegotiated not only by state and project officials, but by citizens themselves, as we show in the next section.

B. “Seeing the state” through entrepreneurs

Citizens “see the state” through the individuals who represent it. Because the personal characteristics of key individuals, such as a pro-poor officer or a corrupt official, often appear large in the minds of citizens who have experienced them, the views of government are likely to be fractured [2] The local bureaucrat has traditionally embodied the “state” in India and the state is then “seen” through the everyday interactions between ordinary people and this person-cum-state:

“The manner in which these officials negotiate the tensions inherent in their location in their daily practices both helps to create certain representations of the state and powerfully shape assessments of it, thereby affecting its legitimacy.” [24:388]

Corbridge et al argue that “encounters with the developmental state build up a dynamic picture of “it”, both as an idealized set of values and practices (the state as it *should* work) and also as its flawed but more commonly experienced counterpart (the state as it *does* work)” (2005: 119). Today,

the local bureaucrat is no longer the exclusive embodiment of the state. When accessing ICT telecenters, citizens' everyday interactions with the state are now being mediated by small-scale entrepreneurs as they, and not local officials, provide a host of government services to the populace⁵. These entrepreneurs, even though they are not state employees, come to represent the state at least in part, and also affect its legitimacy.

During our research many entrepreneurs emphasized their ability to deliver government services through the PPP strategy better than the government could deliver them. However, they relied on being "seen" as the government, particularly when they collected electricity bill payments or issued government certificates. Entrepreneurs confirmed what state officials had claimed, that being thought of as the government or having some government endorsement gives people the confidence to pay their bills at the telecenters. The association with the government also prevented people from thinking the telecenters were corrupt. An entrepreneur in AP admitted:

"If people think we are working under private people they won't come. I think and tell villagers that we got a loan from the government to establish this center. So it is a government center.

For the most part, entrepreneurs providing e-government services to citizens benefited from the association with the government's name. Entrepreneurs faced challenges, however, branding their centers as "government" institutions when they provided more than just e-governance services to citizens, such as computer education courses[19]. Rajalekshmi's study of the Akshaya project also found that the most important reason for its acceptance was "the trust that people had in government as an institution and the fact that this project was spearheaded by the government" [17: 29]. Our study in both AP and Kerala corroborated this observation; citizens' trust in government institutions allowed these privately-run payment and other e-governance systems to function.

C. Citizens' perspectives

We now turn to the perspectives of the households. Several of our respondents said that the private sector, meaning the telecenter entrepreneurs, treated all customers with a level of respect that they did not receive from the government. Our interviews with households revealed that ordinary citizens, especially the poorer ones, resented the bureaucratic and rude manner in which government officials often treated them. One woman, living below the poverty line, complained:

"At government offices, people are not helping me. Even when we go to a government office, they won't help us -

people like us. Even if you have a small job, they will not give any amenities, like ration card. They will have to give, but they won't give it. We have to do everything on our own. Here [at the telecenter] there is more respect for people."

While poorer citizens seemed concern with the need for more respect from the government, middle-class individuals complained that traditional service delivery methods were slow and inefficient. A middle-income elderly man described going to a government office compared to a private telecenter to pay his electricity bills:

"At a Government office, a person has to wait 5-6 hours. A person uses Rural e-seva now. Before they had to travel for many hours to many offices. [Now] instead of 4 hours, I use 10 minutes. We use [Rural] e-seva for electricity bills and telephone."

Speed and convenience were not the only advantages offered by the telecenters. Household members seemed to think that dealing with private providers was easier overall compared to dealing with employees at a government office. In the words of a middle aged man:

"It is easier to deal with these private people than the government - if you have 2-3 private centers, definitely the private person will grab people by providing offers, private institutions, providing amenities. They give you water. You won't find water in a government office. They [the private centers] provide good amenities to you."

In this sense, it seemed that the government had outsourced the provision not only of services but also of customer satisfaction to the private sector.

Thus we found that citizens had mixed feelings towards the government with respect to basic governance services. Ordinary citizens trusted the credibility of the government name but were dissatisfied with the quality of government services, and with having to put up with rude and bureaucratic treatment in an often-corrupt system. Citizens had similarly divided feelings towards the private sector. Civil society in India may be disillusioned with government provided services, but it was equally skeptical of the private sector as the protector of the poor.

Hansen's study of the Indian state as a guarantor of order stated that, "It may be well that ordinary Indians are less in awe of the state than a few decades ago, but it is still regarded as indispensable for public order and for recognizing communities, leaders or claims as legitimate." [26: 37]. The resistance to private sector participation in service delivery among some segments of civil society was rooted in the belief that this sector was solely concerned with profit making and was frequently corrupt [27]. Thus, just as the state officials and entrepreneurs indicated, the citizens we interviewed agreed that, despite a reputation for poor services, the government brand was nevertheless accountable and credible, particularly for the delivery of governance services. These divided feelings explain why the state sees the private entrepreneurs as indispensable to its new image and why the

⁵ Undoubtedly, the range of people's encounters with the state extends much beyond their interactions with telecenter entrepreneurs. Nor do we wish to imply that telecenter entrepreneurs are the only intermediaries between the state and its citizens: field-level government employees and NGO representatives, for example, also play this role. But telecenter entrepreneurs are a novel form of intermediary in that they are simultaneously the state and not the state, at least when they are providing government sanctioned e-governance services.

entrepreneurs see the state as equally indispensable to their ability to provide e-governance services.

D. The hybrid state

We found that through these telecenter projects a new form of government is being experimented with that attempts to combine the accountability of an elected government with the efficiency and customer service associated with the private sector. The state's new vision of itself contrasts sharply with the images that its population might have had from previous encounters at conventional state offices. This hybrid version of government is gradually reworking both the way in which citizens with access to ICTD telecenters now perceive it and also the state's perception of itself in relation to its citizens.

Scholars of the Indian state have argued that, at the most local levels, the boundaries between state and civil society are often blurred [24]. Through neighborhood ICT telecenters, the lines between states and civil society appear to merge as telecenter entrepreneurs hold multiple positions as local community members, private actors, and also representatives of the state in the delivery of government services. By negotiating their multiple roles in their daily practices, entrepreneurs create representations of the state that affect both its legitimacy and their own.

The running together of the public and the private realms is especially evident where profit-seeking entrepreneurs offer public services in a market setting. When walking into an ICT telecenter, citizens encounter painted signboards that mark the telecenters as both private and public. In the case of the Rajiv Internet centers, the signboards might advertise the brands of more than 7 different public and private entities (See Figure 4). The state's name and authority still define the terrain on which private entrepreneurs have to operate. At the same time, entrepreneurs create new experiences that alter the way in which the state is seen by citizens. Everyday interactions with telecenter entrepreneurs contribute to citizens' sense of how, and for whom, government operates. Rather than thinking of the state and market as distinct spheres, our research found that, in these part-public part-private telecenters, the very definitions of the state and the market were mutually constituted.



Figure 4: Signboard outside Rajiv Internet Village Center (2006)

E. Conclusion

This paper analyzed how, in their attempts to liberalize and modernize their operations, Indian states are using ICTD to represent themselves in a new way to their citizens. Equally, it reveals how modernizing states come to be seen by the citizens through their everyday interactions at ICTD telecenters. We find that e-governance initiatives in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh are not only about delivering services efficiently (“e for express”) but also about updating the state's image to one that is modern and market-friendly. This goal has partly been achieved via the delivery of government services through telecenters, implemented in partnership with local entrepreneurs. We find that citizens with access to these telecenters generally prefer them to conventional government offices. In particular, the poorer citizens feel they are treated with some respect at the centers, while middle class citizens appreciate the conveniences and amenities that these new centers offer.

As the good governance agenda has taken hold in India, Kerala and particularly Andhra Pradesh have embraced the language and the ideal of the modern state conducting its business in a business-like manner. This embrace has been only partial, however. With service delivery via privately-managed telecenters, we do not find that the governments in Kerala or AP have been privatized or have withdrawn, as the critics of the “good governance” agenda frequently aver (or as the proponents of the agenda tend to promise). Rather, they play a critical role in managing and constructing their image to their citizens. Citizens' simultaneous trust in and disillusionment with their governments, combined with their simultaneous admiration for and suspicion of private enterprise, have kept the states practically and discursively important to the success of e-governance.

Given that changes in perceptions of the state (for the most part in a positive way) is one outcome of these projects, our research suggests that policymakers could explore how, and if, these changed perceptions can be used in evaluating projects. Given the widespread implementation of telecenters throughout India and the government's commitment to implement 100,000 telecenters in the country, our research also raises the question: Will citizens in other parts of India encounter the state via telecenters in a similar way as the citizens of AP and Kerala?

We note that, as of now, most Indians still do not have access to e-governance, and most government business is still not conducted electronically. We agree with those who argue that the transparency and efficiency expected from public-private partnerships do not always materialize, and with critics of the rush towards telecenters when the results of such projects have been mixed. But our research does indicate that, in Kerala and AP, these public-private telecenters have created a space for the state to renegotiate its role and image in public service delivery.

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