

THE USE OF DIASPORA WEBSITE FOR PROCESSING PAYMENTS UNDER SWACHCHA BHARAT MISSION (RURAL) IN DISTRICT HARDA, MADHYA PRADESH

PREFACE

The use of 'Diaspora' social networking website and 'Sendspace' file sharing website to monitor, track and process payments made to beneficiaries and vendors under Swachcha Bharat Mission (SBM) (Rural), a flagship programme of both State and Central Governments, is a pioneering initiative of its kind in the country.

The Innovation is part of "Operation Malyuddh" campaign of Harda District which aims to achieve "Open Defecation Free" (ODF) Status in Rural areas by adopting a Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) approach. The campaign attained fame after mention in 'Man Ki Baat' by the Honorable Prime Minister of India in August 2015 for its various novel and innovative approaches to achieve Open Defecation Free status in villages.

The benefit of 12,000/- as per scheme guidelines is provided per toilet constructed under SBM (R). Adopting a community approach to achieve ODF status is closely dependent on providing the incentives to the toilet owners in the fastest possible response time. Also, vendors have to be paid at the earliest to ensure smooth supply chain management and to enable them to stock construction materials in sufficient quantity.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The earlier followed fund flow mechanism, in which disbursement through Gram Panchayat took place, was corruption and embezzlement-prone and many such instances, departmental action and recovery of money occurred state-wide. After this the State Government modified the fund flow system and the subsidy had to be transferred to the accounts of beneficiaries, vendors and laborers directly from Zila Panchayat's (ZP) single nodal account, without Gram Panchayat (GP) or Janpad Panchayat (JP) in the intermediate.

Under the new system, there was no standardized method of submitting payment files and with abstract formats being sent, made it a difficult and time consuming process to scrutinize the file at ZP before payment so that no financial error occurs even inadvertently. This created huge pressure and pendency at the district level to release the payments. Delay in payments reduced the pace and progress of toilets constructed under the scheme. Hence there was an immediate need –

- To develop a mechanism
 - For tracking status of payments
 - For tracking toilets constructed
- To reduce the time, cost and paperwork
 - In daily monitoring of completed toilets

- In assuring quality of constructed toilets
- In knowing the status of payments made
- In conveying the objections raised on file
- To develop a simplified system to process payments
- To ensure timely payments to constructed toilets
- And thereby to assist the district's Operation Malyuddh campaign for creating an Open Defecation Free rural environment

STRATEGY

The step-by-step process devised comprised of –

- Preparation of weekly plans for toilet construction in every Gram Panchayat
- Issue administrative sanction (A.S.) for those beneficiaries
- Getting the toilets constructed
- Collecting the bills and vouchers
- Clicking photographs of completed toilets
- Approval of completion by Gram Panchayat functionaries
- Submission to Janpad Panchayat for getting them checked
- JP checks quality and correctness of beneficiary selection
- Recommendation of payment to be made and forwarding to Zila Panchayat
- ZP makes payment from district nodal account

All the above steps had to be monitored to effectively deliver subsidy payments on time. The fundamental idea was to use a social networking website for sharing toilet photos and payment sheets from the profile pages of Panchayat Raj functionaries which can be under the radar of Zila and Janpad panchayats and kept track.

Facebook is a very common social networking website popularly known amongst youth and the elderly internet users. Hence it was analyzed whether existing user profiles in Facebook could be linked for official purpose, or creating new user profiles would help.

There were many limitations of using existing Facebook accounts for the purpose intended. There are three main Panchayat Raj functionaries at each GP – Sarpanch, Sachiv and Gram Rozgar Sahayak. First of all, not hundred percent of GPs of the district have representing profiles existing on Facebook. Secondly, not all existing accounts were active. Thirdly, the active account holders also did not permanently represent the GP and could be transferred. There was also every chance that any unwanted third person, a profile friend of any existing official or staff, could comment on official posts distractingly.

Creating new accounts in the name of Gram Panchayat also posed severe issues. Any new profile in Facebook cannot be opened without an authenticating phone number or e-mail ID, which for the

same reasons of non-permanence of representing staff could not be linked for authentication. Even if we linked the phone numbers of staff, Facebook repeatedly verified the details of phone numbers and e-mail ID while creating bulk profiles for all 213 GPs and rendered invalid the unverified accounts. Same was the case with other popular social networking sites sought out as alternative to Facebook.

After repeated attempts and research Diaspora was discovered, a less popular and seldom used social networking website, which allowed creation of user profiles without a need for authenticating phone numbers, e-mail IDs, one time passwords, etc. Diaspora has exactly the same features as Facebook except that a comment could only be in text format and not a photo. Like Facebook, Diaspora can also be accessed on mobile phones that are WAP-enabled through “Diaspora Webclient Alpha” app downloaded from Google Playstore and hence eliminates the need of a PC.

METHODOLOGY

A page was created for every GP, JP and ZP (217 accounts in all) on Diaspora. Our GP, JP and ZP profiles are friends on Diaspora with their respective hierarchical levels and can post, share, comment and view the information posted, shared and commented by their superior and subordinate Diaspora friends. A GP has only ZP and its respective JP as friends. Every JP has only ZP and all its constituent GPs as friends. ZP is the universal friend and guide.

By restricting friendships, users login for purely official purposes and a GP shall be able to see only contents posted by self and comments received on its own post, thereby refrained from getting distracted by posts and comments on posts from any other GP. ZP shall keep track of every post and ensure that JP is not delaying their payment files beyond time limit.

First the Gram Panchayat displays its weekly plan, selection of beneficiaries and Administrative Sanctions by posting their photos from their page. After completion of toilet construction in batches, according to the weekly plan, every GP posts photos of the completed toilets and label or comment the name of the beneficiary on its page. Photos can be viewed, downloaded, printed, commented, etc by all its friends. Any faulty photo or beneficiary can be commented upon by JP or ZP and the relevant errors are corrected. Photos also manifest the quality of constructed toilets to a certain extent and hence ZP can ensure that good quality toilets are only forwarded for payments.

The issue of photo sharing being solved, the mode of sharing payment files had to be devised. Files, unlike photos, cannot be directly shared in Diaspora. So a file sharing website called ‘Sendspace.com’ was resorted to do this. First two spreadsheets were formulated in MS-Excel and pre-validated column formats were developed.

One was for the Administrative Sanction issued by Gram Panchayat, a name and SSSM ID list, which is the permission given to a family to construct its toilet and serves as proof of eligibility for receipt of subsidy. Second spreadsheet was for Payment sheet and included columns for Bank Account Number, Bank Name, IFSC Code, Amount Payable, Names of Vendors, Masons,

Laborers, Beneficiaries, etc who are recipients of subsidy amount under SBM (R).

As the format is preset with standard information and column headings, Gram Panchayat level functionaries have to only fill up the blank columns of the spreadsheet. The prepared file is then to be uploaded on Sendspace.com and the link has to be posted from their Diaspora page. Sendspace allows files to be shared through it by anyone without any requirements of username or password. The shared file can then be downloaded for viewing anywhere by any of its friends.

Payment sheet has columns for signature of GP, JP and ZP level payment sanctioning and recommending stakeholder officials. Every GP and JP, after affixing its signature, posts a photo of that signed sheet from its Diaspora profile page to declare that it has completed recommending payment. The payment authority in ZP after seeing JP's recommendation, downloads the payment sheet uploaded by GP, signs it and sends it as payment advice slip to the nodal district bank for payment. That communication is also scanned and posted from Diaspora page of ZP.

Each payment file is ideally advised to be sent in batches of 30 toilets, however, bigger or smaller batches are also entertained. Each payment sheet from a GP is sent to banks as a single transaction and not clubbed with payment sheets from other GPs so that reconciliation is made easy. Every payment sheet can be saved in soft copy at both JP and ZP levels for later reference.

RESULTS & IMPACTS

Payments of more than 7500 beneficiaries have been made after the above project was launched till date. All beneficiaries were eligible under Swachha Bharat Mission (Rural) belonging to families which are Below Poverty Line, SC, ST, Women headed, Small marginal farmers and hundred percent rural. 10000 more families who are targeted to get their toilets built in financial year 2015-16 and the remaining rural households who shall build toilets under the scheme in all the future years shall be paid through the above mentioned method. Officials, staff, people's representatives and rural people in Harda are now familiar with Diaspora as equal as Facebook if not more.

The methodology devised has resulted in reaching computer and internet literacy to grassroots level. Knowledge of internet is the only deciding factor to keep the project in place. Under existing cyber laws and regulations, responsibility is fixed for all posts made from a Gram Panchayat's user profile. Basic computer literacy and training on the know-hows of the above project was provided to more than 800 stakeholder individuals, government employees and members of Panchayat Raj Institutions involved in data entry, upload, processing and toilet construction.

SUSTAINABILITY, ADAPTABILITY AND SCALABILITY

There was no expenditure made in discovering this system, no new software was developed, no subscriptions or agreements were made in the process, nor is any to be made in the future. The existing freeware and social media is used for the intended official purpose. The project does not depend on any paid software service. Diaspora creates user profiles free of cost, Sendspace lets share files for free, without any username or password requirements also. Only existing platforms were

merged to create a successful model. Hence it can continue in future also, as there are no financial constraints to extend the usage in the coming years, making the model sustainable.

Not only for toilets, the three-tier PRIs can extend the usage of Diaspora to monitor any scheme and share any file, like Indra Awas, CM Awas, construction plans, filled muster rolls, measurement books after evaluation, etc. Extending the usage for other applications is unlimited. The project is adaptable and scalable to all gram panchayats, blocks, districts and states as there are no limits to the maximum number of users that can be created.

COST & TIME SAVING AND IMPROVED EFFICIENCY

The methodology is a radical improvement over the existing system in the sense that every GP has now a record of its toilets digitally, can track why its payment is pending without travelling to block or district headquarters, and communicate progress to the stakeholders who are waiting to receive payments. Time and cost of transportation owing to the to and fro movement of payment file is saved. It has lessened paper usage and the time and distance of file movement.

The pre-validated columns of spreadsheets have resulted in low chance of error, usually made in SSSM ID, bank codes, etc earlier. Photos and files shared are sent directly to banks as payment advice slips reducing greatly the processing time. Every single transaction is on a separate file making reconciliations easy with banks.

The results of the innovation are encouraging in the sense that the speed of payments have led to a continuous increase in the number of toilets constructed and the district has witnessed the highest ever number of toilets constructed in a year since the start of the government's toilet subsidy scheme.

RECOGNITION

The project and the efforts using Diaspora was appreciated by the Secretary and the Director of Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, New Delhi, UNICEF, WSSCC and World Bank representatives during the lectures at NIFM, Faridabad, Rapid Action Learning Workshop, Bhopal and State Level Workshop on ODF, Tamil Nadu, where the project team leader was invited as a resource person to share the innovations done under SBM (Rural) in Harda district's "Operation Malyudhh".

The zenith of fame for Harda was after being mentioned by the Honorable Prime Minister of India in 'Man Ki Baat' aired on August 2015 and appreciated for its various novel and innovative approaches to achieve Open Defecation Free status in villages.

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